Organizational Frame Bending: Principles for Managing Reorientation

David A. Nadler
Delta Consulting Group, New York

Michael L. Tushman
Graduate School of Business, Columbia University

One of the hallmarks of American business in the past decade has been the attempts by large organizations to manage large-scale planned change. In some cases — AT&T, Chrysler, and Apple, for example — the efforts have been dramatic and have captured public attention. Other cases, such as Corning Glass, Xerox, Citicorp, and GTE, have received less attention, but the changes have been no less profound.

The concept of planned organizational change is not new; but this most recent generation of changes is somewhat different from what has gone before. First, they typically are initiated by the leaders of organizations rather than consultants or human resource specialists (although they have played significant roles in some cases). Second, they are closely linked to strategic business issues, not just questions of organizational process or style. Third, most of the changes can be traced directly to external factors, such as new sources of competition, new technology, deregulation or legal initiatives, maturation of product sets, changes in ownership, or shifts in fundamental market structure. Fourth, these changes affect the entire organization (whether it be a corporation or a business unit) rather than individual SBUs (strategic business units) or departments. Fifth, they are profound for the organization and its members because they usually influence organizational values regarding employees, customers, competition, or products. As a result of the past decade’s changes, there are now more large visible examples than ever before of successful planned organizational change.

Our work has brought us into contact with a number of examples of these changes. In general, they have been changes that encompass the whole organization, have occurred over a number of years, and have involved fundamental shifts in the way the organization thinks about its business, itself, and how it is managed. Our experience has included changes that both internal and external observers rate as successes, some that have been described as failures, and some that are still going on.

Our purpose in this article is to share some insights, generalizations, and hunches about large-scale organizational changes, working from our perspective of close observations. We begin by reviewing some basic concepts of organization and change that have shaped the way we think about and observe these events. Next, we briefly describe an approach to differentiating among various types of organization change. Finally, we devote the rest of the article to our concept of “frame bending” — a particular kind of large-scale change found in complex organizations.

Basic Concepts of Organization and Change

Thinking About Organizations

We view organizations as complex systems that, in the context of an environment, an available set of resources, and a history, produce output. To illustrate, we have developed a model that consists of two major elements (see Exhibit 1). The first is strategy, the pattern of decisions that emerges over time about how resources will be deployed in response to environmental opportunities and threats. The second is organization, the mechanism that is developed to turn strategy into output. Organization includes four core components: work, people, formal structures and processes, and informal structures and processes. The fundamental dynamic is congruence among these elements. Effectiveness is greatest when a firm’s strategy is consistent with environmental conditions and there is internal consistency, or fit, among the four organizational components. Our model emphasizes that there is no one best way to organize. Rather, the most effective way of organizing is determined by the nature of the strategy as well as the work, the individuals who are members of the organization, and the informal processes and structures (including culture) that have grown up over time.
While our model implies that congruence of organizational components is a desirable state, it is, in fact, a double-edged sword. In the short term, congruence seems to be related to effectiveness and performance. A system with high congruence, however, can be resistant to change. It develops ways of insulating itself from outside influences and may be unable to respond to new situations.\(^1\)

**Organizational Change**

From time to time, organizations are faced with the need to modify themselves. The change may involve one or more elements of the organizational system, or it may involve a realignment of the whole system, affecting all of the key elements — strategy, work, people, and formal and informal processes and structures. A central problem is how to maintain congruence in the system while implementing change, or how to help the organization move to a whole new configuration and a whole new definition of congruence. Critical issues in managing such changes include (1) managing the political dynamics associated with the change, (2) motivating constructive behavior in the face of the anxiety created by the change, and (3) actively managing the transition state.\(^4\)

While these approaches have been useful for managers and implementors of organizational change, they have limitations when applied to large-scale, complex organizational changes. Specifically, these larger-scale changes entail at least some of the following characteristics:

- **Multiple transitions.** Rather than being confined to one transition, complex changes often involve many different transitions. Some may be explicitly related; others are not.
- **Incomplete transitions.** Many of the transitions that are initiated do not get completed. Events overtake them, or subsequent changes subsume them.
- **Uncertain future states.** It is difficult to predict or define exactly what a future state will be; there are many unknowns that limit the ability to describe it. Even when a future state can be described, there is a high probability that events will change the nature of that state before it is achieved.
- **Transitions over long periods of time.** Many large-scale organization changes take long periods of time to implement — in some cases, as much as three to seven years. The dynamics of managing change over this period of time are different from those of managing a quick change with a discrete beginning and end.

All these factors lead to the conclusion that the basic concepts of transition management must be extended to deal with the additional issues posed by large-scale changes.\(^3\)
Types of Organizational Change

As a first step toward understanding large-scale organizational change, we have developed a way of thinking about the different types of change that organizations face. Change can be considered in two dimensions. The first is the scope of the change — that is, subsystems of the organization versus the entire system. Changes that focus on individual components, with the goal of maintaining or regaining congruence, are incremental changes. For example, adapting reward systems to changing labor market conditions is an incremental, systems-enhancing change. Changes that address the whole organization, including strategy, are strategic changes. These changes frequently involve breaking out of a current pattern of congruence and helping an organization develop a completely new configuration. Incremental changes are made within the context, or frame, of the current set of organizational strategies and components. They do not address fundamental changes in the definition of the business, shifts of power, alterations in culture, and similar issues. Strategic changes change that frame, either reshaping it, bending it or, in extreme cases, breaking it. For example, when John Sculley took the reins from Steven Jobs at Apple Computer, or when Lee Iacocca took over at Chrysler, systemwide changes followed.

The second dimension of change concerns the positioning of the change in relation to key external events. Some changes are clearly in response to an event or series of events. These are called relative changes. Other changes are initiated, not in response to events but in anticipation of external events that may occur. These are called anticipatory changes. (The relationship between the dimensions can best be described using the illustrations shown in Exhibit 2). Four classes of change are the result:

- **Tuning.** This is incremental change made in anticipation of future events. It seeks ways to increase efficiency but does not occur in response to any immediate problem.
- **Adaptation.** This is incremental change that is made in response to external events. Actions of a competitor, changes in market needs, new technology, and so on, require a response from an organization, but not one that involves fundamental change throughout the organization.
- **Reorientation.** This is strategic change, made with the luxury of time afforded by having anticipated the external events that may ultimately require change. These changes do involve fundamental redirection of the organization and are frequently put in terms that emphasize continuity with the past (particularly values of the past). Because the emphasis is on bringing about major change without a sharp break with the existing organization frame, we describe these as frame-bending changes. For example, the sweeping changes initiated by Paul O'Neil and Fred Federholf at ALCOA are frame-bending changes in that they are not driven by performance crisis (that is, they are proactive) and they build on ALCOA's past even though they involve widespread organization change.

- **Re-creation.** This is strategic change necessitated by external events, usually ones that threaten the very existence of the organization. Such changes require a radical departure from the past and include shifts in senior leadership, values, strategy, culture, and so forth. Consequently, we call these frame-breaking changes. Examples of these reactive, systemwide changes abound, and include those at National Cash Register, U.S. Steel, AT&T, GM, ICI, and SAS.

Building on this classification scheme, these different types of change can be described in terms of their intensity (Exhibit 3). Intensity relates to the severity of the change and, in particular, the degree of shock, trauma, or discontinuity created throughout the organization. Strategic changes are obviously more intense than incremental changes, which can frequently be implemented without altering an organization's basic management processes. Reactive changes are more intense than anticipatory changes because of the necessity of packing substantial activity into a short period of time without the opportunity to prepare people to deal with the trauma. There is also less room for error and correction.
Relative intensity is further affected by organizational complexity. Organizations become more difficult to change as they increase in complexity — complexity determined by (1) size of the organization in terms of employees and (2) the diversity of the organization in terms of the number of different businesses, geographic dispersion, and so on. Smaller organizations with a few highly related businesses are easier places in which to implement changes than are larger, highly diverse organizations.

If we put these concepts together, we get a map of the difficulty of organizational change (see Exhibit 4). The least difficult changes are those that are low intensity and take place in fairly noncomplex settings. The most difficult changes are those that are high intensity (strategic) and take place in highly complex settings. Our focus is on strategic organizational change. Re-creations are the most risky and traumatic form of change, and our assumption is that managers would rather avoid the costs and risks associated with them. The challenge, then, is to effectively initiate and implement reorientations, or frame-bending change, in complex organizations.

Observers of Effective Organizational Frame Bending

In the last section, we identified the activities and elements that characterize effective organizational recreation. The principles have been organized into four clusters for discussion purposes, and we will refer to them as principles of effective frame bending. First, there are those principles associated with initiating change. Next, there is a set of principles having to do with how the reorientation is defined, or the content of change, and another set having to do with leading change. Finally, there are principles associated with achieving change, relating to the activities that are required to implement, sustain, and complete reorientations over long periods of time. The clusters and principles are displayed in Exhibit 5.

The Diagnosis Principle

Managing organizational reorientation involves managing the what as well as the how. The what concerns the content of the change: what strategies and elements of organization will have to be changed to enable the organization effectively to anticipate, respond to, and even shape the challenges to come. While much of the focus of this perspective is on the process of managing reorientations, the content is nevertheless critically important.

Identification of the appropriate strategic and organizational changes comes from diagnostic thinking — analyzing the organization in its environment, understanding its strengths and weaknesses, and analyzing the implications of anticipated changes. Diagnosis typically involves the collection, integration, and analysis of data about the organization and its environment. It involves assessment of the organization usually based on some underlying model of organizational effectiveness.
Effective reorientations are characterized by solid diagnostic thinking. In these cases, managers have spent time understanding the potential environmental challenges and forces, be they technological, regulatory, competitive, or otherwise. They have worked to identify the critical success factors associated with achieving effective anticipation or response. They have looked hard at the organizational strengths and weaknesses, thus gaining a systematic view on what has to change and why.

In contrast, the less effective reorientation suffers from a lack of diagnosis and the quick adoption of "solutions in search of problems," which often comes about through organizational mimicry. In these cases, the senior management of one organization observes how "model" organizations (the referents vary — they could be industry leaders, generally respected companies, and so on) are responding to or anticipating change and they then copy what the model is doing. What they fail to grasp is that the model organization typically has done diagnostic work and has identified a set of changes unique to its own conditions. Because the management of the model organization has participated in the diagnostic work, it has both the understanding and the commitment that results from the process. Thus, mimicking organizations not only adopt strategies that are not designed for the problems or challenges they face, but do so in a manner that leads to low commitment to change. Little wonder that they tend to fail.²

The Vision Principle

An effective reorientation involves movement from one state to another. The most effective reorientations include a fully developed description of the desired future state. Since the nature of the change is usually both very broad and profound, this description is more than a statement of objectives or goals; it is a vision of what the organization hopes to be once it achieves the reorientation. This vision may range from a set of principles or values all the way to detailed papers outlining specific strategic objectives, operating modes, organizational structures, and so on. In most cases, it addresses values as well as performance. Overall, most visions touch in some way on each of the following points:

- **Rational.** A description of why the vision is needed, or why the change is required.
- **Stakeholders.** A discussion of the organization's stakeholders and what it seeks to provide for them.
- **Values.** A description of the core values and/or beliefs that drive the organization of the change.
- **Performance objectives.** A definition of what will characterize effective performance of the organization (and in some cases individuals) once the change has been achieved.
- **Organizational structure or processes.** How the organization will be structured or will work to achieve the vision.

- **Operating style.** A discussion of some of the specific elements of how people in the organization (particularly managers) will operate and interact with each other. In some cases, this is an attempt to describe the required culture in operational terms.

Visions are developed for a number of different purposes. They are directional, signalling where the reorientation is headed. They are symbolic, providing a point for rallying and identification. They are educational, helping individuals to understand the events around them. Finally, they are energizing.

In this context, effective visions seem to be ones that are credible, responsive to the current (or anticipated) problems, and provide a balance of specificity and ambiguity. Effective visions also have a balance of new and old or sustaining ideas, values, or perspectives. In contrast to reorientations (in which a break with the past is often necessary and appropriate), effective visions for reorientations often are crafted to have "resonance" — to meld with themes from the organization's past.

Effective reorientations tend to have visions that are responsive to the issues raised in diagnosis and meet many of the criteria listed above. Less effective reorientations either have no vision or have visions that are flawed, are the result of mimicry, or have been developed in a way that does not facilitate the creation of understanding and/or commitment.³

A final note on vision. The question of whether or not to make a vision public has been faced in a number of reorientations. While the issue is important, no definitive answer has yet been identified. Clearly, the vision needs to be made public at some point. The directional, energizing, and educational goals of the vision cannot be met if it is kept secret. On the other hand, there are many cases of premature articulation of vision leading to negative consequences. In what some have called the "rush to plexiglass," certain companies have developed vision statements and immediately distributed them throughout the company, using posters, documents, plaques, pins, plexiglass "tombstones," and so on. When the vision is poorly thought out, when it is not clear how the vision will be achieved, or (perhaps most importantly) when the vision is very much at odds with current management behavior, employees tend to greet such statements with justified skepticism; the net result is a loss of management credibility. In some cases, this problem has been dealt with by clearly positioning the vision as aspirational and recognizing that this is not the way the organization functions today.

The Energy Principle

One of the great strengths of organizations is that they contain tremendous forces for stability. They are able to withstand threats and challenges to the established order. The flip side of this characteristic is that organizations (and particularly successful ones) can be inherently resistant to change, particularly change that undermines strongly held values and beliefs. Energy must be created to get change initiated and executed.
Organizational reorientation presents a particular dilemma. In a crisis situation (for example, the Tylenol poisoning case, the Union Carbide disaster at Bhopal, or deregulation at AT&T) the clear, present danger of organizational failure creates the energy needed to make change happen. Reorientation, by definition, is different because it involves changes in anticipation of the events that may make it necessary. The need for change may be apparent only to a small number of people. For the majority of people in the organization — and sometimes this includes much of senior management — the need for change is often not clear.

Effective reorientations seem to be initiated by specific efforts to create energy. Most often this involves some effort — usually by leaders — to create a sense of urgency, and somehow to communicate and convey that sense of urgency throughout the organization. In some cases, a sense of urgency can be created by presenting information that shatters widespread assumptions about the current situation. But this tactic addresses the intellectual inertia. Urgency and energy are emotional issues, and experience indicates that people and organizations develop the energy to change when faced with real pain.

The larger and more intense the change, the more extreme the pain needed to mobilize individuals to consider doing things differently. There are a number of different ways in which pain can be created. Most of them involve employees participating in the process of data collection, discovery, and comparison of their organization against accepted benchmarks (frequently competitors). Some reorientations have been started by getting senior managers to spend time with customers, use competitive products or services, or visit companies that are competitive analogs (the now familiar “trip to Japan”). Since individuals have a unique capacity for denial, multiple intense exposures may be necessary to create the required depth of emotional reaction.

The problem is that pain can create energy that is counterproductive. The consequences of pain can be dysfunctional behavior as well as functionally directed action. Negative information can lead to certain defensive reactions, such as denial, flight, or withdrawal. To the extent that the organization is characterized by pathology, the creation of pain or urgency may stimulate maladaptive responses. Therefore, the challenge is to develop methods of creating pain that will create energy and catalyze action.

Successful reorientations involve the creation of a sense of urgency right at the limits of tolerance — just at the point where responses border on defensive. At the same time, efforts are made to track dysfunctional or pathological responses and find ways to redirect the energy in positive ways. In many less effective reorientations, sufficient energy has not been generated early or broadly enough. This is particularly true in very large organizations that have the capacity to absorb or buffer pain.

The next two principles assume that change has been initiated, and focus on the content of the change. These will be followed by two principles regarding the role of leadership in reorientation.

The Centrality Principle

For a change to engage the entire organization, it must be clearly and obviously linked to the core strategic issues of the firm. The positioning and labeling of the reorientation are critical. Successful long-term changes are positioned as strategic imperatives that are compelling to members of the organization. Usually, the connection is so clear and has so much validity that the relationship of the change to company health and survival is obvious. For example, the emphasis on quality and customer service at Xerox and ALCOA were clearly linked to their enhanced competitiveness. Where changes are not seen as central to the survival, health, or growth of the organization, they tend to be transient, existing only so long as the perceived interest of senior management lasts. For a change to “catch,” employees have to see a clear connection with core organizational and individual imperatives.

To the degree the change is central, it raises another dilemma. If the organization has been successful and has built some degree of congruence over the years, employees may resist wholesale changes. In many successful long-term changes, managers worked to make sure that the core themes of the change (and the vision) had organizational resonance — that is, that they seemed related to and consistent with some of the historical core values of the organization.

But how can one find themes with strategic centrality in an organization of great diversity? It appears to be more difficult to find such themes across widely diverse businesses in large organizations. Success comes most often when generic themes, such as quality, competitiveness, or innovation, can be positioned across the businesses and then related with specificity to each particular operation’s situation.

The Three-Theme Principle

While a strategic change may involve a large number of specific activities, most managers of change find it necessary to identify themes to communicate and conceptualize the changes. Themes provide a language through which employees can understand and find patterns in what is happening around them. At the same time, however, they seem to be capable of integrating only a limited number of themes in the midst of all of the other transactions that make up daily life. Employees are bombarded with programs, messages, and directives. In many situations, individuals cope by figuring out which messages they can safely ignore. Usually, more are ignored than not. Successful long-term changes are characterized by a careful self-discipline that limits the number of major themes an organization gives its employees. As a general rule, managers of a change can only initiate and sustain approximately three key themes during any particular period of time.
The challenge in this area is to create enough themes to get people truly energized, while limiting the total number of themes. The toughest part is having to decide not to initiate a new program — which by itself has great merit — because of the risk of diluting the other themes.

Most successful reorientations are characterized by consistency of themes over time. It is consistency that appears to be most significant in getting people to believe that a theme is credible. The problem, then, is how to maintain consistency while simultaneously shaping themes to match changing conditions.

The Magic Leader Principle

Another important component of a successful re-orientation is an individual leader who serves as a focal point for the change, whose presence has some special "feel" or "magic." Large-scale organizational change requires active and visible leadership to help articulate the change and to capture and mobilize the hearts and minds of the people in the organization. This kind of leadership relies on special effects created throughout the organization by the individual leader and, thus, this type of individual can be thought of as a magic leader. These leaders display the following characteristics:

- **Distinctive behaviors.** Magic leaders engage in three distinctive types of behavior that encourage employees to act in ways consistent with the desired change. The first is envisioning — creating an engaging and inspirational vision of a future state. Next is energizing — creating or stimulating energy through personal demonstration, rewards, and punishments, and setting high standards. Finally, there is enabling — helping to create the processes, resources, or structures that enable employees to do the things they have been motivated to do. The most successful large-scale change leaders exhibit elements of all three of these types of behavior.

- **Ability to create a sense of urgency.** The magic leader seems to be critical in creating a sense of urgency so essential to organizational changes. The leader is a key player in the creation and management of pain.

- **Guardianship of themes.** The leader is the guardian of the themes of the change. He or she is the one individual who can make sure the themes survive. Successful change managers exhibit great tenacity (or even stubbornness) in the articulation of themes over a period of years, in both good times and bad.

- **A mix of styles.** Magic leaders also display an interesting mix of management styles. On one hand, they appear to be directive and uncompromising in furthering their objectives for change. On the other hand, they seem to welcome participation and spend time getting people involved in shaping the change process. This combination of autocratic and democratic tendencies appears to be critical to their effectiveness.

The dilemma here is that while the individual magic leader is essential to successful reorientation, continued dependence on him or her can lead to disaster. The change can become too personalized; nothing happens unless that individual assumes personal sponsorship, and the next levels of management may become disenfranchised. Furthermore, when the leader makes mistakes (as he or she inevitably does) the magic may fade. The magic leader finds it difficult to live up to the fantasies that subordinates create. Thus the challenge is to fulfill the need for the leader at the very time when the organization needs to grow beyond the leader.

The Leadership-Is-Not-Enough Principle

While magic leadership is necessary, it cannot, by itself, sustain a large-scale change. Success depends on a broader base of support built with other individuals who act first as followers, second as helpers, and finally as co-owners of the change.

The expansion of the leadership of change beyond the magic leader requires efforts in two directions. The first complements the magic leader with leadership that focuses on the necessary elements of management control, or instrumental leadership.

The second broadens the base of leadership beyond one or two individuals. The most common way to achieve this is through the executive team of the organization. Successful changes are characterized by a large investment in the executive team, both as individuals and as a group. This team needs to share and own the vision, to become over time more visible as champions, and to come to grips collectively with the task of managing today's business while also managing the change to position tomorrow's business. In addition to the executive team, leadership can be expanded through the development and involvement of senior management and by efforts to develop leadership throughout the organization.

The first seven principles have focused on how to initiate change, how to define the content of change, and the role of leadership. The final three principles have to do with the problem of sustaining change and achieving re-orientation over time.

The Planning-and-Opportunism Principle

Profound organizational reorientation does not occur by accident. Rather, it is the result of intensive planning. On the other hand, it is naive to believe that reorientation in the face of uncertainty can occur by mechanistically executing a detailed operating plan. Successful reorientations involve a mix of planning and unplanned opportunistic action.
The argument for planning flows naturally out of many of the principles that have already been articulated. Diagnosis, the development of vision, the creation of energy, and the crafting of the content of the change all require in-depth thinking and planning. The system’s nature and complexity of organizations also require that significant changes with multiple components be sequenced and linked together. A number of successful reorientations have involved six months to two years of planning prior to any public action.

At the same time, there is a valid argument for the inherent limitations of planning. By definition, reorientations involve planning in the face of uncertainty. The architect of change does not know for sure what will occur environmentally in the future. Typically, unforeseen events — both positive and negative — will occur and have a profound impact on the reorientation. Some of these events are themselves consequences of the reorientation efforts — products of its success or failure at different stages. Each event may present an opportunity; to ignore them because “they are not in the plan” would be foolish.

As a consequence, effective reorientations seem to be guided by a process of iterative planning; that is, the plans are revised frequently as new events and opportunities present themselves. This reflects the fact that planned organizational change involves a good deal of learning and that this learning can and should shape the development of the vision and reorientation itself. Thus the planned sequence of activity is balanced with what might be called bounded opportunism. However, it does not make sense nor is it effective to respond to every problem, event, or opportunity. Some potential courses of action may simply be inconsistent with the intent of the change or may drain energy from the core effort. It is within certain boundaries, then, that the effective architect of reorientation is opportunistic and modifies plans over time.13

The Many-Bullets Principle

The nature of organizational stability and resistance to change was discussed earlier. It clearly has implications for initiating change, but it also has ramifications for achieving change.

Organizations are typically resistant to change. Changes in one component of a system that do not “fit” are frequently isolated and stamped out, much as the human body fights a foreign organism. In these cases, the forces for congruence are forces that work for stability. Similarly, individual behavior in organizations is frequently overdetermined. If an individual’s patterns of activity were examined, one would see that there are multiple forces shaping it — for example, the design of the work, the activities of supervisors, the immediate social system, the rewards, the organizational structure, the selection system that attracted and chose the individual, and the physical setting. Indeed, there are frequently more factors reinforcing a pattern of behavior than are necessary. As a result, changing those patterns will require more than a modification of a single element of the environment.

Effective reorientations recognize the intractability of organizational and individual behavior and thus make use of many “bullets” — as many different devices to change behavior as possible, incorporating intentionally redundant activities. They thus involve planned changes in strategy, the definition of work, structure, informal process, and individual skills — along with attitudes and perceptions.

In effective reorientations, managers use all available points of leverage to bring about change. Underlying the Many-Bullets Principle is the assumption that the organization ultimately must come to grips with the need to adjust its infrastructure to be consistent with, and supportive of, the change. As all the other work is being done, there is the less glamorous but still critical work of building the structures to enable and reinforce the changes. This is tough, detailed, and sometimes tedious work, but it is crucial. Things that need to be addressed include:

- Standards and measure of performance
- Rewards and incentives
- Planning processes
- Budgeting and resource allocation methods
- Information systems

The problem here is one of timing. The work cannot get too far ahead of the change, yet it cannot lag too far behind. Successful managers make skillful use of these levers to support and in some cases drive the change over time.14

The Investment-and-Returns Principle

The final principle concerns the amount of effort and resources that are required to achieve a truly effective reorientation as well as the long time span that is usually required to realize the results of those efforts. There are two subpoints to this principle — one concerning investments (the no-free-lunch hypothesis) and one concerning returns (the check-is-in-the-mail hypothesis).

The No-Free-Lunch Hypothesis. Large-scale, significant organizational change requires significant investment of time, effort, and dollars. While change may yield significant positive results, it is not without its costs.

Successful changes are characterized by a willingness on the part of the changers to invest significant resources. The most scarce resource appears to be senior management time. Organizations engaging in large-scale change find it necessary to get senior managers involved in a range of activities — senior team meetings, presentations, attendance at special events, education, and training — all of which are necessary to perform the functions of leadership in the change. This broadening of ownership also requires a significant investment of time, particularly of the senior team. Less successful changes often prove to be those in which the investments of time were delayed or avoided because senior managers felt so overloaded with change activity that they could not do their work. In successful reorientations, senior managers saw change as an integral part of their work.
The dilemma here is that while the senior team's investment of time is essential, it may also cut into time that the team needs to spend being leaders for the rest of the organization. This could lead to charges that the senior team is too insular, too absorbed in its own process. The challenge is to manage the balance of these two demands.

The Check-Is-in-the-Mail Hypothesis. Organizational reorientation takes time. In particular, as the complexity of the organization increases, so does the time required for change. Each level of the organization engaged in the change takes its own time to understand, accept, integrate, and subsequently own and lead change. In many changes, it becomes important to sell and resell the change throughout many levels of the organization. Each level has to go through its own process of comprehending the change and coming to terms with it.

Organizations go through predictable states as they deal with a change and a set of themes:
- **Awareness.** People within the organization first become aware of the need to change and the dimensions of the change. They work to come to grips with this need and to understand what the change is all about.
- **Experimentations.** Small-scale efforts are made to experiment with the changes in a bounded and manageable setting. Efforts are made to see whether the change will really work in "our unique setting."
- **Understanding.** The experimentation leads to increased understanding of the change, its consequences and implications. At this point, employees begin to realize the scope of the change and what it may involve.
- **Commitment.** The leadership faces up to the decisions to change and makes a significant and visible commitment to take action.
- **Education.** Employees spend time acquiring the skills and information needed to implement the change. This may involve training or other transfers of skills.
- **Application to leveraged issues.** The new approach, perspective, and skills are applied to key issues or specific situations where there is leverage. This is done consciously, and even a bit awkwardly.
- **Integration into ongoing behavior.** The new changed behavior starts to become a way of life. Employees naturally (and unconsciously) are working in new ways.

Obviously, a change rarely follows the steps exactly as described above. Moreover, different levels of the organization may go through the stages at their own pace. But at some time, each part of the organization must come to grips with each of these issues in some way.

As a result, experience indicates that large-scale reorientations generally take from three to seven years in complex organizations. The efforts may entail false starts, derailments, and the necessity to start over in some places. In addition, significant payoffs may not be seen for at least two years. Again, there is a dilemma. People need to be persuaded to invest personally in the change before there is any evidence that it will pay off, either for the organization or for them personally. Their motivation is essential to success, but proven success is essential to their motivation. The challenge is to demonstrate (through experiments, personal example, or through "face validity") that the change will ultimately pay off.

**Conclusion**

This article has focused on the factors that characterize the most successful attempts at frame bending — large-scale, long-term organizational reorientation. But it would be a mistake to conclude without commenting on the very important, critical, and central aspects of organizational life and how these affect change.

Two elements are tightly intertwined with the implementation of organizational change — power politics and pathology. All organizations are political systems, and changes occur within the context of both individual and group aspirations. Thus strategic changes become enmeshed in issues that are ideological ("What type of company should we be?") as well as issues that are personal ("What's going to be the impact on my career?"). These are not aberrations; they are a normal part of organizational life. However, they will be magnified by and indeed may "play themselves out" through the change. It is difficult to provide general guidance for dealing with this, since the issues vary greatly. However, the successful change manager works at understanding these dynamics, predicting their impact on the change and vice versa, and shaping the situation to make constructive use of them.
Not all organizational life is adaptive. Organizations, like people, have their dark sides — their destructive or maladaptive responses to situations. Organizations develop stylized responses to problems and situations. These responses may be elicited by the intensity of a strategic change. An organization that engages in collective despair may become more despairing. Again, it is the leader who must understand the organizational pathology and confront it.

We have attempted here to share some initial views on a particular subset of organizational change — reorientations. Our belief is that reorientations are a particularly significant kind of change. While reorientations require sustained senior management attention, they are more likely to succeed than re-creations.

More and more organizations face the need for such change as competitive pressures increase. This article is another step in trying to understand this need and to provide guidance to those who are called upon to lead these organizations.

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**Endnotes**

1. This article is based on observations of approximately 25 organizations in which we have done work over the past five years, and specifically our very close work with the most senior levels of management in planning and implementing significant, multiyear strategic-level changes in six particular organizations.


13. See Quinn, Endnote 10; and Tushman et al., Endnote 3.

14. See Nadler and Tushman, Endnote 10; and Pennings et al., Endnote 8.

15. See Quinn, Endnote 10; Quinn and Cameron, Endnote 10; and Tichy and Devanna, Endnote 9.

16. See Kets de Vries and Miller, Endnote 9; and Tichy and Devanna, Endnote 9.
Michael L. Tushman is professor of management and director of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Research Center in the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University. His current research investigates patterns in organizational adaptation, with particular emphasis on the interaction between technological discontinuities, executive succession, and strategic organizational change. Professor Tushman has done extensive consulting and executive education work for a variety of American and European organizations, and has lectured and worked throughout Europe and in Japan and Brazil. He has a number of books to his credit, and his work has appeared in a variety of professional journals. Professor Tushman serves, or has served, on the editorial boards of several noted publications, including Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Journal, Management Science, Journal of Business Venturing, Journal of Product Innovation Management, and IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management. He holds an MS from Cornell and a Ph.D. from the Sloan School of Management at MIT.

David A. Nadler is the president of Delta Consulting Group, Inc., and is well known for his research and writing on organizational change, feedback, and group performance, management, and organizational design. He has written numerous articles and book chapters, and written and/or edited five books. In addition, he currently serves on the editorial board of Organizational Dynamics. Dr. Nadler has consulted extensively on problems of organization behavior, management, organizational design, and planned organizational change for many firms, including AT&T, Citicorp, Chemical Bank, Xerox, GTE, and Pepsico. He served seven years on the faculty of the Graduate School of Business at Columbia. Dr. Nadler holds an MBA from Harvard Business School, and an MA and Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Michigan.