



Avoiding “Change Theatre”

GMD helps you understand the cutting edge of organizational thought with straightforward writing for practical application and insight.

More often than we might care to think, the motivations behind our change efforts reflect far more of our anxieties and political moods and less of what *really* needs to happen to ensure long-term success.

For example, having travelled often to the USA, I have experienced the useless and petty security practices of the US Customs Service. Recently, an internal investigation showed that they missed 95% of all threats – bombs, drugs, weapons: 95%! It is hopeless for everything but giving the public the impression that they are safer than they would be without it. For many, what they experience in the airport is referred to as “Security Theatre”; the impression of security when there actually is none.

In our businesses, we want to avoid similar dynamics: Change Theatre or “Pseudo

Change”¹. To do so we need to know where the seeds of the phenomenon are planted. This article explores the concept of “Change Theatre” and offers some insights into how to avoid it.

Change “Theatre”? Sounds dramatic...

What is this dramatic sounding concept of Change Theatre? It has three main components:

- 1) It is change that doesn’t address the real problem
- 2) Or it addresses a ‘problem’ that doesn’t *need* to be addressed
- 3) And it gives rise to activities that only give the *appearance* of change.

If this describes all or part of a change effort you are involved in, read further...

“The past was... almost OK”

The most common cause of Change Theatre is that it is just

easier to apply old solutions to new problems, but do it better this time. If you hear, “The last time we saw this kind of thing we did ‘X’, and that worked pretty well,” then you might be on the slippery slope toward Change Theatre.

This keeps the thoughts of the team confined to less-innovative solutions and starts to characterize the problem as one we’ve seen before, one we can handle alone, one we can pull levers and “fix” ... which is never the case.

Damned Consultants

A second cause: Consultants.... Yes, if you're not a part of the solution, there's a lot of money to be made by dragging out the problem!

Anyone can be a consultant and chances are they have a “silver bullet”, or “secret pill”, or “magic solution” that they are sure will hammer your problems flat. (Developing innovative, tailor-made solutions are a right pain in the

¹ “Exploring the world of pseudo-change”, Head & Sorenson

backside!). Not only that, they see all kinds of other problems in your organization that they should be involved in in order to ensure the approach is "holistic". Beware.

To be fair, sometimes they are actually helpful; too often they are not. The proof of the pudding is in the eating – if what they are serving is an easy to digest, plain, vanilla X-step plan, then you might want to exit the Change Theatre, stage right. Counterintuitively, if your stomach gets upset after the first bite, chances are the dish they are serving is sufficiently different to be part of a real cure!

In other words, the less palatable a consultant's approach, the better it is to stand firmly in the middle of life's stage and take what's coming.... Rotten tomatoes and all!

Speed & Action; not Analysis

In Dutch, "*poetsen, niet lullen*", in English "Just Do It", but if your organization's problem is complex, requiring a transformational change in how you do business, then the chances that a leader can rely on his or her "gut instinct" to jump in and "just solve it" is vanishingly small.

Success will more often be found in competent analysis and planned intervention *seasoned* by a preference for action.

Stake...holders

So often our Change Theatre is at the behest of Stakeholders that have a special point of view. This includes unions, Boards of Directors, customer groups, Shareholder activists, and so forth.

Here is where real clarity about the strategic direction, sensitive political antennae, and simplicity of thought keep the 'Theatre' locked up until a performance worthy of the problem can be acted upon.

In other words, don't get bullied on the Change Theatre stage for the wrong reasons!

Feel the Love – It hurts.

Change is inherently political; savvy managers and objective consultants are what your organization needs to fix its problems. If your consultants suggest things that logically seem right, but make your stomach turn because, "we've never done that before", you are probably in change management's sweet spot. ❖

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Why should I?
He's just a puppet!

Do you believe him?

