

THE PAST

DRIVING FORCE FOR CHANGE

BY AART PIJL

It may seem paradoxical, but looking backwards to the past is the essential first step to moving forward.

Why waste energy on the past when the future is really all that matters? Because it is vital to ensure that the past does not block progress. Instead of ignoring it, use the energy associated with the past. Establish and relive the company's unique successes and failures and provide the psychological basis to prepare for change.

In short – take a step back before moving forward.

The past is now

The past is a key factor in determining human behavior. Past decisions and experiences have shaped everyday patterns, inspiring stability and confidence in staff who often take their identity from it. Managers who want to change organizations without recognizing this past often face a source of resistance created by staff who regard these actions as a lack of recognition for them personally.

The past emerges not just in the behavior and identity of the staff, but also in the organization's 'being.' Every organization has its own, unique history, with its own unique factors of success and failure. If a company's old culture is particularly strong, many changes are unsuccessful as the company slips back into its old ways. This is why it is so important to use the past to gain an insight into the patterns in place – what is successful and what isn't – and to use this expertise in designing the upcoming change. A company's collective memory may yield tips about solid conditions, as well as traps for the company in question.

The past as the starting point

In the initial phases of planning a change, organize one or two days in which management and staff work towards the future, based on the past. During the meeting, the people can share and exchange the company's key experiences. They may distinguish a number of periods and for each period determine the key stories, developments, customers, and products. It is a good way to focus on the cultural core, the organization's roots. While it is often difficult to change the core of the organization, it does offer the energy which may serve as a handle for change.

Then use the shared image of the past and the organization's core to draw lessons for upcoming changes. Which past events still influence the future? What are the guiding principles for the future, for change?

Results from the past

Every organization has experience with change projects. While some changes will have been successful, others will have died a glorious death. What are the criteria for success that have guaranteed actual change in this specific company?

Together with managers and staff, select two to three successful and two to three non-successful projects of change from the past. Then determine the common characteristics of the successful projects as a joint effort. What do these successful projects have in common as to set-up, approach, commitment? Follow by jointly establishing the common characteristics of the non-successful projects. What do these projects have in common? Compare the two groups of characteristics and use these as the basis for determining the success criteria for change projects in this company. Which characteristics should a project meet in particular to be successful? This is 'proven knowledge.'

Make the past an inspirational source for change. At the same time, learning from the past gives staff the psychological room to let go of the past and to contribute ideas for the future. A good manager recognizes history and embraces it to be able to make the future a success.

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