



The Seven Levers of Change for Work-Life Effectiveness



David J. Thompson, Ph.D.
Capital University

The prevalence of work-life programs at organizations of all sizes and shape is impressive. A recent report indicated 97 percent of surveyed companies offered some form of dependent care, 83 percent offered health-promotion services and incentives, and 75 percent offered flexible work arrangements of various forms (Hewitt Associates 2005). Additional common work-life programs include elder care, financial education, community involvement and concierge services. Basic economic pressures and the cyclical tight labor market throughout the last two decades drove these work-life initiatives as corporations increased efforts to attract, motivate and retain employees. High turnover has huge cost implications. Turnover concerns shareholders, can hinder production and service, and negatively affects customers. However, many corporations have struggled with the implementation of effective work-life programs.

The rationale for work-life programs includes enhanced competitiveness in recruiting, removing barriers for employees to be more productive, reduced costs through decreased absenteeism and health-care costs and improved retention. At the root of the difficulty is work-life effectiveness requires fundamental changes in policies and management practices that are much more complex than rolling out a new retirement option or medical plan. Consequently, most early efforts of work-life focus on simple programmatic solutions, such as flexible spending accounts for child care,



or offering on-site concierge services—both good benefits offerings, but they have little impact on corporate culture. Further, it has been known for some time that the process of challenging old assumptions and cultural beliefs that underlie work and work-family integration frees employees to think more creatively about work in general and provides companies with a strategic opportunity to achieve a more equitable, productive and innovative workplace (Rapoport and Bailyn 1996).

During the 1990s, many companies began to shift the focus from reducing work-family conflict to increasing work-life synergy to reduce barriers to productivity, increase discretionary effort and improve organizational effectiveness (Galinsky and Johnson 1998). This new approach to address work-life issues requires a supportive culture.

Unsupportive workplaces lead to spillover from jobs into employee's personal lives which, regardless of the quantity of work-life programs, limits the effect of such programs on job performance (Bond, Galinsky and Swanberg 1998). Even with policies in place, the organizational culture dictates how widely accessible the

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Research has identified certain characteristics of corporations that correlate with having work-life programs, such as size of the organization and percentage of women in executive positions (Galinsky and Bond 1998). What have not been identified are the strategies enabling the development and integration of work-life programs, nor what practices or techniques were used to leverage change. Even more important will be the identification of key steps to changing the culture to enable work-life program success.

Seven Levers of Change

The cultural barriers to work-life strategic success are daunting. Much research has been published on the possibility of changing culture, and many methods of culture change have been prescribed. Schein (1990) best defined culture as: "...the pattern of basic (underlying) assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems."

Once the culture is defined, find out what the underlying assumptions are and devise a plan to change them. Therein lies the challenge: the deeper the culture the more "underlying" the assumptions are and more difficult to change. Put another way, culture is why things are done the way they are, and this is based on faith. Faith is roughly defined as believing in something without evidence. The difficulty of changing someone's faith in something is well documented. It is much more realistic to focus efforts on changing the climate, which is closer to the surface and shows up as the way things are done. Although the change effort may appear more superficial, if successful, they become engrained in the values and eventually become part of the deeper culture (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996).

Every organization has a personal climate and culture that has taken many years to develop. Thus, any effort to change an organization's culture or, more feasibly, climate, will need to be customized. Most prescriptions for change have many similarities, which are categorized into the following seven levers of change.

- ▶ Analyzing the organization's readiness for change
- ▶ Shared vision and strategy
- ▶ Creating a sense of urgency
- ▶ Involving all stakeholders
- ▶ Planning for evaluation
- ▶ Total systems change
- ▶ Reinforcing change.

Analyzing the Organization's Readiness for Change

Before a large change initiative is begun, the climate and environment should be analyzed. This includes looking at the history of past change efforts, then assessing the current environment for opportunities. Lewis (2001) pointed out that organizational change, like accepting family-friendly policies that go against the entrenched social norms of the male model of work, does not take place in a vacuum. When listening to people speak of failed attempts to implement a change, one often hears: "the culture here just does not support that," or "the climate was just not right for it to happen." Organizations' attempts to change culture in general are filled with high expectations. However, when they fail to take root and produce intended results, a continuous cycle of new change and further disappointment can be the experience (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996).

A link has been shown between work-life and culture by defining a supportive work-life culture as one in which shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the extent to which the organization values and supports the integration of work and family lives (Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness 1999).

If a company's track record of change in general includes much resistance and many failures, additional

work will need to be done (Schneider et al. 1996 and Jick 1991). Regardless of what the organizational leaders may trumpet as a success, the view held by the employees is the key. Did anything change? Schneider et al. proposed that changes often fail because "changes introduced fail to alter the fundamental psychology or 'feel' of the organization to its members."

Next, the work-life strategic plan must be created in a way supporting the vision, goals and priorities of the organization and its employees. The tendency to create this strategy in isolation is common due to the isolated nature of many work-life directors. However, effectiveness involves using interviews, surveys and observation to identify existing and desired cultural norms. The level of effort required also will be dictated by how incongruent the work-family philosophy is with the existing climate and other change initiatives. Implementing a work-life program at the same time

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with another major change initiative, like Total Quality Management, could undermine the entire effort (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kossek and Sandling 1997).

Shared Vision and Strategy

The creation of the vision is crucial as it can guide the desired change, but only if it reflects the organization's values and philosophy (Jick 1991). Every work-life program, and specifically the work-life strategy, is highly dependent upon the company in which it exists. This is why "when you have seen one work-life program; you have seen one work-life program." The work-life strategy must be in line with the total rewards and overall HR strategy, and the three need to be in line with the company's business plan, strategy and philosophy. Because work-life is downstream in this flow, the strategy must be imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and communicable (Kotter 1996). Most organizations would take on a change only when it is determined that the change improves productivity and profitability. Artemis Management Consultants (1996) proposed that profitability increases by increasing staff commitment, and staff commitment is increased when organizations integrate the business needs with the employees needs.

Creating a Sense of Urgency

The importance of establishing a sense of urgency cannot be underemphasized (Kotter 1996). The urgency for work-life efforts—often cited by leading organizations—is the need to attract and retain talent. An organization which is precariously close to bankruptcy or is losing its position in the marketplace will adopt a sense of urgency more readily than one which is thriving (Jick 1991). Unfortunately, many organizations are in part particularly resistant to change because of a lack of urgency. The risk is in appearing as "chicken little," so there must be data

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showing the trends concerning to the decision makers.

The sense of urgency to sell to decision makers can take two basic tracks: show what bad will happen quickly if they don't do what is proposed, or show what good, or advantage, the company gains by doing it now. For example, the war on talent is starting to affect turnover, presenting an opportunity to show what must be done to prevent a potential "brain-drain."

Involving All Stakeholders

True organizational change needs to involve everyone from the support people to the president. Ideally, the organization's CEO will champion the work-life efforts, as the CEO has more influence on a change effort than other drivers of change (Schein 1990, Thackray 1986). If leaders recognize the complementary importance of work-life priorities for business success, they strongly influence integrating this approach in building a supportive work environment (Boston College Center for Work & Family, Carroll School of Management 2002).

However, the CEO also can ensure the failure of the change by providing little support and giving only lip-service commitment (Silverzweig and Allen 1976, Jick 1991). The midlevel managers and supervisors may hold the key to culture change implementation. Each manager creates and establishes necessary practices and rewards for driving change within his or her areas of responsibility (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996). If middle-level managers are uninvolved in the strategy of the change,

they feel left out, alienated and forced to surrender their main function: making decisions (Zamanou and Glaser 1994). A safe environment must be created allowing them to suspend some standard operating procedures that their departments have "...identified as barriers to work-life integration and productivity. Such a signal from upper management also helps people believe that cultural change is possible and provides higher-level support to individual managers seeking to bring about change" (Rapoport and Bailyn 1996).

Planning for Evaluation

A most-heard criticism about culture change is that the outcome is often never identified nor based on measurable results (Schein 1990; Thackray 1986). Objectives such as increased employee loyalty, improved morale, decreased absenteeism, improved recruitment or higher rates of retention can be measured. The key is determining what can be measured regularly and whether it will be accepted throughout the organization as realistic and worthwhile (Silverzweig and Allen 1976). The preparation phase revolves around identifying the problem, what is going to change and how it will be measured.

Planning and evaluation must be congruent in terms of being formative, concerned with ongoing evaluation or summative and concerned with outcome measurement of the change effort (Gowler and Legge 1978). Knowing that 50 people signed up for a teleworking pilot program is nice, but it is more important to measure how successful the arrangements were, how was work redesigned, were co-workers involved and what happened to productivity. If all the latter is not measured, than teleworking stays as a "pilot program," instead of a way that work gets done.

Total Systems Change

Splitting an elephant in two does not result in two elephants. Thus is the reality with work-life. Total culture change needs to entail changing many facets of

an organization, such as the nature of interpersonal relationships, the hierarchy, the nature of the work, and the focus of support and rewards (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996). Narrow job descriptions, out-of-sync compensation or performance-appraisal systems, and conflicting HR systems and policies are consistent barriers to change (Kotter 1996). Many change initiatives fail because they are too narrow, and fail to motivate managers and employees to change any practices and behavior (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996). The work-life program must involve the entire organization and deal with the subcultures.

At a more abstract level, the philosophy and values that are tied to and communicated with the change must be broad enough to encourage investment in the change (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kossek and Sandling 1997). And even though work-life programs initially stimulate attention on an ideological level, "... success will depend heavily on human resource management processes and technical infrastructure at very concrete levels" (Nord, et al. 2002). A systemic effort, one that is proactive, integrated, and ongoing, will be much more effective at affecting the organization than a programmatic effort (Boston College Center for Work & Family, Carroll School of Management 2002).

Reinforcing Change

Most change efforts fail due to little follow-up on new training and little focus on the goals and direction of a change (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996). Kotter (1996) termed this final step as "generating short-term wins" which needs to focus on visible improvements, but also on those that made the change happen. The end result is to create a culture recognizing and thriving on the continuing necessity of change (Jick 1991). There needs to be "performance-related support and rewards to yield truly sustainable performance enhancements" (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo 1996).

Even if the work-life strategy is supported companywide,

it is still part of the climate, not culture, which is tenuous and dependent on the internal and external environments staying constant. Few organizations exist in a completely stable environment, thus the work-life strategy must keep working through these levers continuously.

Work-Life Stages of Change

Although each lever is useful, its effectiveness is increased if used at the appropriate time. Using Prochaska's transtheoretical Stages of Change model as a base can determine the decision maker's openness to information and willingness to consider supporting a work-life initiative (See Figure 1). Using workplace flexibility (flex-time, telework, part-time work) as an example, this paper discusses the model.

Precontemplation

In the precontemplation stage, the decision maker is unaware of problems, and not thinking about making any change. Bringing a proposal, or even data supporting a proposal, is ineffectual as the decision maker is not open to listening. Although one may attribute a significant amount of turnover to workplace flexibility issues, the decision maker sees the cause as something completely different and will label the flexibility initiative as a "personal issue," something that the business would never address.

Research on past change initiatives is crucial, looking for levers and opportunities to frame the workplace flexibility issue within existing strategies and philosophies of the organization. Communication at this stage is minimal and subtle, such as the following to the decision maker:

FIGURE 1 Stages-of-Change Model with Work-Life Levers

Stage in model of change	Organization/Decision maker stage	Perception of Work-Life Effectiveness	Effective Lever of Change
Precontemplation	Not thinking about change May be resigned to current situation Feeling of no control Denial: does not believe it applies to self/organization Believes consequences are not serious	Never Nonbusiness issue equals "personal issue"	Analyzing the organization's readiness for change
Contemplation	Weighing benefits and costs of initiative, proposed change	Someday Marginalize the issue equals "woman's issue"	Creating a sense of urgency Shared vision and strategy
Preparation	Experimenting with small changes Research Form committee or task force Pilot	Soon Research the issue equals "task force issue" or "pilot"	Involving all stakeholders Shared vision and strategy Planning for evaluation
Action	Taking a definitive action to change Expand pilot Roll out companywide	Now "Business Issue"	Total systems change Involving all stakeholders
Maintenance	Maintaining initiative/s over time Enhanced communication Evaluation	Now and future "Climate issue" and can become "Culture"	Reinforcing change

Information based on Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross. (1992).

- ▶ Articles of best practices from similar industries
- ▶ Comments from managers and key employees within the company
- ▶ Data on business issues such as turnover and productivity.

Little can directly influence decision makers in this stage, rather the strategy is to bide time, and be prepared when they appear ready to move to the next stage.

Contemplation

As the name implies “contemplation” is just that, thinking about it. Although decision makers may view workplace flexibility as more than a “personal issue,” they still may marginalize it by labeling it a “woman’s issue” or a “generational issue.” Nevertheless, this crucial stage is difficult to get to, and it is where the research, ideas and options can be brought to light with the decision maker. The first lever to use is the “shared vision and strategy.” It is crucial to demonstrate how in-line the workplace flexibility initiative can be with the department’s and the organization’s strategy. The focus is to demonstrate how minimal the change will be, and the intent is to lessen the anxiety of the decision maker.

The next level is arguably the most important lever for change, “creating a sense of urgency.” If three frogs on a branch all intend to jump, how many frogs are left on the branch? The answer is probably three. Intentions alone do not predict behavior. If a snake is slithering toward the frogs, however, their sense of urgency to jump would be much higher. Once again, the timing of this lever is crucial. Applying it too soon may entrench the decision maker in the precontemplation stage. Wait too long to apply the lever and the initiative may never get out of task-force mode.

Preparation

The decision maker has compelling information and some sense of urgency to act on the workplace flexibility

initiative. The decision maker is starting to invest some credibility in this initiative and will now see this as a “task-force issue.” The lever of “involving all stakeholders” is now most effective. These stakeholders need to be treated as decision makers as well, so the previous levers of “shared vision and strategy” and “creating a sense of urgency” are used in a similar fashion.

Likely, a pilot program will be proposed, as this keeps the initiative small, manageable and measurable. Thus, the other lever to apply in this stage is “planning for evaluation.” Far from being mundane and tedious, this lever allows the workplace flexibility initiative to be framed as a business issue. The stakeholders will be able to provide much-needed business metrics by which to measure the initiative’s value.

Action

The pilot has been successful and now the decision maker sees workplace flexibility as a business issue. To roll out the flexible work arrangements will require the lever of “total systems change.” Much or most of what will be required will have come from all the previous stages and levers, with a heavy reliance on the stakeholders. With the stakeholders involved early, it should be clear what systems, processes, procedures and logistics need to be addressed before the companywide rollout can succeed.


Maintenance

It will be tempting to claim that the successful pilot and companywide rollout of flexible work arrangements changed the organizational culture. Rather, understanding that some of the climate has been changed, in the way of practices and policies, is more realistic. Now is the time to use the “reinforce change” lever. It will be almost impossible to overcommunicate what flexible work arrangements are, how managers decide on who gets them and how managers evaluate employees in them. The more successful the users of flexible work arrangements are, the more communication must be public.

The initiative (flexible work arrangements) may start becoming part of the culture when it fulfills the main requirements of culture development: solves problems, works well enough to be considered valid and is communicated to new employees as solution (Schein 1990).

The Change Journey

It is crucial to realize that at any stage of change the initiative may not succeed for many reasons. Whether the external or internal environment changes, or there are deficiencies in any preceding stages and levers, the change process moves back to the first stage and the first lever. Moving back to the first stage does not mean the end of the initiative, but rather, an attempt to start again.

The seven levers for change will enable any organization to institutionalize the change journey, rather than the change itself. This concept is crucial to grasp because each institution has its own culture and climate, and no single culture or climate is ideal for sustained changes. Such changes are important to make because creation of a work-life program is not just nice to do, it is an urgent business necessity. 

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Author

David J. Thompson, Ph.D., has more than 15 years of experience in implementing work-life effectiveness programs in corporate, university and community settings, including Microsoft, Purdue University and Montana State University. He is the chairman of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP) Strategy Board and is on the advisory board for the Circle of Business in Columbus, Ohio. His Ph.D. is from Purdue University, and he earned an M.S. from Ball State University and a B.S. from the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse. Thompson is an instructor in the MBA program for the School of Management at Capital University. He can be reached at www.davidjthompson.net.

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