

FOREWORD

Much research has been done on the negative impact of organizational defensive routines. Many change programs have been and continue to be executed to reduce them, and the dominant focus has been to change the culture of the organization. Yet the effectiveness of cultural change programs as documented by evaluations of the participants varies from very effective to quite ineffective. And even when participants report that the programs produced positive changes, the changes have not persisted. Why?

Most individuals answer this question by saying that

- Organizations are too rigid and bureaucratic. They contain organizational defensive routines that inhibit learning and change.
- There is a lack of appropriate rewards.
- There is a lukewarm commitment to change from those at the top.

I often hear additional explanations for why successful change is not sustainable. The following are the three main explanations I've heard:

- Most busy executives do not have the time that is required to generate lasting commitment by others.
- It is frustrating getting people to realize that they are responsible for the problem and to stop blaming others or the system.
- Many executives express concern about harming their reputation if they take initiatives that are too risky.

The implication is that if we can reduce or eliminate these problems, culture change will flow more easily and be more persistent.

I have tested the implications of removing these obstacles to sustainable change, and my findings suggest several conclusions. First, it is true that organizational cultural factors do inhibit effective change. To implement a new culture, we require the support of the type of culture that we have been able to specify but have so far been unable to create. A new culture would have to include reward systems and champions necessary to support the change. On the level of interpersonal interactions, fears associated with the loss of reputation and career can inhibit change. Resistance to changing behavior and overcoming blindness is always

difficult to overcome. And the constraints of everyday pressures will inhibit the effectiveness of any change initiative.

A key criterion for effective cultural change is to change behavior. But if the changes are to persist, we must identify the most fundamental causes of the behavior. They are (1) the theories-in-use human beings hold about effective learning, (2) the defensive reasoning mind-sets that they use to design and execute their actions, (3) the organizational defensive routines that reward anti-learning, self-sealing processes, (4) the ways in which we are all causally responsible for creating these counterproductive features, and (5) our skilled unawareness and skilled incompetence, which prevent us from producing the changes that we can identify but cannot produce in sustainable ways.

This is a nontrivial challenge often acknowledged and rarely engaged. William Noonan's book provides one of the most complete and detailed answers as to how to achieve change. He engages the puzzles head-on. He provides rich, warm, and thoughtful insights into his trials and tribulations while learning to become more effective. He connects this personal learning to recommendations as to how to design and implement changes in organizational defensive routines—changes that are both effective and sustainable. I recommend *Discussing the Undiscussable* as a first-rate example of how effective individual and organizational change can happen.

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