

Five Good Ideas about Institutional Change: Turning a Ship... it takes time!

**Alok Mukherjee, Chair, Toronto Police Services Board
Tuesday, September 18, 2007 - 12:00 to 2:00 PM**

We all know the saying: "I ain't got all day!" My theme is time – the time it takes to bring about institutional change, the time we often have to make such change and the price we pay if we run out of time before accomplishing real change in the organizations we are involved with.

I want to explore what considerations we need to take into account, and what concrete actions we can take to ensure that when our time with the board of an organization is up, we can leave with the satisfaction of knowing that it is a better organization, rather than with the nagging feeling that as a director, we ran out of time or with the self-doubt that we were only there as 'time-servers'.

At one point recently I said to my staff at the police services board, "I have only 3 years and 6 months left in my term, and so I can't afford to let up." When I am asked – as I often am – whether I plan on seeking another term on the board, I answer, "If I haven't accomplished most of my goals by the time I have completed my term on this board, what good will be another term?"

Like most of you, I became involved with the Toronto Police Services Board (TPSB) because I have a vision for this very important institution of our society which touches the lives of every member of the community. I would like to see TPSB become an inclusive organization in the way it sees itself, serves the community, makes decisions, sets priorities, uses public money, acts as a large employer and generally responds to the needs and expectations of the residents of Toronto. And I would like to ensure that these goals have been achieved, or, at a minimum, a solid foundation has been laid for accomplishing these goals before my time is up! Almost all of us have heard the refrain at one time or another: 'Institutional change takes time. Be patient.' There are many variations of this refrain, often presented as popular wisdom, such as:

1. Be realistic.
2. Don't rock the boat.
3. Change is a slow process.
4. Board should not be involved in operations.
5. Don't go too far.
6. Leave it to the experts.
7. Be objective, neutral and impartial.
8. Don't worry about details.
9. Don't go too fast.

I believe that the notion that change takes time is perhaps one of the greatest sources of conflict and mistrust between organizations and seekers of change who feel, often rightly, that they have already waited long enough.

Time for me, then, is a very important component of the process of organizational change. Yet, curiously, there is no formula or model that I am aware of, to quantify or predict the time required for the change process. I suspect that most organizational change theories have not dealt with the question of time as I have posed it because they have been developed from the perspective of the organization, to make change palatable to those already in power. When looked at from a dominant or status quo perspective, time takes on a different dimension.

My ideas on this subject are not derived from books or theory; therefore I cannot give you a bibliography or list of resources. They come from praxis.

As you will see, my five good ideas are simple ideas. But I do believe there is much substance to them. Let me now elaborate on each of them.

1. Know yourself; know the lay of the land.

This is my starting point. It is a great ego booster to be invited or sought out to sit on or chair the board of an organization. The inclination is to say yes, and that is quite understandable. There is a sense of gratification for the acknowledgement of one's record of work and leadership that this represents, a sense of obligation to help an organization in need of the particular value that one might add or a sense of an opportunity to make some real change in an organization that does important work.

It is extremely important to be very clear about one's motivation for seeking or taking a place on a volunteer board. What I have cited earlier are just some of the many reasons why we agree to serve on boards. Clarity about motivation will help us decide on the role we want to play as part of the leadership of the organization.

The next step is to assess the assets that we can bring to the role we seek to play. These assets can include a particular knowledge, expertise, skill, experience or network. Any or all of these are enablers; they bring us legitimacy and enable us to play our desired role.

I still remember the conversation I had with the Board of Governors of a community college when I was interviewed for my suitability to be a member. It was a board made up of people primarily from the corporate sector because the role of this board had been to raise funds. I was quite candid in telling them that since I had a hard time managing my personal finances, I would be the wrong person to choose if ability to raise funds was the main criterion! However, there were other strengths that I had, which, in my view, would enable me to make a positive contribution. The board decided that those strengths would enhance its governance role and I was appointed.

This leads me to the second part of my first idea: whether I can make a contribution or play the role that I would like to depends equally on whether the organization is ready for me! In the case of the community college that I have just mentioned, I knew from people within the college that it was in a state of flux and was ripe for change. Money, or lack of it, was not its main problem. Its main problem was that though located in and serving a rapidly changing population, it had made no – or little – effort to prepare itself for the emerging clientele in terms of its administrative leadership, programs or community linkages.

The knowledge I had of the college's needs and of the pressures that it was facing both from within and outside the organization, helped me decide that here was an board where I could make a positive contribution – and do so fairly quickly. Had these conditions not been present, I would have been an ornament, a token, and not a real agent of change on this board.

There is one further consideration: in getting to know the organization in which you want to play a leadership role, it is important to pay attention to its formal as well as its informal culture. If you stop with the formal culture, you may well find that while it makes bold pronouncements on matters that may be dear to you, informally it does business in a totally opposite way. And this informal culture is often more powerful than the formal one.

It is important to pay heed to this first idea **before** getting involved with an organization for the simple reason that, otherwise, you may set yourself up for failure, frustration or loss of credibility in the public eye.

2. Lay the groundwork fast, and don't settle for a half loaf. Build support and find allies within and without. They are everywhere.

My second good idea is, as you will note, a cluster of ideas rather than one idea. The ideas in this cluster are not just because I was not able or prepared to throw any out; they are here because they are interdependent. With the benefit of knowing the lay of the land already, you would also know the changes that you would like to make.

In terms of taking necessary action, I favour the practical approach of software developers to that of the practitioners of what the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, called "theoretical theory". These latter are the experts and specialists in the field of organization theory who, often working in the abstract, lay out elaborate models of the change process. While they offer valuable insights, and should not be disregarded, I have great trouble with their linear, step-by-step change processes. These are based on the assumption that organizations are rational, logical entities and change can be a managed process like building a house or a plant.

The reality of most organizations is that they are often dealing with a 100 pressures or challenges at the same time. As well, a linear change process that insists that you must take one well-considered step after another requires an extended time frame. And I ain't got all day! Nor do those who have waited a long time for change to happen.

This is why I prefer the approach of the software programmer who knows that since the cyber world is dynamic and constantly evolving, speed rather than perfection is of the essence. All of you are familiar, I am sure, with the upgrades that Microsoft sends out to its users almost every day. If Microsoft waited until it had perfected its products, you can be sure that it will not be where it is today.

It is a better strategy to make the best effort, implement the initiative and then make the corrections and adjustments that may become necessary as the implementation goes ahead.

This is what I mean by laying the groundwork fast.

In doing so, it is also important, I believe, to go for the 'whole waterfront', as it were. Or, to mix metaphors, don't settle for a half-loaf.

This is the opposite of the admonition to be realistic. I would put it to you that in seeking institutional change within the finite time that we have at our disposal, there is little room for timidity. Being realistic can be a call to be timid. So, it is important, in my view, to not only start fast, but also to be ambitious.

Let me clarify one thing. When I advocate for the need to start fast and go far, I do not mean to suggest that you should act without a game plan. It is extremely important to have a plan, but it is even more important that you don't fixate on it. The plan should not become its own justification, without flexibility and room to change course, make adjustments or take advantage of a serendipitous opportunity.

In other words, the plan must not restrict your ability to act on many fronts. An ambitious agenda of change requires that there be action on many fronts. This is what I mean by going far. As seekers of change who ain't got all day, we need to open a broad front of action. You can rest assured that when you do this, there will be those who will push back, counsel patience, advise caution, or question your authority.

This last admonition I find most challenging. It reminds me of a line that I once used when, as the Acting Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, I had raised some issues that were not particularly welcome to the government of the day. My response was that I will use the full powers of the office given by the Human Rights Code until I am told by those with greater power than mine that I can't. The important qualifier is that in seeking to go far or promoting an ambitious agenda, our actions must always be legitimate; that is, supported by legal, constitutional and jurisdictional authority. I am not advocating for extra-jurisdictional or dictatorial action.

My proposal is based on the belief that change is a dialectical process. And in this dialectic, synthesis results from the tension between your impatient thesis and the cautious anti-thesis of others. You can be sure that there will be no shortage of those who provide the anti-theses!

However, in working for change, whenever you demonstrate that your actions are ethical and not motivated by self-interest but by the greater good, you will find there are allies within and without the organization. You will find that there are many allies and they are everywhere. You will find them at all levels of the organization. It is important to pay attention to them and to enlist their support for the change you are seeking.

In building this base of support within the organization, there is one final consideration to bear in mind. While you are **in** the organization, you are not **of** the organization. That is to say, the mutually supportive relationship that you build should not blind you to the fact that your relationship to the organization is not the same as that of those who are management and employees. There are bound to be different interests, though they need not be antagonistic interests. The supportive relationship, in other words, should be characterized by a creative tension.

3. If you can, find a new management team and build relationships. Be challenged by the management team and let it be your ambassador. Respect each other's interests and resolve differences constructively.

My third good idea is, like the second good idea, a cluster of ideas. It is a reality of our organizations that operationalizing change is the domain of management. There are numerous examples where the best plans and intentions of a board have been proved ineffective, or have not been implemented in a timely manner, because of the resistance, inertia, incompetence or outright hostility on the part of management.

Management, particularly the chief executive, needs to be on board, to have the trust and confidence of the governing body and to be on the same wave length philosophically. I am reminded once again of my experience at the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Those of you who were around at the time when I was Acting Chief Commissioner might remember the bad public reputation of the Commission. It was clear that fundamental changes were needed in the way the Commission functioned. It was clear that those changes could not happen unless we had an Executive Director who understood the need for change and had the skills, ability and stamina to carry out our decisions as Commissioners.

Traditionally, the Executive Director, who is a civil servant, was assigned by the Deputy Minister responsible for the Commission. I – acting on the principle that I will act until I am told that I can't – asked the Deputy Minister for a say in the choice of our Executive Director. He understood our rationale and gave us the person who fitted the bill.

I can tell you that our success in finding an Executive Director who shared our view on the need for change, and had the capacity to make it happen, made all the difference. As the operational head of the organization, a different person could have annulled all our fine decisions.

There is, of course, more to it than just changing the management. The quality of relationship between the board and the management is equally important. I am reminded of a organization where the board chair and the executive director were at constant loggerheads. The result was that the chair made one set of decisions and the executive director implemented something quite different!

My point is not that the management should be a lackey or yes-person of the board. It is critical that the operational head of the organization be someone with real authority, clout and command over the organization in order to be effective. The relationship must be professional and one of equals. This means that you will be challenged by your operational head. And that challenging must be welcomed, because it will produce good decisions, and establish the necessary balance.

Implicit in this is the real possibility that there will be conflict. Conflict is inevitable because the interests of the board and the operational head are not necessarily identical, though the goals they pursue must be. But conflict is not a negative phenomenon. It can result in great creativity, provided there is an effective process to resolve differences, and differences are not personalized.

I find it helpful, when dealing with conflict with management, to keep in mind that there are more agreements than disagreements and that there is no disagreement with respect to the broad goals; the conflict is not to decide between a winner and a loser but to select the best course of action that meets the needs of both parties.

Such a process works best, in my view, when the emphasis in decision-making is, as far as possible, on collaboration rather than fiat, i.e. decision-making strictly by majority vote. If a culture of collaboration is promoted, it becomes easier to resolve differences. Differences are easier to resolve as well, if they are dealt with in private. However that happens only when there is genuine respect. We say that often enough, but what does it mean? For me, it involves a clear recognition that people who work for boards are the lynchpins; without them change cannot happen. It also involves an appreciation of the hard work that management does to implement board decisions.

These are simple ideas, but they work for me. And what also works for me is the principle that I must work as hard as they do. That is how I communicate the seriousness which I attach to the change process, and earn respect in return. When there is such mutual respect and understanding of each other's interests, the chances of the change effort succeeding are increased significantly.

4. Use power wisely and with compassion. Understand different forms or types of power, and use a range of them.

My fourth idea is about power. Institutional change is, in the final analysis, an exercise in power. And one's success in making change happen depends on understanding the full range of power, identifying the types of power that one has, and using all of them appropriately and strategically.

I don't think I need to dwell on this idea, since it is self evident. To the extent that change is a process marked by possibilities of conflict, resistance, sabotage, hostility and so on, it is only to be expected that the process will involve transactions in power.

In order to participate in this transaction effectively, it is important to first understand that there are many types of power related to one's identity and personal attributes, location in society, status in the organization and so on. Derived from all of these sources, one can have knowledge and expertise power, charisma power, socially-imbued power, network power, connection power, status power, coercive power, and so on.

From our understanding of these various types of power, we can decide which ones we have, and how best to use them. I believe that coercive power and status power have limited uses, and should be used only as a last resort. Use of power is most effective when the type that is most appropriate to a given situation is employed.

Above all, regardless of the type of power used, it is most important that we use power wisely and with compassion. Power used unwisely can be hurtful and produce negative impacts. I think the idea is so self-evident that there is no need for further elaboration.

5. Assess, evaluate and communicate. Don't lose friends among or support of those who need change most!

My last good idea is simply that, when engaged in the change process, we must assess and evaluate the results we achieve and the progress we make. Because we ain't got all day, this must be done continuously so that we don't become complacent and so that we may make the necessary adjustments and corrections in a timely manner.

By assessing and evaluating, I am not referring to some elaborate, formal and time-consuming activity. I am referring to something akin to taking a pulse. We need to do it as part of our interactions with people both inside and outside the organization.

However, such pulse-taking depends on one further requirement - the requirement to communicate widely and continuously. In particular those whose interests we represent, those whom we consider our base of support, those who have advocated for change, have a need to know the difference that we are making to the organization and the results of our efforts. At the same time, we have a need to know from them if the results of the change process are being felt by them. It is through this process of communication that we know if we are being effective.

This two-way communication is absolutely critical for the legitimacy of our efforts. For one thing, such communication helps to remind us whose interest we are serving. For another, it gives us the feedback that we need in order to know whether we have used time well or have simply been 'time-servers'.

We need to know this because we ain't got all day; nor do those who have been looking for the organizations of our society to serve the broader interest.