

Applying the Tipping Point philosophy to Organizational Change

“An organization’s ability to learn, and translate that learning into action rapidly, is the ultimate competitive advantage.” Jack Welsh

Many people are familiar with Malcolm Gladwell’s best selling book ‘The Tipping Point’ first published in the year 2000. Drawing on epidemic theory, Gladwell provided insights into how social trends and programs tipped from a small beginning to widespread adoption. In doing so he popularised the term *tipping point*, that ‘magical moment when ideas, trends and social behaviours cross a threshold, tip and spread like wildfire’.

Less well known is the work of Andrea Shapiro who has applied the same concepts to create a simple model of organizational change. Shapiro’s model provides a common language for those engaged in implementing change enabling dialogue on the actions required to help move people from being disconnected to being committed to a change.

The end point of a change is sometimes defined in technical terms e.g. the project is complete, new equipment or technology is installed, training is complete etc: however change is successfully implemented only when people have adopted the new ideas and are using the new ways of working to do their jobs.

The tipping point model of organizational change postulates that the spread of a change is analogous to the spread of an epidemic. The spread of a flu epidemic is dependant on contact with a carrier of the flu, the virulence of the flu strain and the environment in which the epidemic occurs. In an analogous manner, the rate at which a new change is adopted requires contact with advocates of the change, a compelling content of the change itself and appropriate environmental support for the change. These factors interact and either reinforce or compete against each other.

The four possible attitudes to organizational change, outlined by Shapiro, are given in Figure 1 below. As people’s attitude toward the change evolves, they move among these four attitude pools.

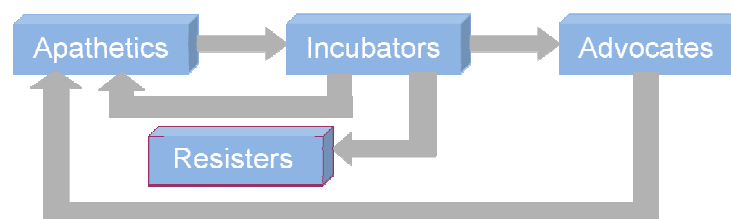


Figure 1: Four Attitudes towards Change (Andrea Shapiro)

Apathetics are unfamiliar with or uninterested in the change: Incubators know about the change but as yet are not advocates of the change: Advocates recognise the value of the change, are positive about it and can explain the value of the change to colleagues: Resisters will work against the change, either overtly or covertly.

To make the change tip, the rate at which people enter the advocate pool must exceed the rate at which people leave the advocate pool. Thus the goal is to move people towards the Advocate pool and away from the Apathetic and Resister pools.

Shapiro defined 7 levers of change which influence how people move between the 4 attitude pools. These are outlined below and fall into two broad categories - people support levers and environment support levers,

Table 1 - The Seven Levers of Change

Contacts	1-1 Contacts between Advocates of the change initiative and those who are Apathetic to it	The People Support Levers
Mass Exposure	One size fits all communication	
Hire Advocates	Hiring of people because they are Advocates and experts of the new change	
Remove Resisters	The approach to dealing with those who resist the change	
Reward and Recognition	The amount of reward and recognition allocated to the specific change	Environmental Support Levers
Walk the Talk	Leaders communicating the business case and demonstrating commitment to the change	
Infrastructure	Has the required infrastructure been put in place to support the change?	

The levers of change impact the movement of individuals from one attitude pool to another. The way in which this occurs is outlined in Figure 2 below.

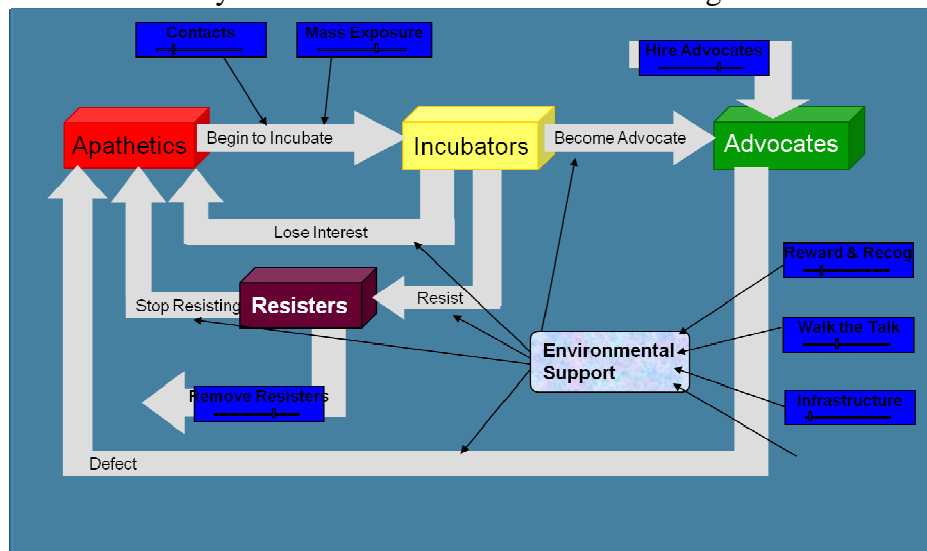


Figure 2: The Levers of Change and how they influence People's attitude towards an Organisational Change (Andrea Shapiro)

Not all levers are equal. 'Contacts' and 'Walk the Talk' are *must have* levers of change. It is as important to support existing advocates of the change as to create new ones. Mass Exposure should be used with caution as it is easy to over use this lever.

Hiring for expertise should be done with caution. The reasons for resistance must always be surfaced and explored.

A suggested use of this change model

In practice when a project is being introduced, a strategy for introducing the change needs to be clearly defined and documented. Too often the error of assuming that the change is so good that it will implement itself is made. This approach to change implementation is rarely successful. Next, with a few members of the implementation team and using the levers of change as a prompt, a number of actions to support the change implementation should be agreed. The must have levers of change should be reflected on. Are the correct advocates identified? Are there opportunities for 1-1 contacts between advocates and apathetics? Are plans in place to surface and address resistance? Is the required infrastructure in place? Do leaders communicate a clear business case for the change? Do leaders demonstrate their commitment to the change?

Exercise: Getting to understand this model

With a few colleagues, think of a previous change that was successful. This can either be a change in your work environment or a change in the general environment. Take 10 mins to consider the following questions.

What was the implementation strategy?

What actions were taken under each lever of change?

What was the impact of these actions?

References and Acknowledgements

1. Creating Contagious Commitment: Applying the Tipping Point to Organisational Change, Andrea Shapiro, 2003, Strategy Perspective, Hillsborough, North Carolina. <http://www.4-perspective.com>
2. The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell, 2001, Little, Brown and Company, Great Britain.