

Break the Cycle!

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Arend Ardon

Break the Cycle!

**How managers block change
without realizing it**

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To Bram and Ruth

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Preface

You'll only see it when you get it

Ever been on a winter driving course where you were taught skid recovery techniques? The number one rule in a skid: lay off the brakes! Hitting the brakes will only make the skid worse. I remember one conversation I had with my instructor about that big red light on the dashboard.

Me: 'What's that red light for?' Instructor: 'It will light up when you hit the brakes.'

Me: 'But surely I'll know when I've hit the brakes?' Instructor: 'You probably won't.'

Me: 'I find that hard to believe. Besides, I won't be applying the brakes anyway, you've just taught me not to.'

Instructor: 'Just drive...'

I remember I got into a skid and made two 360-degree turns. The red light came on ...

Me: 'But I didn't even brake.'

Instructor: 'You thought you weren't going to and you think you didn't. That's what the red light is for.'

I found this absolutely fascinating. I had basically hit the brakes unknowingly. And that while I had so firmly resolved not to. It was a reflex: I saw danger, so I applied the brakes. Instead of keep-

ing me safe, my subconscious self-preservation ended up putting me in danger...

Years later, I would regularly encounter similar situations in the corporate world. At many companies and organizations that engaged me as a consultant, I would find a typical manager who wanted an open and honest culture at his department, where people can speak their minds, where every opinion counts, and where managers therefore must show an interest and ask questions. And this manager would really mean all of this. But whenever discussions at a meeting would get heated, he would still go out of his way to convince others they were wrong. Result: others would just give in to be done with it and think twice about expressing their opinion next time. The manager was not aware of his behavior. If only there had been a big red light on the meeting room table...

The more I was asked to breathe new life into change processes that had gone stale, the more examples I encountered of these kinds of fascinating situations. Managers with top-notch change management expertise who knew exactly how managers should act, but who still saw their change processes come to nothing. They would all work with the best of intentions to steer the process in the right direction but end up with unwanted outcomes. This was because they would, without realizing it, do exactly those things that cause change processes to fail.

Given that we are not aware of how our actions lead to change processes grinding to a halt, we do not address them at management meetings. Instead, we talk about milestone plans and change strategies that will help us change the process and the

employees. But as we discuss plans, we do things that have the power to make or break the change process. And we do them without realizing it.

Wanting to get to the bottom of this, I dedicated four years of postgraduate research to this phenomenon, attending around 100 meetings, ranging from board meetings to management team meetings and regular team meetings, and keeping an accurate log of what was said and what happened at those meetings, ultimately totaling around 1,700 pages of notes. I also spoke to managers personally to tune in to their thinking. The next step was to analyze all my notes, tracking down recurring patterns, identifying thought processes, and studying management behavior. It opened up a whole new world to me!

Without realizing it:

- we have counterproductive assumptions about change processes
- we don't do as we say
- we display behavior that makes employees dependent and reactive
- we undermine employees' entrepreneurial spirit and sense of responsibility
- we tackle recurring problems with the same approach every time, and
- we try to block discussion of our own ineffectiveness.

If you listen closely and look at what is going on in the here and now, you will obtain a wealth of information about how change processes end up stagnating. It is a learning curve. You will not see it right away, because all those 'suspicious' comments and

behaviors initially seem so logical and familiar. And because we view them through the same glasses that caused the problems in the first place.

This book will help you understand why change processes stagnate. And, even more importantly, how you are one of the main reasons why they stagnate. This book will help you become aware of your subconscious assumptions and behavior, and make you see the unwanted effects. It will show you how you are keeping the vicious cycle going and how the same problems keep coming back. The emphasis in this book is not on providing tips and tricks, but rather on helping you understand how you are the one perpetuating difficult situations. By analyzing your own behavior and approach, you will learn to breathe new life into your stale change processes.

This book is structured along the lines of the six basic principles of breaking the cycle and achieving real change.

Break the Cycle! - The Six Principles

1. *Recognize persistent situations*

Sometimes the problem and the solution are crystal clear. When that happens, you 'only' have to intervene. But in sticky situations, intervening often only makes things worse. That is when you need an understanding of how you are perpetuating the problem through the way you think and act. The question is how to recognize these kinds of situations.

2. *Be aware of your thinking about change*

Without realizing it, you have all kinds of assumptions about how change processes work. These assumptions are often

based on the idea that you, as the manager, can simply ‘implement’ change. Your choices are based on these assumptions, and so they can get you into serious trouble. You can, however, breathe new life into change processes by rethinking your assumptions.

3. *See what you do when the going gets tough*

The key to successful change lies in the here and now, in what happens between you and others in day-to-day interactions. You know how important it is to get your employees involved in the decision-making process, how important it is to listen to them, and how important it is to get to the bottom of their concerns. But chances are that, when push comes to shove, you lose sight of all that. This is because when the going gets tough, our autopilot tends to take over. Without realizing it, we unilaterally try to stay in control of the situation, thus undermining the change process. If you are aware of this happening, you can override your autopilot and switch back to manual mode.

4. *Understand how you are perpetuating the situation*

Whenever changes are not going smoothly, you sometimes feel you are going around in circles. And you probably are. It is very likely that you and your people have indeed ended up in a vicious cycle that has you all running in a kind of hamster wheel. All you are doing is perpetuating the current situation. But you can stop the hamster wheel.

5. *Dare to discuss the undiscussable*

Learning happens when you openly address the effectiveness of your actions. The thing is, however, that we are not very good at that. We often try to sweep information about our own ineffectiveness under the rug, using so-called defensive strategies, which are very logical and inconspicuous. This is how

we ultimately block learning and change. Talking about it and getting it out in the open has turned out to be a very effective way of unblocking it.

6. *Start small*

We talk about change a lot, and we are quick to set up all kinds of projects. But real change is realized only when you manage to create an open communication climate in which everyone, including you, learns from the things that happen. A transparent guideline will give you something to go by in putting this into practice.

Every chapter is structured in the same way.

- *Real-life example*

An explicit fragment of a management team discussion or a conversation between a manager and their staff is used to illustrate the subject covered in the chapter. These exchanges are taken from a company where management wants to realize culture change to make employees more enterprising and more result-driven. At first glance, the exchanges may seem very normal. It all seems so logical...

- *What is actually happening?*

The chapter will help you understand what is actually happening. And how those seemingly logical exchanges show how we, without realizing it, are making change processes grind to a halt, undermining people's sense of responsibility, and causing recurring problems. A combination of real-life examples and new insights.

- *How to breathe new life into a situation*

Targeted suggestions will help you break deadlocks, generally

by openly discussing the situation, openly addressing your own role, and exploring new ways together.

- *Breakthroughs*

In every chapter, you will find ‘breakthroughs’, which are exercises for you to do in your own day-to-day work to put insights from this book into practice. The emphasis of these exercises is often on boosting your understanding of your own role in any sticky situations that you may find yourself in at work. These interventions have all been tried and tested in real-life environments, and they have proven their effectiveness.

- *The essence*

Every chapter closes with a brief recap of the essence of what was covered in the chapter in four or five bullet points.

The headers in the chapters are not exact copies of those listed above, as that would make things boring. But you will instantly recognize the line of thought they represent in each chapter.

This book is based on my PhD thesis entitled *Moving Moments*. In working on my thesis and this book, I have drawn inspiration from a number of authors, with Chris Argyris being my main source of inspiration. He has written a great deal about the inconsistency between what managers say and what they do. Peter Senge’s work shows beautifully how we inadvertently perpetuate problems. Bill Noonan and Diana McLain Smith have managed to make Argyris’ often difficult-to-read works more accessible. Check the back of this book for a list of books worth reading by these and several other authors. What all these books have in common is that they do not try to present change processes as customizable step-by-step plans. Instead, they all try to get to the bottom of what really happens. Although that is indeed a more

complex undertaking, it is ten times more exciting than the misleading simplicity of ‘do it this way and it will all work out fine.’

This book is about managers and where they hit a wall. Managers are not a special breed of people with out of the ordinary behavioral tendencies. This book deals with human behavior, albeit shown by managers in specific situations in the context of change processes.

The challenge for me in writing this book was to capture years of scientific research in a book with actual practical relevance. I hope that you, after reading it, conclude that I have succeeded in doing that. And I hope that this book will help you realize how we, through seemingly normal and rational behavior, are causing our change processes to fail. You’ll only see it when you get it.

1 Recognize persistent situations

Be in the picture

‘We have to push them hard.’

Manager 1: ‘Remember we discussed in the beginning that the new structure also had to lead to different behavior? Enterprising employees, result-driven attitude...’

Director: ‘You want to do too much too quickly. We are focusing on the structure first. We’ll deal with the culture later.’

Manager 1: ‘But how can you see these as two separate things? To be able to organize work processes properly, employees are really going to have to show more initiative. We still have to push them hard...’

Manager 2: ‘You’ve got a point there. The employees themselves lack drive. We keep having to convince them to act. Sometimes I feel we’re going around in circles.’

Manager 1: ‘I don’t want them to do it for me, I want them to do it of their own accord.’

Director: ‘Also in the future, we are going to need initiative and entrepreneurial spirit. Assign responsibilities lower down in the organization. That’s where we are going to have to launch a culture-change process.’

These managers feel they have to push their employees hard. They try to convince employees and do their utmost to propel them

into action. But they are not getting anywhere. They feel they are going around in circles. The director suggests tackling the culture. But the question is whether that is the solution. This chapter will show that it will probably not lead to much of anything, simply because it is a solution that was chosen without knowing the problem. It is an intervention that is not based on understanding. In this chapter, you will read all about how difficult change situations call for a unique approach, and about how to recognize persistent situations.

Recurring difficulties

I am often engaged by companies that have been trying to realize change for some time, without ever achieving satisfactory results. Interventions produce short-lived improvements, but the same symptoms always reappear after some time. Examples of such persistent situations are poor customer satisfaction or a lack of entrepreneurial spirit across the company. In a strikingly large number of cases, managers claim that employees are overly reactive, have too much of a wait-and-see attitude, and are even cynical. Employees, in turn, describe the corporate culture as threatening and the management as directive.

Common examples of persistent situations include when you try to boost your people's sense of initiative, but they stick with their wait-and-see approach. Or you do your utmost to garner support for your plans, but your employees keep resisting. Sometimes it seems as if the harder you try, the more difficult it gets. Despite your best intentions, the meetings, and the workshops, you feel you are not getting anywhere. The same problems keep coming back. The change process stagnates.

When things get difficult and your best intentions do not lead to improvement: stop! You are only wasting your time. Initiatives that may seem logical will only take you from bad to worse. More of the same will only get you into trouble. These persistent situations call for an entirely different approach. But the question is how to recognize them.

Gunshot wounds and excess weight

When it comes to identifying persistent situations, we can learn a thing or two from doctors. They distinguish between acute and persistent symptoms all the time. Obvious examples of acute conditions are a gunshot wound or a broken leg. With these kinds of injuries, the problem and the solution are crystal clear. The doctor knows what is good for you and will assume all responsibility for your treatment. As the patient, you submit yourself to your doctor's intervention without challenging it. You relinquish your responsibility and become dependent.

But what about when you are overweight, and diets and exercise have not produced any weight loss, or when you suffer from chronic headaches or stress? Both the problem and the solution are a lot less self-evident in those cases. A painkiller will alleviate the headache, but only for a short while. In the long term, a painkiller is a solution that may even worsen the problem. After all, the underlying problem could be stress, which, in turn, is caused by an inability to handle pressure. If these underlying issues are not tackled, the headaches will keep coming back in the long term. By taking a painkiller, you have only temporarily bypassed the real problem. And the real problem may even have gotten worse in the process, as symptoms were suppressed by the pill and the patient starts to feel dependent on the doctor.

The same kind of dichotomy applies to organizational problems. There are cases when the problem is clear and the solution obvious. For example, when waiting times rise due to understaffing, the solution is to (temporarily) hire additional staff. And when the information system does not return the right management information, the system needs to be reconfigured.

In other cases, the problem and the solution are not as clear-cut. If your employees are insufficiently enterprising, you can offer them a workshop (much like a pill) that will teach them to be more enterprising. This might spur them on, but it could also worsen the problem. Their reactive attitude may be the result of the fact that managers keep organizing things for them, such as workshops, and they barely ever have to take responsibility themselves.

So, you can basically distinguish two kinds of situations:

1. *straightforward situations* with a clear problem and a clear solution. In such situations, the required action is self-evident. It is as clear-cut as dressing a gunshot wound;
2. *persistent situations* where seemingly logical solutions do not produce logical results. Well-intended initiatives may only make the situation worse. Problems keep coming back, it is all very troublesome, you are not making any progress.

This book is about persistent situations. The emphasis in such situations should be on understanding instead of on intervening: how did we get here, how am I perpetuating it?

Take the persistent situation where efforts to make employees more enterprising keep failing. Instead of devising an approach to boost employees' entrepreneurial spirit, it would be far more useful to first understand why employees are not enterprising in the first place. How are we causing employees to adopt a passive wait-and-see attitude?

Breakthrough 1

Which persistent situations do you recognize?

You can recognize persistent situations by the fact that they consume a lot of your energy, while the initiatives you take to resolve them yield little. These situations make you feel all knotted up inside and they create tension. You have doubts about the approach, because your previous initiatives failed. Below you will find a list of several common persistent situations. Check the boxes for the ones you have faced in your working life.

- You have been trying to motivate your people to take more initiative and be more enterprising, but you are not getting anywhere.
- You have made several attempts to bridge the gap between management and staff, but your attempts have come to nothing.
- You keep trying to break down the resistance to change, but you only seem to accomplish the opposite.
- You do your utmost to motivate and inspire your staff, but they simply seem to lack any kind of drive.
- You have taken a range of initiatives to raise employee satisfaction, but the scores continue to be low.

- You communicate until you're blue in the face, but they are still unhappy about communications about change.
- You feel that you are being very clear on the need for change, but they are just not accepting it.
- People keep saying 'yes' but doing 'no'.
- ...

Now write down what is making the situations you have selected so persistent. What causes the process to stall and the problem to persist?

From intervention to understanding

To recognize persistent situations, you need to learn to look and listen very closely. If you do that, you will see how you, despite having the best of intentions, are basically reinforcing the current situation. Go back and carefully read the management team discussion at the start of this chapter again. The managers say a couple of things that can be classed as 'suspicious' in this context. But they are not aware of it. They are in the middle of the situation. Do you recognize these 'suspicious' statements?

A few examples:

- ✗ 'They are really going to have to show more initiative. We still have to push them hard.' And: 'The employees themselves lack drive. We keep having to convince them to act.'

It seems that these managers think that persuading and pushing their employees will help them get more out of their employees. But they have already seen that it does not work,