

**Critical Challenges of the Learning Red Zone™:  
Senior Managers in Empowering  
Organizational Change**

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### **Introduction**

We are in a difficult historical moment. Culturally, we have one foot in the modernist world of hierarchal bureaucratic organization and one foot in the new complex and dynamic world of emerging new organizational forms (Beckhard and Prichard, 1992; Bergquist, 1993). Unpredictable change is rapidly eroding the efficacy of modernist bureaucracies and we are searching for more responsive, flexible organizational forms that can adapt more rapidly to changing environmental demands (Purser and Cabana, 1998). A consequence of this new environment is that command and control leadership is becoming dysfunctional as senior managers now have no hope of keeping up with the barrage of new information that must be ‘digested’ for effective decision making. Refined judgment and intelligent decision-making now have to be exercised throughout organizations.

In this context, there has been intensified innovation activity in the domain of participative planning processes and organizational redesign approaches (see Beyerlein, et al, 2003). An accumulating depth of expertise (Purser and Cabana, 1998) as well as a rich theoretical discourse (e.g., Emery and Trist 1977; Emery, 1993, 1999) deriving from this current practical necessity also draws on a more longstanding search for more humanizing forms of work organization over the past half century (e.g., Trist, 1979).

One of the typical hurdles in organizational redesign projects that genuinely distribute power and responsibility throughout an existing and formerly traditional setting is the development of commitment and ability to support the intervention. This article is an exploration of the challenges of this radical organizational innovation especially for senior managers who, with the sponsoring change leader(s), play a critical role in the organization redesign process and implementation of empowering change. I propose a partnership between organization-wide change interventions and learning focused initiatives such as *change leadership coaching* that enable senior managers to engage constructively and reflectively with participative change processes as a key success factor in empowering initiatives. Conceptions of leadership and responsibility inherent in empowering change initiatives imply second order learning<sup>1</sup> - the development of a paradigmatically different perspective on one’s self and one’s workplace. Drawing on research about learning for self-management and a leadership coaching practice with primarily public sector senior managers leading participative organizational change, I outline typical learning challenges for organizational leaders, highlight the implications for these organizational change initiatives, and suggest learning focused interventions that hold promise for constructive leadership and organizational outcomes.

### ***Including Persons in Organizational Transformation Initiatives***

Participative approaches to organizational planning, redesign, and operation are seen typically as planned change interventions at organizational and team levels. The implications for change at the personal level have been assumed to take care of themselves and to be beneficial, that is, *empowering*. For some change practitioners and theorists, there is a conscious intention to avoid focus on the individual to prevent collapsing the structural view into a ‘psychologistic’ perspective. This, however, eclipses the role of personal understanding and informed choice as a critical element of effective and sustained commitment for collaborative participative organizational practices. Indeed, one of the common barriers to the success of empowering initiatives is the strong resistance on the part of senior managers, as noted recently in this journal (Warah, 2002). The demands on personnel who participate in organizational decentralization processes have also perhaps simply been overlooked since people are often reluctant to disclose their own frequently tumultuous experience. Agreement that widely distributed, well-networked, collaborative leadership is needed is more prevalent than a comprehensive appreciation of what is required of participants to achieve it. What, on the surface, appears to be just-another reorganization can be surprising, if not shocking to those ‘living the change’. In fact, participative organizational redesign involves much more than restructuring and new ways of working. It implies *simultaneously* a fundamental reconfiguration of organizational culture and deeply held personal beliefs, values, assumptions, and, potentially, identity.

### ***The Players and their Different Challenges in the Empowering Change***

Decisions to initiate organizational participative redesign typically come from one or several key leaders who I will call “change sponsors”. They are motivated by some combination of their passionate commitment to principles (e.g., humanizing the workplace, development and empowerment of people) and their perceptions of and convictions about the pragmatic value of the change (e.g., become more responsive to changing client and environmental demand, increasing integration of sectors of the organization, increasing efficiency). These individuals in promising change projects are in positions of power with a mandate to re-envision the organization. They are CEO’s, Presidents, General Directors. But they must enlist others in the project—external, and possibly, internal consultants to provide the change planning expertise, and, importantly, their senior managers and board members (elected officials in the case of public service organizations) to support the change goals. The apparent paradox that will follow both the change sponsor and the senior managers throughout the major change project is how strong, influential and decisive they have to be, but in a way that champions an empowerment process and enacts their commitment to devolving influence and decisions to others. One of their key challenges will be to communicate themselves in words *and actions* that enable people to see both their confidence and commitment to the change and their openness and interest in the participation and perceptions of others. The senior managers have several additional challenges that will be detailed further later.

Largest sets of ‘players’ are the *employees* throughout the organization, among them supervisors and team leaders. The typical experience of the workplace is some version of the hierarchal model in which the thinking and direction-setting are from the top and the work done in compliance to those decisions at the ‘lower’ ranks. Educational institutions, including universities, are similarly structured to prepare us for this work world. So, empowering

employees to be involved in decision-making and to take responsibility for results are significant reversals of cultural expectations, perhaps particularly for older employees who have spent many years in more traditional organizational and institutional settings. This fundamentally different organizational form requires more than new decision-making procedures and processes; it requires each participant *to reorient him/herself from external standards to an internal standard for arriving at judgments and decisions* (Kegan, 1994). It requires a reinterpretation of ‘responsibility’ from being a reliable employee in implementing a superior’s expectations to being an originator of relevant observations, thoughts, visions and initiatives—taking leadership—in ways that could benefit the organization. This, in turn, implies a shift from knowing one’s own particular domain very well to being knowledgeable about the work and challenges of the whole organization, and understanding how one’s own work relates to the whole enterprise. Finally, while it may have been that one could work independently on projects assigned by a superior, now one is more likely to be engaged with colleagues in planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. This requires not only ‘managing up’, looking after one’s relationship with one’s boss, but ‘managing across’, creating and maintaining good working relationships with colleagues not only within one’s unit but also beyond it in cross functional, even virtual, teams. Second order learning for employees has similarities to that of senior managers, but somewhat less paradoxical. It is about taking on new responsibilities and collaborative leadership, while senior managers are challenged to devolve responsibility and reinterpret their roles as leaders. In practice, employees typically have less difficulty engaging in empowering change than do managers. Leaving for the moment attention to ways in which their experience can be enhanced in this process, the emphasis in this particular article is on the challenges for senior managers who are critical to employee empowerment.

### ***Participative Organizational Redesign: The Paradigm Shift for Personnel***

The modernist bureaucratic organizational image is that of the structurally stable well-functioning machine. The reliable constant in a turbulent environment is no longer the organizational structure with set roles and job descriptions. Yet the majority of work organization personnel tacitly holds the mechanistic metaphor. Moreover, it is a ubiquitous mental model comprising the foundational assumptions and expectations that shape *normative* behaviour and relationships among members of our society and the way we organize ourselves to accomplish anything—generate our livelihoods, manage civic affairs, educate ourselves, deal with illness, raise families.

Redistribution of decision-making authority and responsibility more widely in an organization in order to achieve flexibility in the face of change *changes the fundamental rules of the game*. It implies reframing values, roles, relationships, and perspective that have governed all aspects of our lives, in short, a transformation of our perspective on our self and our world. Kegan (1994) observes that when the rules of the game change, the new ‘curriculum’, requires a different “order of mind”, not simply a new skill set or additional information. It is, rather, a new way of knowing and seeing. This implies a much more complex, far-reaching learning challenge than is usually evident to organizational change sponsors and their consultants, and to other senior leaders who are struggling to understand how to provide leadership and engage in a decentralized, participative work place.

### ***The Shift in Perspective or “Order of Mind” for Managers***

Bureaucratic organizational forms are oriented to preconceptions that specifically define collective and individual tasks, roles and relationships. The ideal leader is one who has extensive and detailed knowledge of these, can clearly communicate them to employees and ensures that they are enacted. Bureaucratic leadership expertise pertains to knowing precisely what should be done and how it should be done just as the traditional teacher has mastered the subject matter. This knowledge has been gained typically by ‘coming up through the ranks’ and is valuable only so long as the broad dimensions of the common tasks are relatively constant. The leader conveys to employees what s/he knows. Torbert and Fisher (1992) call this “first order” learning, or in this case, leadership—providing technical knowledge relevant to the achievement of a predetermined goal in stable conditions. But this approach to leadership and transfer of learning does not keep pace with the current reality. Spiraling change in the global context impacting the workplace demands different organizational formats, a different kind of leadership and a different kind of learning. This demands not just another change or a transition (movement from one known state to another) but a transformation (movement out of a known state toward an unknown state). As described by Torbert and Fisher (1992), second order learning is about learning “to more effectively approach a relatively intangible mission, purpose, or principle (p. 195).” Fred Emery (1995) observes that this is an approach in which the ends are continuously defined. One manager stated that she fully understood this only about four years after she had led the creation and development of an empowered workplace.

I really can take a picture of what it is now and appreciate what it is and know that it won’t remain that [way]. And that was the biggest ‘get it’ for me—that there wasn’t something I was going to go to that was this fixed plan that I can reach or achieve. People told me that coming in, “it’s a constant living thing,” but you think it will be *something* and I can know what that something is. One year when we made a lot of critical changes... I realized this *is* what it is. This is what it does. It is our ability to react and do things differently and live through them and keep doing them with good results on the budget and good results overall on the morale and still get top quality people coming in there. That is the measure of what it is what we’re supposed to be doing as opposed to we’re supposed to look like something. And I kept thinking that we had to look like something in some book on the topic.

While there are models and principles of self-organizing human systems, specific organizational forms of empowerment must, by definition, be created locally. And while there are precepts about the new leadership, what it means to be a designated organizational leader in which leadership is distributed throughout an organization does not evoke a clear culturally shared guiding image. Second order learning is emergent, a process that begins in confusion (Taylor, 1986), a state that is an anathema to the modernist mind.

A shift to a self-organizing format must be driven by effective intervention at both the organizational and team levels; it also generates learning for participating personnel that can be momentous. This need not be a barrier to change; indeed, it can be a powerful source of energy and commitment and vital to second order learning. However, a positive outcome of this

experience is more likely if the implications of transformative organizational change of participating personnel are recognized, ‘normalized’, and supported actively, thus maximizing the conditions for second order learning.

### ***The Learning Red Zone<sup>ii</sup>™***

Engagement with unpredictable change means navigating unmapped territory. In a world in which we assume most of the territory has been mapped and the maps attainable (first order learning), we discover that our assumptions (maps) don’t account for the reality we are experiencing. More disconcerting still, *we didn’t know that we didn’t know*. Disconfirmation of our expectations can be an intensely uncomfortable experience in a workplace. The traditional meaning of ‘competence’ is immediate knowledge and expertise. We must either know or know that we don’t know and be able to ‘fill the gap’ quickly. Empowering, self-organizing change confronts us, not with a gap, but with a vast expanse of the future in which old ways are found inadequate. Our first experience is one of confusion and likely anxiety about being without immediate solutions. If our own positive self-regard is based substantially in what we can do, self-efficacy, and less in our own intrinsic self-worth, our self-confidence can plummet seriously.

### ***These are the defining features of the learning red zone—disorientation (Taylor, 1986).***

The term ‘red zone’ is perhaps most prevalent in football, the 20 yards before the goal line where progress is most difficult because it is the most fiercely defended. But it is also in this zone that breakthroughs have the greatest ‘pay-off’. While the win-lose aspect of the analogy is not appropriate to learning, the notion of intense struggle with defenses is very pertinent. This phase of second order learning is a critical choice point for the learner. It seems likely that for a small percentage of individuals, the change toward a participative workplace will be supported unequivocally. Like the change sponsor, there is often conviction about the humanity and efficacy of this approach to organization design while obstacles, ambiguity and discomfort are expected and accepted. Also, there are likely to be a small percentage of members who will be disposed against the initiative no matter what occurs. But the majority of members’ informed support will be gained in the experience of the change process. More specifically, what occurs in the learning red zone™ will impact their ability and/or willingness to engage fully in the initiative. For this reason, a closer examination of the dynamics of red zone for senior managers is important in order to appreciate and enhance managers’ roles in empowerment change initiatives.

People experience the disorienting features of the learning red zone™ in their own unique ways. In part, the experience is shaped by how they have construed their management role and responsibilities in the past and how they perceive themselves in the management structure. It is probable that virtually all participants will experience confusion in ‘unknown territory’ and some level of anxiety (from minimal to intensive) about the changed environment. *The challenge of the red zone is self-inquiry about the nature of the disorienting experience and pursuit of learning from it*. People who have experienced their most deeply held assumptions contradicted through other life experiences and who have opened themselves to learning in those occasions, are more likely to have developed reflective abilities and relationships with others that assist them greatly in this new second order learning challenge. They may have a partner or a friend from whom they seek to be challenged as well as supported as they converse about their challenges. They may

have developed a habit of reflecting about their experiences with a spirit of inquiry even in the face of upsetting moments and their fears and concerns. Through these experiences, they are likely to have developed a basic confidence in themselves to not only survive but also to learn and advance themselves through unexpected periods of major change and, even, adversity.

For many, however, reflection and learning oriented relationships are not salient features of life in the day-to-day. We are an action-oriented culture and conventional relationships are congenial, not candid, and challenging. Our 'psychic fitness' and social resources to engage with second order learning with ease are typically not quite in place. So more often there is a spiraling descent into a period of disorientation, confusion and considerable anxiety. Any characteristic concerns about our professional competence loom large and our personal defenses 'kick in'. We have the tendency to present ourselves in the workplace as we believe we are expected to appear. Conventionally, this is to be calm, collected, and competent. The significance of this to an empowering change initiative is that valid communication suffers. People will not be candid about the problems that they see or experience. This signifies reduced levels of trust in others as well as in ourselves.

A gap between reality and appearance widens and maintaining it consumes a great deal of energy. We struggle to rationalize our state—'this is not important or it is only temporary'. We look for places to excel more than others. But we are not convinced. Eventually we 'wear thin'. We become impatient and reactive with people, more frequently expressing aggravation and anger. For those promoting organizational change this will be predictable but it should also be a concern because it significantly impacts team-work and participative decision-making and, without wise leadership, it can continuously deteriorate.

This can combine with another source for anger. That is, for people whose positive self-regard is dependent on how they perform and how others perceive them, especially those in power positions, disorientation, and confusion resulting from a change initiative from their boss is a highly threatening experience. Furthermore, we typically detest feeling vulnerable and at a loss. We get indignant and angry at having to experience those feelings. Anger and blame are almost certainly directed toward others, most likely the person(s) in designated authority positions, the origins of the change. This is typically accompanied by forms of distorted perception and distorted communication. Often, directing anger at the boss is seen as too dangerous, and it will be directed at less powerful advocates of the change. When directed toward the change consultants, the expressions of anger can be acknowledged, communication established and issues worked with constructively. Often, however, people threatened in this way by the change may appear to give support but, 'behind the scenes', be more candid in pockets of commiseration with others who share their perceptions. Cynical interpretations of people and events they find aggravating can give rise to socially constructed distortions of the intents and behaviour of the change leaders and their supporters. These subgroups can result in organized resistance to the change effort, not in a constructively challenging way but in a broadly destructive fashion. This has potentially serious implications for not only the change effort but also for the general well-being of the workplace. Change efforts *will* create change but unless managed well can reduce the quality of the workplace rather than improve it.

Constructive emergence from the learning red zone™ is the point in which we are able to reframe our confusion as a learning challenge and not a mistake for which blame needs to be allocated. This reframing does not seem to occur until we are able to hear an affirming response from a credible other, typically someone we perceive to be an authority on the experience that has provoked our confusion. In many cases, the person who needs to be the affirming authority for senior managers is the change sponsor, typically the chief executive officer or president. This relationship is enormously significant in optimizing the results of the organizational redesign. For the change sponsor, the complexity of championing the change while enacting openness to the full and responsible participation of others is now combined with the challenge of providing a strong, reliable, and palpable source of affirmation while providing commentary and feedback to keep the change intervention on track with a steadfast concept of the process and design requirements.

Red zone dynamics place a tremendous strain on trust among all personnel especially concerning their leaders who are not behaving in traditional ways yet retain influence over their futures in the organization. At the senior management level, however, this can be intensified by the fact that participative organizational redesigns are associated with the reduction of management positions. Even if there is prior commitment to retaining all personnel at the same wage levels, managers who have doubts about how they are regarded in the system can worry about how they will come out in the shuffle—whether, for example, new positions will be as respected by others or be as interesting to them as their current positions. The second order learning process launched by the self-organizing initiative is likely to foster an interpretation of our careers as successful within the larger context of the organization's well-being. However, at the beginning of this process, we all begin where we are and intensively so in the red zone.

Another 'task' for senior managers is to come to represent the empowerment initiative to the wider membership without having been the originators of the organization redesign initiative. Many managers are 'good citizens' who will cooperate and deliver for the CEO. But employee empowerment, by its very nature, requires that leaders *own* and understand the project well. There are no transferable formulae. Their leadership judgments and actions need to grow out of a fundamental grasp of the process. That grasp comes through engaging actively, taking risks and being willing to make 'mistakes'. This is very difficult for managers *and employees* with traditional organization experience where the organizational myth is that the top leaders don't make mistakes; they know all the answers and, for that reason, are leaders.

### ***Learning Interventions with Individuals in Organizational Change***

Key features of red zone experience are reduced trust and communication, both needed for effective learning and leadership. As we have seen, transparency with colleagues and especially one's President or CEO can be threatening. A catalyst of release from the red zone can be a temporary reconfiguration of relationship in the form of a change leadership coach. The change leadership coach is a professional, external to the organization, who understands both empowering organizational change and second order learning. S/he is able to provide a connection and safe container in which the senior manager can transparently reflect and explore their experience, and thoughtfully craft their participation in the organization change process and their relationships with others to be maximally constructive. As with any executive coach, the change leadership



coach must be able to establish a relationship of trust and support with the manager. While being aware of the nature of the organizational change project, to be trustworthy to the manager, the coach's primary commitment must be to the manager. And, of course, their sessions must be confidential. The coach is able to assist the manager to conceptualize his/her experience as an essential learning process working through the specific manifestations of the red zone s/he experiences. *The coach is not an alternative for communications with colleagues and the change sponsor but rather a bridge to them.* Tough conversations that need to be held with members of the organization can first be piloted in the safety of the coaching context where there are no interests or investments beyond the manager's learning in the context of his/her organizational responsibilities. The coach needs to be able to challenge the manager's assumptions and perceptions that, not having been verified, may have become exaggerated and distorted in self-sealing thought patterns of the red zone vortex. The coach becomes an alternative to the relationships of commiseration that can develop where trust is based on agreement about who is to blame rather than about moving forward in a constructive direction.

The coaching relationship is, of course, voluntary. It is an option recommended by the change sponsor who then must remain at a distance from his managers' coaching. There are senior managers whose disposition toward the participative redesign project is very unsupportive and/or who are too threatened to be willing to undertake change leadership coaching. However, many managers who want to support the organizational change but who find themselves struggling with it will choose to make use of the opportunity to work through critical moments and issues, avoid pitfalls, and strengthen their abilities to articulate themselves and their intentions relative to the organizational change.

As stated earlier, the position of the change sponsor is particularly complex and critical. S/he will be the focus of intense concern by not only employees but especially senior personnel who are 'direct reports'. S/he will have red zone moments and must, nevertheless, hold the conception of participative organization design and its essential features, not as an abstract plan for the organization but as a process to be negotiated with employees into reality. In the public sector, s/he will also experience additional challenges in the form of pressure from political bosses who are ultimately concerned about the wider public implications. How the senior staff experience him/her through the change process is likely to be pivotal in their choices and commitment to organizational redesign. It is critical that change sponsors, especially those new to organization redesign, have the safe place to reflect on their own experience, sort through issues, prepare for challenges, and generally improve their capability to learn in the process. There is a critical role in anchoring the change process in partnership with their senior managers who need to be able to trust them—their word and their actions—through the tumult and uncertainties of new organizational 'terrain'.

As senior leaders begin to move out of the most intense red zone period, there is often readiness and interest in collaborative learning with colleagues. Their reflection and working out issues can then be shifted to peer coaching.

## Conclusion

What begins as a personal response to change for personnel thus has very direct and wide-reaching organizational significance. Morley Segal (1997) recognizes self-organization and the empowerment it creates is “part of a century long trend in which organizations are calling upon an increasingly larger part of the individual worker’s being” (p. 15). He speaks of ways to “convert individual interventions (‘points of influence’) into organizational change [by identifying] important processes in which the needs of the individual and organization meet” (p. 8). One of these is when organizational conditions challenge its members to individual change. This paper has examined employee empowerment as a special case of organizational challenge, especially so for senior managers who lead the empowerment initiative who must reconstruct their leadership roles with empowered employees. The learning red zone appears to be a critical moment in that ‘point of influence’ not only for a manager but, potentially, for participative organizational redesign projects.

## About the Author

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<sup>i</sup> Second order learning, according to Torbert and Fisher (1992) involves changing the way I understand and enact my work as a leadership; an example of first order learning would be learning a new theory about leadership.

<sup>ii</sup> The “red zone” is the disorientation phase in a second order learning process that I documented and conceptualized in a learning process model among adults in a graduate course in which learners were asked to take responsibility for their own learning (Taylor, 1986).