

Taming an Intangible - Change

“Our voice messaging system has changed. Please listen carefully to the following options and kindly respond to our up-to-the-nanosecond automated attendant. May the force (and an abundance of time and patience) be with you.”

It is apparent everywhere. Customer service has evolved into virtual information floating somewhere outside of the 3rd dimension in the time / space continuum. In our techno-encumbered age, the personal touch has been replaced with sites to navigate this, download that, email here, or report electronically. Previously helpful staff has disappeared into an untraceable electronic FAQ protection program.

Like all businesses, the daily reality of healthcare has become entwined with a virtual environment that is not quite able, ready or smart enough to completely adjust to or comfortably replace our long established human processes and interactions. Despite its technological shortcomings, automation has invaded our world at a relentless pace. It has merged methods into twisted flow diagrams that otherwise would make no sense. It has created its own structures and systems to support and further promote its ever growing presence.

As a consequence, change has become the standard operating procedure and language of healthcare. The mantra of change has become the accepted norm. Materials, tasks, people and processes are shuffled like playing cards in favor of a new and restless matrix. The solution to every problem is change. And the volume of those solutions has morphed into its own problem.

Change has no value by itself. It can be good or bad, welcomed or resisted, effective or counterproductive. In many cases it is definitely needed. But what is often lost in the implementation is that each change comes with a cost. Change can increase disorientation and may necessitate more change to accommodate itself in unanticipated ways. For the better or worse, each change has an immediate potential for impact on error, satisfaction, handoff of information, process flow, patient safety, efficiency, employee morale, and productivity.

For example, today few of us would recognize our jobs of 5 years ago. Multitudes of previous methods and positions of employment have been re-organized out of existence. Budget downsizing is determined by who can move and adjust quickest to a new version of musical chairs. The resume of the most employable person is of someone who has survived or outlasted the most change. Attributes such as experience, tradition and loyalty are missing from the personal asset column. Flexibility has taken preference over established practice. The ability to make sound decisions based on history has been replaced by spontaneous opportunity destined to relive previous failed attempts at change.

Furthermore, change is a fickle intangible. It is impossible to reliably predict (other than it commonly occurs at inopportune times), has no respect for timelines, resources or organization, and seems to excel in creating unparalleled challenging situations. Unfortunately, and all too often, the accomplishment of change is only to move a problem from one place to another. Change can cloud our vision and distract our attention.

It is therefore wise to consider a couple of important characteristics regarding change:

If there is one major mismatch between human and techno adaptability it would be the speed in which multiple changes can be applied and accepted. Many employees in healthcare are working at capacity now. Adding new processes and things to remember invites other items to fall off the radar screen. Technology, on the other hand, does not experience the stress wrought by rapid change that can result in judgment error.

Secondly, few changes happen in isolation. Most changes have varying degrees of ripple effects across many other operations and resources. Change may create both a short and long term impact or influence seemingly unrelated and far reaching peripheral interests.

While change can not be eliminated, proper management can influence effective outcomes. Be aware of the rate, size, depth and breadth of change. Allow time to adapt, assimilate and evaluate the overall effectiveness. Question if the change (and how much of it) is most appropriately implemented at this time and place. Is it comprehensively considered, significantly beneficial and designed to reduce the disruption to those most affected?

Most importantly, change serves its greatest purpose when it is utilized to promote the accomplishment of the ultimate goal. Only then does change take on the dimension and title of improvement.

Improvement Management is the highest and best application of change. It requires careful analysis of change before, during and after implementation. Anything less is merely change for its own sake and hopeful gambling on best outcome.

Nonetheless, change truly remains the only constant on which to depend. With that in mind, the challenge is to harness, re-structure, and direct its abundance into a vehicle of opportunity. Perhaps then less of our time and resources will be consumed by the operational scope creep of that insidious infestation known as change and more goals will be advanced in the name of improvement.