Learning to change wisely

An Interview with Edgar Schein

He is still the reference person for organizational development worldwide: Edgar Schein, former professor at MIT and probably the expert on corporate culture, organizational transformation, and, more recently, the art of helping. In this interview he shares his blunt opinions on the usefulness of (theoretical) change management seminars, on managers' abilities to change (their) behavior and where they still need to improve their skills dramatically.

OE: You have recently highlighted the importance of helping in the management context. What and how can leaders contribute as helpers in a change management context and how can they learn to be more effective managers?

Schein: I don't think there is anything particular about change processes. I don't think there is any different criterion of leadership effectiveness. Effectiveness is a combination of having the analytical skills to figure out what's going on and then having the interpersonal skills of creating a climate of mutual helping at a peer level and an authority level where people will tell you what's going on.

So for example if you are trying to make a change and you are asking for something that is unrealistic, instead of the subordinates saying «yes» and sabotaging it, they will say:«Boss, what you are asking us to do, won't work, it is unrealistic». And the boss will listen and will then say: «Help me, figure out what we should be doing to solve this problem?» So, this would be the right attitude: if things aren't working, the boss will go to the subordinate and say «if you help me figure out what to do, I will help you to get it done. I'll give you the resources.»

So, whether it is a change program, whether it is a start-up, or whether it is whatever, the logic is: members of the organization have to develop helping relationships with each other in order to communicate better, in order to get better information, in order to make better decisions, in order to get a more effective company.

OE: And through the way of helping, can leaders actually help their change managers to reflect on their change experiences and thereby accelerate their learning regarding change management? In a nutshell, what role is helping playing in the reflection process on change experiences?

Schein: I think that the helping process is not a thing that is applied in different situations. Helping is a relationship between people where they are motivated to help each other.

Maybe that is the biggest problem for managers in all situations: They see it as a tool rather than a fundamental human process that applies all the time. So you don't just move helping into a change situation. Helping is something that you build intrinsically into all your relationships in order to improve them. So, if the senior manager is able to be helpful and if he has a change manager who doesn't understand that, the first step is for the senior manager to engage in a helping relationship with that changer manager until he realizes that he or she also has to have that added skill to be able to manage change better.

OE: Which training formats do you think are adequate for a soft topic such as change management?

Schein: I don't think training formats are the answer. I think the answer is having a good diagnosis of what the business problem is that you are trying to solve. Developing a concept

of what behavior changes will be required to solve the business problem and then developing the training process for those behavior changes.

If I may give you an example: When a company in New York had to become environmentally responsible, which meant no more oil spills, no more contaminating the rivers and so on, the company decided that all employees now will have to become environmentally responsible. And then the management realized that the employees won't be able to be environmentally responsible unless management teaches them what a dangerous oil spill is or what dangerous chemicals are or how to manipulate the amounts of emissions and so on. So, they engaged in a training program for all their thousands of people, teaching them both the content of what's dangerous and how to deal with it. But, until they had a goal of becoming environmentally responsible, they had no idea what kind of change training they should have. Tthey also realized that around the safety issues, they needed to have more teamwork between bosses and their team, and between the members of

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the team. So now, they needed a training program on teamwork, and they also have added a training program on conflict management.
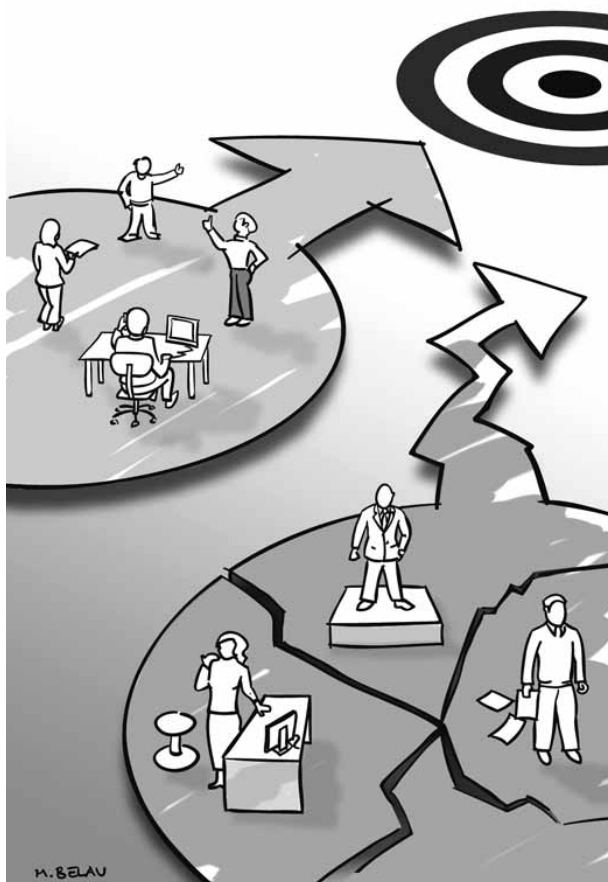
So the training is tied to the nature of the change program. And I don't think that there is a training program per se for change management unless you make it very theoretical and say: «I am only going to offer this to people who are going back into their own companies and be change managers, so I can teach you something in general about the theory of change.» That's certainly available but you wouldn't do that in a company in an actual change program.

OE: You said that the trainings are tied to the change processes, so are there any mistakes in change management that can be avoided and that should be discussed in change management trainings. How should they be addressed?

Schein: I think the mistakes are usually most clear in the initial planning, if you set the wrong goals you can then waste enormous amounts of time, or if you invite the wrong people into the change processes initially. I think my difficulty in answering the question is, it implies that the change process like helping is a thing and it isn't a thing. There are principles of change that can be applied but in a real change process, how they apply is usually very local. For example: it is a principle of change that the people who are going to have to make the behavior change need to have some motivation to want the change. So you can say: if you did it wrong and people aren't motivated, you made a mistake. But what the nature of that mistake is, is a local thing. Somebody did not figure it out right. So you can specify the steps which I have done in various books.

OE: Which change management skills do you see most underdeveloped with current managers and how can they be fostered?

Schein: I am very clear about that: I think it's amazing that leaders at very high levels do not understand the communication process between people, and they do not understand groups, they do not know how to run meetings, they are to a surprising degree interpersonally incompetent. They are brilliant decision makers, they are maybe great analysts, but I keep being surprised at how poor they are at establishing good communication with people, at being able to be helpful or to be helped. What makes this especially difficult is the belief in leaders that the higher I am, the more I know everything, and the more I am responsible for everything really creates attitudes that makes them incompetent. They will run a meeting badly but if they have run the meeting it must have been OK because they did and they are always right. Instead maybe before a CEO runs a meeting, that CEO should go to a helper and say: «Help me organize this meeting, so it will go well.» At that le-

vel, CEOs should seek help and they don't. They just walk in and do what they are going to do, then make mistakes and then usually blame somebody else rather than looking at themselves. They don't reflect enough. They don't think of themselves as being vulnerable, they get arrogant and overconfident. So, I would take executives off and say: «Let us just do a lot of reflecting and figure out some simple skills of communication and group management and how to get help from our subordinates.»

OE: Mr. Schein, thank you very much for this conversation.

The interview was conducted by Tina Dörffer, project manager at the Bertelsmann Stiftung, for the journal Organisations-Entwicklung. tina.doerffer@bertelsmann-stiftung.de; www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fuehrung

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