

Humanly Sustainable Organizational Change

Among the ongoing challenges we face as consultants is how to introduce change, how to ensure that beneficial changes in an organization will be sustained over time, and how the changes impact the vitality of the organization overall. As consultants, we habitually spend time ensuring that our recommendations are sustainable financially and procedurally. We look for cost-effective answers that can be integrated into processes and policies. Change takes time and energy; organizations that hire us want their investments to hold value past initial implementation.

We have concluded that this approach, while useful, is incomplete. We suggest that issues of human sustainability are as important as the economic and logistical feasibility of our advice to management. We assert that we need to go beyond consensus for a change, beyond informed consent by those affected. We are suggesting that consultants need to consider whether the change increases or decreases the ability of the organization to support the ongoing financial and physical health of its clients, its workforce and its owners. Our claim is that if these issues are not considered, the overall health of the organization will be impaired or break down.

What is a Humanly Sustainable Organization?

Schilling & Maure, along with four other organizations, sponsored a conference on Human Sustainable Organizations on May 20-21 of this year. Arising from that conference was a working definition of a Humanly Sustainable Organization as one in which the people who constitute organizations and the capabilities they possess are seen as valuable and worthy of attention. This point of view reflects assumptions about the fundamental nature of the world, and in the way people relate to organizations. Proceedings from that conference can be found at [\[link to HSO Page\]](#).

Questions to Consider

As we are considering the implementation of change in an organization, we need to be asking questions about what the change encourages or discourages in the organization overall. There are two areas to think about:

What implicit, unvoiced assumptions or narratives about the world and the organization are being furthered?

A narrative, in this context, is a set of statements that form an assertion about the nature of the world. Narratives are grounded in belief and emotion. Facts, evidence and anecdotes are brought to bear in support of them, but in most cases a narrative will prove resistant to rational or factual argument. Narratives are critically important, however, because they form the basis in belief for so many actions. When change is contemplated, it is critical to know what narrative will be required to support it, because no change that conflicts with the organization's ongoing narrative is likely to have a long life expectancy.

In the tables below, please remember that we are not arguing for or against a particular narrative *per se*, although we make no pretense that some narratives are more attractive to us than others. We are suggesting that some narratives support certain actions and policies more than others.

We can distinguish narratives in several general categories:

- What kind of world do we live in?
- What is the nature of people at work?
- What is the nature of success?

Each of these categories has its own "story" to tell.

	Humanly Sustainable Organization	Other Organizations	Questions to Ask About Change
<i>What Kind of World Do We Live In?</i>	<p>The world is a neutral or even nurturing environment; value is inherently recognized, and there is a place for everyone to grow and flourish.</p> <p>The world is self-regulating; over time, both positive and negative actions and beliefs return amplified to those who practice them</p>	<p>The world is a threatening place. Both people and organizations must fight to survive.</p> <p>Competition is relentless and ruthless. Every business seeks to dominate its market by eliminating its competitors.</p> <p>There is no common ground for cooperation with other organizations unless cooperation promises a competitive advantage</p>	<p>What narrative will this change support? What changes will support the predominant narrative in this company? How can we describe needed changes so that they conform to the predominant narrative?</p>

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<i>What Is The Nature Of People At Work?</i>	<p>People want to work and contribute, to belong and be trusted. It is an unusual exception when someone steals, lies or lacks integrity – one that probably indicates a breakdown in our company’s way of doing business.</p> <p>A breakdown in trust, rather than a breakdown in controls, is the most likely the issue at hand in dealing with untrustworthy manner.</p>	<p>People do as little as possible to get as much pay as they can. People can’t be trusted and must be made to work. People generally behave like wayward children.</p> <p>In many cases employees deliberately frustrate the efforts of executives and managers to carry out reforms.</p> <p>In most cases, change must be imposed on an unwilling workforce.</p>	<p>Will this change foster belonging and contribution? Will it demonstrate trust in workers, or distrust of them?</p> <p>How well does this change recognize that all who interact with us, including all on staff, are fully capable adults?</p> <p>Did we see and hear the concerns and hopes of the staff who are affected by this change?</p>

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<i>What Is The Nature Of Success?</i>	<p>Organizations cannot flourish in the long run unless they attend to their customers, suppliers, the people who work in them, and their effect on the world.</p> <p>Maximizing profitability (in the private sector) or efficiency (in government) at the expense of other values is toxic to the people involved with the organization, and to the health of the organization itself.</p>	<p>Profit or economic efficiency (in government) is the only meaningful measure of success. All other measures are subordinate, and in most cases irrelevant.</p>	<p>Will this change attend to the needs of our community, our industry, our world?</p> <p>Will this change have a positive or negative impact the lives of our staff, our customers, our owners?</p> <p>What constellation of values is served by this change? Is one set of values dominant to the point that it will negatively affect the organization?</p>

In addition to the narrative of an organization, there is a set of values that support and/or justify what the business or government agency or charitable foundation does. These too differ in sustainable organizations.

What values and purposes are being fostered?

	Humanly Sustainable Organization	Other Organization	Questions to Ask about the Change
<i>Purpose</i>	To produce goods and services of genuine benefit to customers and clients in ways that do not cause harm to employees, other people, or the earth.	To produce the greatest possible immediate return for shareholders; all else is distantly subordinate.	What impact will this change have on the goods and services we and others produce, and the way we produce them?
<i>Body</i>	Workers, owners, and customers have bodies that need sleep, exercise, and healthy working conditions.	60 to 80 hour work weeks are demonstrations of loyalty to the organization. Failure to perform at a high level under stress is indicative of a fault in the employee	What changes to the time spent or the physical environment of the workers and clients will result from this change?

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<i>Dignity</i>	<p>When people's dignity is respected, they take pride in their work.</p> <p>In an organization where people's sense of value is a priority, errors are forgiven and used as a source of learning.</p> <p>Candid feedback, encouragement and support in the direction of learning and positive change are expressed with respect for individuals.</p>	<p>Fear, guilt and embarrassment are appropriate motivators.</p> <p>People work harder when they are " a little" afraid.</p> <p>If people express anger, they should be punished. If they become discouraged, they should be replaced.</p>	<p>Does this change recognize the knowledge, values and dignity of the staff who work here?</p> <p>How can this change be implemented with a minimum of embarrassment for people?</p> <p>Does this change punish anyone?</p>
<i>Teamwork</i>	<p>Organizations are engaged in the process of finding and building cooperative, inclusive, interactive teams.</p> <p>Organizations are constellations of linked teams.</p>	<p>Results are more important, than the ways they are achieved.</p> <p>Teamwork, in and of itself, is not valuable unless it produces an improved product.</p>	<p>How will this change affect the way teams form, work and disband in this organization?</p>

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<i>Diversity</i>	<p>Diversity builds the creativity and flexibility in an organization. New ways of seeing the world and different ways of working refresh the larger organization's values and sense of mission.</p> <p>Embracing diversity tolerance produces a sense of safety and certainty that in turn fosters trust among workers and between workers and management.</p> <p>Diversity brings new ways of thinking, new language, and new flavors of relationship to an organization. It is a constant reminder to notice and test assumptions, and to learn to flexibility in our approaches.</p>	<p>The best people to have in our organization are those who look and act like us.</p> <p>We should pursue diversity only to the extent required by law.</p> <p>New ideas must prove their worth before being considered. If a new idea does not show immediate signs of success, it must be abandoned</p>	<p>How will this change be perceived by the different sub-cultures within this organization?</p> <p>Have we listened to and seen a wide variety of people who know about or are impacted by this change?</p> <p>Are there other ideas about this change that we haven't heard yet?</p>

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<i>Growth</i>	<p>Sustainability implies longevity. It does not necessarily imply immortality. Sometimes an organization reaches its natural end, and should be allowed to dissolve.</p> <p>Steady, well-planned growth should be nurtured. Excessive growth, typically requiring long periods of intense activity, is potentially harmful. "Boom and bust" cycles are especially damaging.</p>	<p>Growth in size and profit are always good. Faster growth is better, with very few limitations</p>	<p>Can we sustain the growth that will arise from this change without harming the staff who work here?</p> <p>How will we recognize when the growth generated by this change is excessive for the current staffing, facilities, and procedures? When should we slow down?</p>

Conclusions

Lasting change in organizations is best supported by working toward sustainable narratives and sustainable values. These can be expressed in the language used to frame and justify recommendations to clients, and in the implementation programs for recommendations to which clients agree. An important first step in this process is to consider the questions we have listed above in developing sustainable recommendations.

The advantage of this approach to consultants is that recommendations designed and justified in this manner are more likely

to bring about long-lasting beneficial change. This enhances the effectiveness of the consultant and leads to increasing trust on the part of clients. Ultimately, we believe that this approach improves the chances that a consultant will reach the highly desirable status of "trusted advisor to management."