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How to unlearn and change – that is the question!

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Intense dynamics in internal and external environment poses a great challenge to modern managers. They are continuously stimulated to make changes. Introducing change means that the current system is destabilized, new approaches are tested and the new desired state is established. The most difficult aspects of every change initiative are:

- raising awareness that change is necessary; and
- convincing organizational members to change their behavioral routines.

To succeed, change initiatives require both learning and unlearning. Unless organizational members engage in both processes simultaneously, the project of introducing change is likely to fail. However, unlearning is difficult and somewhat controversial. That is why this issue also has the process of unlearning in its focus.

By building on the model presented in Part I, [Fiol and O'Connor \(2017\)](#) question primary drivers in three change management sub-processes:

- (1) initial destabilization of old routines;
- (2) ongoing discarding from use of the old and experimenting with the new; and
- (3) developing new understanding and releasing the old.

Raised awareness is the first condition necessary for any shift to occur. That is why in this phase, leadership interventions are crucial for raising sufficient motivation for change or reaching the so-called tipping point when change is inevitable. Practitioners have to keep in mind that destabilization results in a certain level of discomfort. Leadership support is essential to manage dissonance. Managers should also present evidence indicating that old routines result in inadequate outcomes as well as provide reassurance in terms of a clear vision of a desired reality.

Even though change is mostly pain-free when approached proactively instead of reactively, negative emotions related to some sort of impending loss often serve as the greatest catalyst for questioning the validity of existing behavioral patterns. That is why practitioners acting as transformational leaders should sustain a certain level of ambiguity and uncertainty with the purpose to point to deficiencies of the current situation. Even though positive stimuli can lead to behavioral shifts, inertia as a characteristic of all systems is likely to prevent every change initiative. That is why [Fiol and O'Connor \(2017\)](#) identified negative stimuli as primary drivers in the process of



destabilization of old routines. Readers are encouraged to review further suggestions pertaining to the two remaining phases or sub-processes.

The paper by [Morais-Storz and Nguyen \(2017\)](#) complements the model by [Fiol and O'Connor \(2017\)](#) in several ways. They provide a broader picture of the change process indicating that companies should move from the paradigm of reacting to crisis and finding means to adapt, toward a paradigm or organizational behavior by which resilience is strengthened through continual metamorphosis. When managers merely react to threats, the process of adaptation can be frustrating, leading to actions such as equipment selling and downsizing, followed by massive layoffs, apathy and a loss of confidence. Organizational resilience is therefore about introducing change before the need for change becomes obvious, difficult to manage and threatening to survival.

Managers should be on high alert to identify early-warning signs to initiate and maintain continuous metamorphosis. The process of continuous metamorphosis should be supported by both learning and unlearning. [Morais-Storz and Nguyen \(2017\)](#) suggest that the mechanism that drives both processes is *problem formulation*. The way the problem is defined strongly influences how it would be solved. Problem formulation can sometimes indicate that the mission statement should be revised. Early-warning signs can also indicate that the strategic intent of the company is no longer valid. When a new mission has been determined, organizational routines should change accordingly. The model as described by [Fiol and O'Connor \(2017\)](#) can then be used in this regard. The joint presentation of those ideas is shown in [Table I](#).

Replacement of top managers is sometimes suggested as a way to implement organizational unlearning, as indicated by [Tsang \(2017\)](#). However, a new management team might be equally misaligned with the nature of current circumstances so no real progress can occur. However, sometimes a new team might offer a new perspective and induce changes in the whole organization. That process is related to organizational unlearning/learning. While individuals rarely completely unlearn something, organizations as collectives of individuals can unlearn by discarding old routines through managerial orders. That is why we should differentiate between *forgetting*, which is more related to individuals and is involuntary, and *unlearning*, which is intentional and possible in organizational life. However, practitioners should keep in mind that organizational unlearning could also occur unrelated to other processes. In other words, when one routine is discarded, it is not necessarily replaced by a new one.

Regardless of the attempt by authors to categorize phases and provide clear guidelines for managing change while balancing between learning and unlearning, practitioners should keep in mind that the process is rarely linear. A more or less chaotic process is far more likely to occur. Phases often proceed simultaneously and relapses are to be expected requiring redefinition of the current situation and future expectations. Contingencies driving the process should also be examined on several occasions. However, as long as practitioners approach the process systematically and logically, the suggested guidelines would be beneficial.

Faced with environmental stimuli, individuals and organizations continuously make changes or small adjustments without dwelling consciously and deliberately upon the exact and correct direction for change. In other words, individuals and organizations try to “find their way”, as suggested by [Chia \(2017\)](#). Practitioners should therefore not despair when a solution is not ready at hand. We often just “know as we go”, and rely on our experience and previously established habits, which we apply in new situations. We

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Goal Steps		Continual metamorphosis (Nguyen and Morais-Storz, 2017)		
Processes	Problem formulation (Nguyen and Morais-Storz, 2017)	Destabilization of old routines (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017)	Discarding from use of the old and experimenting with the new (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017)	Developing new understanding and releasing the old (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017)
Facilitation Means	Learning	Learning – unlearning	Leadership behavior Unlearning – learning	Learning
Practitioner/managerial action	Check the environment Look for early-warning signs Check the validity of the mission Check the validity of the strategic intent <i>Replace top managers?</i>	Raise awareness for change Provide information about reasons for change Manage conflict Provide a clear vision of a desired reality Invite active participation <i>Replace top managers?</i>	Stimulate interaction (e.g. role playing and experimentation) Select key employees to support role-playing Provide incentives to reinforce desired behavior	Stimulate interaction Align individual and group actions Stimulate collective understanding of new behavior Maintain a realistic outlook

Table I.
Learning – unlearning – learning as a continuum leading to continual metamorphosis

should just reach out into the unknown and have confidence that our internal guiding system will lead us through the uncertainty. New and uncertain situations can contain hidden and often unthinkable potentials and emerging opportunities. We should nurture our sensitivity and vigilance to be able to respond to them in our day-to-day engagements.

Learning, unlearning, continuous adaptation and similar processes are all part of the learning organization concept. However, the term is not used as frequently today as it was several years ago. That is why Pedler and Burgoyne (2017) try to determine if the learning organization is still “alive”. Practitioners should keep in mind that learning organization ideas are still widely implemented, albeit sometimes partially and under different names such as “agile and adaptive systems”, “dynamic capability”, “knowledge networking”, “collaborative partnerships” and the like. However, the learning organization is an ever-unfolding vision that helps us generate new ideas and transformational paths both individually and collectively. In case of uncertainty, make sure you give it a benefit of the doubt!

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