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PROPELLING CAREERS THROUGH TELLING STORIES ABOUT CHANGE

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JOB-SEEKERS WHO CAN tell stories about their ability to lead, communicate, and handle organizational change have an advantage over others in the workplace. Although it is important to be able to tell stories about other skills, characteristics, and values, individuals who can showcase their "change skills" will be attractive to employers that seek the competitive and visionary edge. Carl Steffen, a vice president at PeopleSoft, noted that "developing an agile, adaptable workforce that embraces change and aligns itself quickly will be tomorrow's competitive differentiator" (Conference Board, 2004, ¶ 5).

Where stability was once the goal of organizations, relentless change is now the constant. This pace of change is greater than at any time in history (Moran & Brightman, 2000); yet, just as one's own organization is changing, change in other organizations creates the need for new employees with different characteristics from those hired in the past. Job seekers and organization members can grab the opportunity to develop new self-concepts, specific skills, and mental attitudes for handling, leading, communicating, and taking advantage of organizational change.

Stories About Change

What's responsible for inexorable change in organizations? Here are some stories told by employees about the major causes for changes in their organizations and the change skills that can be communicated as narrative during career transition.

1. *Business Process Redesign/Reengineering*
   I was team leader for a reengineering project. My team was responsible for change management for the implementation. We had no in-house change management expertise, so a consulting firm had promised to bring in a change management expert to assist with the design and development and then transfer knowledge to provide us with the in-house expertise we needed for the ongoing rollout. As the design and development of the implementation phase progressed, the huge amount of change that would need to be managed became alarmingly clear. The consulting firm failed to provide the change management expert. The project was in jeopardy of failing because of the consulting firm's failure to provide the appropriate level of expertise. Ultimately, the desired results were not achieved. I've therefore learned to trust my instincts and gain support of others earlier so I won't be scapegoated for the lack of expertise needed to make the change. I am also willing to obtain additional training so I can be the one to gain that expertise.

2. *Change in Organization Ownership*
   I worked on the sale of the company for 6 months before the other employees knew about it. I'm very good at getting the job done, no matter what, with or without help. Then I adapt to change if something falls through.

3. *Employer Turnover in Organization Ownership*
   In the department I was with, product management, the average number of bosses within a 1-year period could be anywhere from 4 to 10. In the 2 years I've been there, I've gone through 5 bosses. So if anything can be exemplified dealing with change and coping with change and rolling with the punches, I think that's as clear as it comes. My previous boss had 12 bosses within the year. There's a very quick and constant turnaround.

4. *Changing Technology*
   Management completely changed the whole back source of our project. We had to redo all of our code and everything. So, in handling that situation, we had a change management plan to do things on a certain timeline and meet our goals.

5. *Loss of Customer Base*

   Our college has lost considerable enrollment, so I have been striving to be a change agent for every student by personally giving one-on-one customer service to aid retention. I'm learning how to adapt to doing more work as a one-person office while the VP keeps demanding—fix it, fix enrollment, fix it, change anything that needs changing.

6. *Turmoil of Unexpected Events*

   Early in my tenure in the training and development department of a large hospitality company, 9-11 temporarily killed the tourism industry, and we had to go through some downsizing. My role was to work with other members of the leadership team to make some tough decisions and to think through some criteria about how we would make those decisions—to make sure that we were being fair and open with everyone. We tried to think about the human factor and to be creative in considering the individuals, considering the situations, and coming up with criteria.

Storytelling Change Agents

The cases above show how individuals can incorporate change and other skills into impressive stories that will enhance their career success. They can use their résumés, cover letters, and the job interviews as vehicles for such stories. Ibarra and Lineback (2005) describe such a worker who, while networking, developed and told change stories about a bankruptcy, a turnaround, and a rapid reorganization, eventually garnering referrals to employers, as well as job interviews. In another example, they describe a worker who learned more about her career passions and became more committed to a planned career change each time she told her story by writing a cover letter, participating in a job interview, and networking with friends.

"Develop a positive hunger for change," advises Pamela Kaul, president of the Virginia-based Association Strategies, Inc. "Learn to identify and speak to your role in motivating change" (Kaul, 2000, p. 67). Such advice would go a long way for those seeking to advance professionally as they craft stories that will illustrate their skills and experience as leaders and innovators in the workplace.

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