

# STOP NAMING YOUR CHANGE (AND TRANSFORMATION) PROGRAMS!



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**Developing Organizations: One in an occasional series reminding us of (or putting novel twists on) sound, but often forgotten, principles that help leaders lead change.**

There is no lack of creativity in organizations when it comes to naming their transformation efforts. One IBM, Quality is Job One, Eight is Great (the doomed Wells Fargo initiative that incited people to create numerous accounts for customers), Project Phoenix (to support a turnaround effort), Fusion 360 (as part of a merger process), Operation TurboClaim (emphasizing faster claims service), XLR8 (to drive growth), and Compass (moving from a matrix to a more decentralized structure), to name a few. These labels, along with the pins, banners, and t-shirts that go with them, provide attention and focus on the change; it signals the importance of the transformation. But in a world where change is supposed to be constant, this practice can have unintended and negative consequences.

When we talk with companies about organization agility, one of our biggest challenges is clarity. After hearing about the challenge of the day -- the need to respond quickly to a new industry disruption -- we have to explain that agility may not be what they are looking for. It often draws some confused looks and responses.

**“ Well, we need to be more agile. If we can pivot to this new strategy we can grow faster. ”**

Yea, that's not agility. Agility is not a one-time, one-off change event. Agility refers to the ability to make repeated organization changes - the right ones, at the right time, implemented well - that sustain performance. In agile organizations, change is normal. Agile organizations don't fret about "oh, that's a big disruption, what are we going to do?" Agile organizations shrug it off, "oh, another change, let's get going."

**What most organizations are comfortable with is the seizing of the moment and the mustering of the will and resources to confront the challenge, to digitalize, to become customer centric, to integrate the acquisition seamlessly, or to transform HR.** And so, consultants are hired, the corporate communications department goes into high gear, and the change management process is rolled out. What shall we name the change?

It's true, when you give transformation efforts a name, it does give focus. But it's a terrible thing to do if you are trying to become an agile organization; it tells people that change is a project that's going to be over. We are, unconsciously and probably unintentionally, telling people that change is an event and after it's done, we can get back to what's important -- a comfortable, stable, and efficient focus on leveraging our resources and making money.

What has to be done – holding managers accountable, removing them from positions of power, or as the French like to say, “mets les dans le placard” (put them in the closet) – is easy to see, but as we all know from experience is hard to do on several levels. With courage and support, the leaders of the transformation can make the tough decision, make the change, and re-catalyze the change effort. When you see it happen, when you experience it, or when you have to do it, it is both difficult and liberating.

**Here’s the problem. When that big change is over, that nice stable way of working never comes. And fairly soon, management is back, “enrolling” people in the next change, and asking them, nicely, to sign up for the next big transformation.**

What we’ve found in many of these situations is that the workforce feels betrayed by leadership who got everybody all riled up about the importance of the last change and implicitly suggested that change would be over. Notice the word – betrayed. It was the word used by a manager we talked to was describing why the workforce was tired of change. That’s a powerful emotion and if it happens over and over, it’s not hard to imagine the emergence of cynicism in the culture.

**When we were talking about all this, Beth had the most elegant insight – a diagnosis and practical suggestion all wrapped into one: Stop naming your change initiatives! It’s brilliant.**

**Case in Point:** An organization we worked with was restructuring to align to their new strategy. During one of the design workshops, one leader stopped the discussion and said, “We need to come up with a catchy name for this transformation.” When we pushed back, for all the reasons noted above, we were met with some resistance – “If we don’t name it, what will we put on the Outlook invite for these design meetings?” And “How do we title our slides when we roll this out to employees?”

After discussing the implications of giving the work a “name,” we arrived at calling it what it was: LRP (Long Range Plan) Activation. In doing so, we were signaling to employees that all of the upcoming changes were grounded in the long-range plan – the strategy. And the word “activation” suggested the beginning of process, not a picture of some, never-going-to-happen end state.

For organizations serious about becoming agile – and even for organizations that just want to cultivate a more engaged workforce, the example above provides a simple first step: **Create a communication strategy that frames a change as a natural extension of who we are and what we are doing as an organization.** Given our values, culture, and history or given where we are in our management cadence, talk about the change in terms of what is best and right under these circumstances, and totally consistent with our purpose and mission. Instead of a, “I wonder what this is about?” reaction, you’re more likely to get an, “Oh, that makes sense, I wonder what I can do to help” commitment.



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