

Ask the Expert: Navigating 2010 and that Six-Letter Word: CHANGE

By Marc Levine



Marc is an Organization Development consultant with a 15-year track record of demonstrated success in organizational effectiveness, leadership development, change management, team development, and executive coaching. As a Principal at Linkage, he develops long-term client relationships and drives results in complex, multi-level engagements. Partnering with C-level officers, senior executives, and technical leaders, he enhances company-wide leadership capabilities and improves individual, team, and organizational effectiveness.

Copyright © 2010 by Linkage. All rights reserved.

Linkage
Unleash your full potential.

As I think about the many conversations I've had recently with my OD colleagues, their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges that we will face in 2010 and beyond coalesce around several key themes.

The Gen-Yers

First, how can OD professionals help their clients engage Gen Y or 'Millennial' employees who, over time, will come to represent an increasing percentage of our employee population? I've had this conversation many times this year and perspectives vary on not only how this may be accomplished but also about whether the question is even important. Some clients take what I might call a 'defensive' position and argue that these new, young employees will simply need to conform to prevailing norms and expectations. They acknowledge generational differences and the difficulties of managing Gen-Yers but conclude that ultimately these 'newbies' will figure it out and start 'behaving like they should.' Others see these generational differences as opportunities, and note the tactics that can be used to harness the energy and talent of Gen-Yers can apply more broadly as well.

Much has been written on the characteristics of Gen-Yers in general and in the workplace in particular. Some of the characteristics I've noticed include comfort and ease with technology or 'techno-literacy,' the desire for participation in decisions that impact them, a sense of social responsibility, and the need for real-time communication, networking, and collaboration tools. To engage this new generation of workers, OD practitioners need to encourage their clients to 1) become more transparent in terms of how decisions are made 2) allow more venues for two-way, vertical communication whenever practical, 3) communicate in a more timely manner using a variety of media, and 4) encourage and enable information flow and collaboration within and across their organizations. Tactics such as these have always been on our 'nice to do' lists but assume even greater importance today when a growing segment of our employee population expect these pathways to be open and are able to leverage them quickly and efficiently if/when given the opportunity.

But it's not only our clients that need to adapt; we do, too. Can we become comfortable delivering training virtually? Can we step back from the assumption that all important meetings must occur face-to-face? Can we begin to see the value in multi-tasking and not only its limitations? What enabling technologies can we offer global teams to establish and maintain alignment? How do we cascade strategy using new communication tools and forums? Perhaps these are areas in which Gen-Yers can and should educate us. Hopefully, we'll be listening.

Networking Internally and Externally

Another trend I see emerging among OD practitioners is the need to facilitate networks and alliances both internally (across organizational silos/geographies) and with potential external partners. Many of our clients are coming to the realization that no matter how talented and engaged their employees are or no matter how well they train and develop their people, most ideas that will help them win over the short-and long-terms will come from outside their organizations. This has likely always been so but our ready access to information and the ability to share it instantly necessitates a more strategic approach to how this occurs. How do we access and inventory the best thinking and best ideas across the company and bring them together when needed? How do we identify and deploy our best talent quickly and efficiently?

How do we ensure the best ideas from outside the company find their way in? The ability to help our clients establish formal and informal channels of information flow, dialogue, and collaboration with potential sources of critical information will be a key OD competency in the years ahead.

Executive Coaching

Finally, another clear trend is the acceptance of executive coaching as a key developmental experience for senior executives. The stigma once attached to coaching as a remedial fix for executives who don't measure up has been slowly eroding and has perhaps, finally, begun to disappear. As coaching becomes more popular, it falls to the OD practitioner to establish formal coaching processes in their organizations by creating a cadre of qualified internal and external coaches, matching coaches to clients, and establishing metrics and rigor around coaching outcomes.

How can OD practitioners add value during challenging economic times, particularly as companies need to re-engage employees who have come to know the words 'layoffs' and 'burn-out' all too well?

Effectively Handling Change

As I reflect on 2009 and the many conversations I had with my clients about the hardships brought on by the Great Recession, the theme that emerged most consistently was, 'how do we help our clients deal with all of this change?' We know that many of our clients who survived the layoffs had to work twice as hard, take impossibly difficult decisions affecting the lives and livelihoods of many of their people, perform roles that didn't really suit them, and accomplish much more with much less. For many, this condition has become the 'new normal' and, indeed, it can be challenging to remember the way things were only 18 months ago. And though the recession shows signs of abating, make no mistake, the next wave of changes to impact our businesses, be they economic, technological, legal, or political, will come just as quickly and just as unexpectedly. In this context and into the future, the greatest value that OD professionals can provide our clients is to help them understand the impact change has on people, the typical reactions that can be expected, techniques for helping people not only survive, but thrive under these conditions, and to view "change-ability" as a source of competitive advantage.

Specifically, the change-related message I've delivered most this year involves people's bandwidth for change. This idea is illustrated best, I believe, through what I will call the 'wisdom tooth' analogy. About 20 years ago, I began to develop a nagging toothache on the lower left side of my mouth. I had never had any significant problems with my teeth before so I was puzzled as to the cause. I went to my dentist, then to an oral surgeon who examined me, took X-Rays and informed me that I had two wisdom teeth, one of which was pushing through causing the pain. He told me that both would eventually need to go and that since the recovery time would be more or less the same for one extraction or two, why not go ahead and get it all over with and take both at once? I agreed. The day of the surgery arrived, the surgeon put me under, took both teeth, and sent me home with a friend telling me to expect "a little discomfort when the drugs wear off." That happened at about 3:00 am when I awoke in absolute agony, cursing him and his 'all at once' approach. I thought back to this episode frequently this year when consulting to clients who would often say to me, "we have to do these layoffs but why not go

ahead and make some other changes that we've been putting off for a while, too, while the iron is hot? Let's just do everything at once."

Though 'all at once' may make sense for oral surgery—which I grudgingly admitted after the pain subsided—it may not apply in a change context. Why? Because people have the capacity to deal constructively and effectively with only a finite amount of change at any given time. During times like these it is as important to emphasize what is not changing as it is to communicate why certain things must change. Stability takes on enhanced value. What's staying the same is what people need to hear. My advice in the near term is to separate necessary versus discretionary changes and keep the latter category to a minimum, whenever possible.

OD professionals can also take the lead in helping our clients re-engage their employee populations. How? Though the Great Recession was a singular event in most of our working careers, people are still people and want the same basic things from their jobs as they always have; fair compensation, a good working relationship with their direct supervisor, regular feedback/communication, clear roles and responsibilities, the chance to do meaningful, interesting work, etc. Equipping front-line and middle-managers to provide these essentials will be absolutely critical as the economy rebounds and employees begin to have more choices about where they work. In the end, engagement is a 'local' phenomenon, dependent more on the direct supervisor than anyone or anything else. It's our job, in part, to make sure middle managers understand that, have the tools to get it done, and the support from us when necessary. From a senior leadership perspective, re-engagement involves straight-forward, authentic dialogue about the rationale behind the tough choices made in '09 and a clear vision for what's ahead in 2010 and beyond.

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com