



How Change Actually Happens in Organizations

By Adrian Pei

Two key lessons I had to learn the hard way...



Everyone gets upset at some point or another about an organization or system around them. Maybe it's our company, family, our educational or medical system, or the government. So we look to bring attention to issues and problems in various ways—but if we don't understand how change works in organizations, our efforts can lead to immense frustration.

What are some common mistakes, and better ways to influence change in an organization or system? **Here are two lessons I've learned:**

1. Changing an organization is not the same as changing one person (an individual).

We might influence one person by sending them an article or video, or educating them about an issue of which they had no awareness. However, changing an organization is far more complex, and requires more than just education or information.



Organizational (or systemic) change involves:

- **Strong buy-in and commitment** to the change initiative among top leaders in the organization, who need to be actively involved, visible, and communicative throughout the process.
- Proposals of changes that have a **holistic and realistic understanding of the existing structures, responsibilities, and limitations** of the organization and its leaders—to ensure the changes aren't just put on the backburner.
- **Close collaboration with leaders and implementors** for sustainability and accountability.

Many of us know this is true on some level—we've been at enough PTA or City Council meetings to understand how slow and bureaucratic systemic change can be! However, it's so tempting to try to bypass all of that, and to post a frustrated rant on social media or air one's grievances at a council meeting or protest.

I've seen individuals who even went to great lengths to research and write up entire reports on systemic issues—only to see these efforts sidelined because they didn't go through organizational channels. I've done all of these things myself, and **have learned the hard way that organizational change requires additional gears and tools** that I must use to be more effective.

2. Don't dismiss organizational history, because it can be a key to unlock change!

If we are frustrated by things that haven't changed in a long time, it's helpful to ask ourselves: **“Do we fully understand the history of this issue, and *why* it hasn't changed?”**

I once talked to an employee who said, “I know that people in my organization are all hung up about this event that happened forty years ago, but they just need to get over



it!” I empathized with them, but also challenged them to try to understand why people couldn’t get past this barrier.

I told them the story of how in one company, part of my job was to modernize an understanding and training of the organization’s core values. As I did this work, I encountered resistance from some longtime leaders who feared that some of the company traditions might be lost in my process. While I was advised to ignore these criticisms, I decided to talk to these leaders and understand the history behind their concerns. To my surprise, these leaders were happy to be heard, and **eventually became some of my biggest supporters in making the organizational changes!**

To better understand the history and culture of an organization, I find it helpful to ask and explore questions like these:

- **What kinds of similar projects and change initiatives have been attempted in the past?**
- **Which were most successful, and why?**
- **Which didn’t succeed, and why?**

You can uncover a wealth of insights about any organization or system, that often provide incredible insights to help unlock change!

The bigger the system and the longer the history of an issue, the harder and more complex change can be. But if we operate with some understanding and wisdom, organizational change becomes easier to navigate.

There is so much more to this, and it’s part of why **I offer workshops like “*Understanding Systems, Organizations and Communication*” and “*Influencing Change in Organizations*”**—as well as **cohorts** and trainings on personal, relational, and organizational change! If you want to learn more about these topics, or if you know a company or group that could benefit from an organizational consultant or trainer, you can easily **[schedule a call on my website](#)**. I look forward to hearing from you!



Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. What have you learned from your successes and mistakes in trying to influence change in organizations and systems?
2. To what extent do you agree that changing one person is different from changing an organization or system? Please explain why.
3. Thinking about an organization or system in your current life or context: what can you learn from projects and change initiatives in the past? What worked and why? What didn't work so well, and why? How can that knowledge help you?



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