

Drucker on Change and Continuity

Adapted from *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*; and *The Effective Executive*

By Peter F. Drucker

The traditional institution is designed for continuity. All existing institutions, whether businesses, universities, hospitals or churches, therefore have to make special efforts to be receptive to change and to be able to change. This also explains why existing institutions face resistance to change. Change for the traditional institution is, so to speak, a contradiction in terms.

Change leaders are, however, designed for change. And yet they still require continuity. People need to know where they stand—and this is true for employees, volunteers, board members, donors and outside partners. They need to know what they can expect. They need to know the values and the rules of the organization. They do not function if the environment is not predictable, not understandable, not known.

Change and continuity are thus *poles* rather than opposites. The more an institution is organized to be a change leader—the more it is constantly innovating—the more it will need to establish continuity internally and externally, the more it will need to *balance* rapid change and continuity.

Balancing change and continuity requires continuous work on information. Nothing disrupts continuity and corrupts relationships more than poor or unreliable information (except, perhaps, deliberate misinformation). It has to become routine for any

organization to ask at any change, even the most minor one: “Who needs to be informed of this?”

This will become more and more important as people no longer necessarily work next door to one another and see one another half a dozen times a day. The more enterprises come to rely on people working together without actually working *together*—that is, on people using information technology to communicate—the more important it will become to make sure that they are fully informed.

Information is particularly important when the change is not a mere improvement, but something truly new. It has to be a firm rule in any enterprise that wants to be successful as a change leader that there are *no surprises*.

Above all, there is a need for continuity in respect to the fundamentals of the organization: its mission and its values. Especially when an organization innovates constantly and change is the norm, it’s crucial to remind your staff and other stakeholders how the new program or service or process or activity that’s being introduced actually reinforces what the organization has *always* stood for.

Indeed, any organization needs a commitment to values and their constant reaffirmation as a human body needs vitamins and minerals. There has to be something that “this organization stands

for,” or else it degenerates into disorganization, confusion and paralysis.

Finally, the balance between change and continuity has to be built into compensation and recognition. We long ago learned that an organization will not innovate unless innovators are properly rewarded. We long ago learned that an organization in which successful innovators do not make it into senior management, let alone top management, will not innovate. We will have to learn, similarly, that an organization will have to amply reward those who, while not thwarting change, help preserve essential areas of continuity.