

Disruption and Change Management

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Abstract

This paper contends that disruptive leadership is an effective strategy for supporting organizational change and substantive change initiatives within arts organizations. Through the lens of organizational change theory and disruptive innovation, this writing reviews individual motivational tendencies toward resistance as well as generalized change organizational theories and disruptive practices within systems. Through evaluation of the preceding components, it is hypothesized and resolved that disruption is an effective tactic for decreasing resistance to change and subsequently provokes an environment that supports innovative and progressive change management.

Keywords: disruptive leadership, innovation, organizational change, change management

Disruption and Change Management

Introduction

At its root, disruption is a disturbance or set of problems which interrupt an event, activity, or process. As relating to biological processes, business models, or guerilla warfare, disruption is a recognized tactic of change, whether intentional or unintentional. Consequently leaders should not only recognize the significant impact of disruption but should embrace it. Disruptive leadership, as a technique, breaks down firmly established habits and normative practices in order provoke action and produces an unstable environment which is conducive to eradicating complacency. Disruption provides motivation for employees to work towards new pathways for growth and innovation. The work of Christensen, Davidson, Piderit, and Oliver are examples of evidence to support these findings. Through examination of the processes, techniques, critical analysis of disruption in organizational norms, this paper will justify the strategic use of disruptive leadership in order to decrease resistance to change as well as bring about substantive change to an arts organization.

Definition of Change and Resistance

Change is a constant within systems and organizations, and arts organizations are not excluded. Arts organizations are foundationally grounded in ritual and cultural expression; thus these symbolic connections are more strongly established than in transactional industries. The relationship of the arts to personal identity breeds an interconnectivity to self that is not as fully

realized in other business sectors. Art, and thus the work of arts organizations, allows the individual to insert themselves in a bigger picture, consider it an extension of self, and thus create an ideal “noble” profession. These characteristics contribute to both motivational factors for resisting change, as well as the extent to which members of the organization exercise their resistance.

Establishing a clear definition of “resistance” is beneficial in considering resistance to change within an organization. Davidson (1994) argues,

resistance has come to include anything and everything that workers do which managers do not want them to do, and that workers do not do that managers wish them to do....

resort to such an essentially residual category of analysis can easily obscure a multiplicity of different actions and meanings that merit more precise analysis in their own right. (p. 94)

The opposition forces exerted by organization members against institutional change have varying motivational implications; and a clear understanding of theory will help leaders determine the most appropriate methodology for dealing with resistance.

Piderit (2000) extensively considers the definition of “resistance.” Beginning with the work of Lewin (1952) and Coch and French (1948) which focused on the undesirable behaviors of workers in response to management-imposed changes in jobs and work methods. These theorists focus on the conceptualizations of resistance, “as a behavior, an emotion, or a belief—has merit and represents an important part of our experience of responses to change. Thus, any definition focusing on one view at the expense of the others seems incomplete” (Piderit, p.786). Knowing that disruptive tactics will provoke a response in all 3 of these realms

will aid the leader in managing resistance. Knights and Willmott (1999) support this idea in their work related to self-identity. Disruption to systems of recognizable social groups will evoke an emotional response to individuals as their notions of self and identity positions are “unfrozen” and reframed.

Tiedens and Linton (2001) argued that emotions characterized by certainty appraisals promote heuristic processing, whereas emotions characterized by uncertainty appraisals result in systematic processing. However, it is important to note that some recent research has found differences in processing among negative affective states. It appears that although sadness promotes systematic processing, anger encourages heuristic processing (Bodenhausen, 1993; Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Siisser, 1994; Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998; Tiedens, in press)(p. 794). By understanding the cognitive processing of resistance, a leader can more clearly apply the disruptions in a manner that can support their desired outcome.

Cognitive Theory Behind Resistance

In order to effectively discuss disruption as a tactic for change management, one must also understand the cognitive theory behind resistance. Hirschman (1970) explored resistance in his publication, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. The basic premise of his work states that members of an organization have two possible responses when they perceive an organization’s demonstration of a decreasing quality or benefits to their members: they can “exit” the group or “voice” their opinion in an attempt to repair or improve the situation. This closely echoes the idea of the “fight-or-flight” response developed by Cannon in the 1920s, and which is a physiological reaction in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival. When an

individual perceives institutional change, this acute stress response triggers a physical reaction.

At its most basic level, individuals cannot control this biological response to change.

Change resistance can also be viewed in connection to the individual employee's connection to the philosophical nature of the work. Rarely do individuals form resistant attitudes, or express such attitudes in acts of dissent or protest without considering the potential negative consequences for themselves. "What some may perceive as disrespectful or unfounded opposition might also be motivated by individuals' ethical principles or by their desire to protect the organization's best interests" (Piderit, p.785). Self-preservation, whether personally or professionally, is a motive of protection that is highlighted by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and is a strong factor that contributes to resistance. In arts organizations, ethical principles are more firmly rooted due to the deep personal connections made during the process of creating art. Due to this, arts organization members may form strong change resistant strategies.

Oliver (1991) validates these observations on organizational resistance norms in her research. "Organizations that are highly cohesive and that have strong internal cultures may be more prone to resist external expectations and beliefs. Common educational and ethnic backgrounds among status groups in an interorganizational field also may tend to promote conformity (Galaskiewicz & Shatin, 1981)" (p.173). Within arts organizations, like minded individuals come together in order to produce an artistic product. While educational and ethnic backgrounds may be diverse, these organizations typically reflect a philosophical identity that mirrors other conformity standards.

Smith and Hitt (2009) provide additional insight on this topic when reflecting on Bandura's work. They explain:

Human functioning is rooted in social systems. Therefore, personal agency operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences. In these agentic transactions, people create social systems to organize, guide, and regulate human activities. The practices of social systems, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunity structures for personal development and functioning. Given this dynamic bidirectionality of influence, social cognitive theory rejects a dualism between personal agency and a social structure disembodied from human activity. (p. 10)

This foundational work by Bandura on Cognitive Theory further supports the idea that individuals must break from structured protocols to provide for growth. Homeostasis does not support development. Artistic communities provide another layer to the complexity of the social systems Bandura discusses in his work. While social-structural implications are inherent in any organization, arts organizations deepen the constraints due to their collective philosophical identity.

Models of Change

In order to thrive in a world full of endless cultural options, arts leaders must push for organization evolution and innovation. While many arts organizations hold deeply rooted traditions and possess strong organizational cultures, leaders must aggressively push for ways to break long established structures, beliefs, and values in order to promote change and growth. The theoretical work of Lewin (1952), Kubler-Ross (1969), and Kotter (1996) support the tactical use of disruption to facilitate change through their models of change. When confronted with change, individuals follow predictable processes. Disruptive leaders can act on these behaviors in order

to lessen member's resistance to change, and move past the mantra of "that's how we do things around here."

In both the Kubler-Ross and Lewin models, there are periods or stages where individual resistance is lower than its normative state. Lewin's 3 step model for change illustrates "unfreeze, change, freeze." Drastic and repetitive disruptive action facilitates the "unfreezing" of cultural norms, and subsequent "refreezing" is a method to cement new practices. In arts organizations, old paradigms must be recognized and reassigned. For example, broadening an organization's use of technology might need to be "unfrozen" before new ways of integrating can be established. An organization who is dependent on more traditional patrons may need to work strategically to "unfreeze" their aesthetic preferences. Technology examples of this can be seen in the use of projections or sound amplification/reinforcement in musical theatre. Content driven by technological advances was once rejected and has now become a standard convention for performance practices.

Kubler-Ross's model of change requires individuals to pass through 7 stages of change and includes the movement of individuals from a phase of depression to integration. By interjecting a disruption to normative practices during these critical phases, the leader can allow the individual to emerge from the previous stage with new and differing habits, attitudes, and ideals. When a change happens, members of the organization mourn the loss of an idea or process, just as in the stages of grief. Once the individual is ready to move forward, they find ways to integrate the new paradigm into their cultural norm. Again, the example of technology can be used to illustrate this point for contemporary arts organizations. When subtext was first introduced into contemporary opera, many members of the community mourned the end of the

“pure” art form and believed projections polluted the production. Now, many have groups have moved toward integration and support the benefits of this innovation due to their ability to increase accessibility to younger and wider participants.

A continual interjection of disruptive acts to normative practices will also help break the tendency to revert back to old patterns as Lewin supports in his “refreezing” stage. A savvy leader will know when to interject a disturbance or disruption into the scheme in order to evoke the desired response. Whereas comfort breeds complacency, discomfort provokes action. Again using the opera example, diminishing audiences threatened members of that artistic community enough to cause discomfort, and that discomfort provoked the change. Now, representing the last phase of Lewin’s model or “refreezing” process, subtitles have become a norm.

Disruptive Leadership Defined

By recognizing change resistance norms, theorists then strategized ways to combat these intrinsic tendencies. Disruptive leadership evolved out of the work of Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen as a method for facilitating innovation. As described by Christensen (2015),

“Disruption” describes a process whereby a smaller company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses. Specifically, as incumbents focus on improving their products and services for their most demanding (and usually most profitable) customers, they exceed the needs of some segments and ignore the needs of others. Entrants that prove disruptive begin by successfully targeting those overlooked segments, gaining a foothold by delivering more-suitable functionality—frequently at a lower price. Incumbents, chasing higher profitability in

more-demanding segments, tend not to respond vigorously. Entrants then move upmarket, delivering the performance that incumbents' mainstream customers require, while preserving the advantages that drove their early success. When mainstream customers start adopting the entrants' offerings in volume, disruption has occurred.

His book, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (1997) fully explored this model which is the basis for many systematic approaches to disruption as an applied leadership tactic.

“According to Christensen, the originator of the concept ‘disruptive innovation,’ if your company is doing everything ‘right’ by conventional standards, you can still fail. Organizations need to set themselves apart from the established norms of the market” (Kernan, p.10). While the theoretical work evolved out of economic and technology sectors, this method of innovative leadership has permeated through other industries as well. Kernan states, “This was the downfall of many companies listed in Clayton Christensen’s book; they simply kept going after guaranteed money from their current customers while smaller newcomers to the market started to dominate the incumbent’s market share. These principles of disruption can be applied to any type of business model, including nonprofits” (p. 13). Nonprofit organizations are similar to corporate structures in numerous ways and prescribe to many of the same motivational factors for both members of the group and the organization as a whole.

Application of Disruptive Leadership

Due to the extreme speed of required advances in other industries like technology, the results of these leadership tactics are more easily measured in those industries. With that said, arts organizations must also evolve in order to maintain support when entertainment and cultural options are becoming more accessible through technology. While artistic purists might argue

that art forms are sacred and above market factors, financial deficits are extremely impactful to the future of arts organizations and determine the organization's ability to complete its mission. While the product content and quality may not have degraded, consumer support for the arts is a lessening resource. Kernan reiterates Christensen's ideas "Sustaining innovations are incremental changes that improve the existing product just enough to satisfy the existing audience. These sustaining innovations will definitely improve the organization; however, it is not enough of a radical change to separate yourself from the rest of the pack" (p. 15). Within arts organizations, leaders must think more radically about future possibilities and work within their organizations to reform the creative industries to ensure their validity against increasing societal disregard.

Change resistance theory supports the application of disruption as tactic for change management. Resistance to change has been extensively studied in the field of organizational theory. The work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Meyer and Rowan (1977), and Greenwood and Hinings (1988) are examples that support disruption in systems. These studies explore the organizational design archetype as well as the motivational responses of the individuals within the system. Armstrong (2017) describes the difficulty with inflicting change on an organization. "Typically, the relatively few corporations that are successful in "disrupting themselves" do so by setting up some type of quasi-autonomous division that operates outside of the typical rules and constraints of the main company" (p. 7). While there is clear support for the application of disruption, Armstrong proves that leaders must be willing to work outside of normal expectations in order to generate truly new and innovative practices. Since most arts industries are based on aesthetics and subjective tastes, it may be a delicate negotiation to push into new forms and

methods; while not pushing innovation so far that the organization loses audiences or members of their donor base.

Successfulness of disruptive leadership is dependent on the leader's understanding of previously addressed behavior and motivational theory. Ellersgaard and Billington (2017) state, "Change management starts with each individual leader – the ability to adapt to new circumstances quickly and act as a role model. The need to transform continues beyond the individual into the organization that calls for a systematic way for change to be managed in all functions in the organization and to be adopted by others. Without change management, disruption will be chaos rather than opportunity. The underlying causes of disruption are the leadership levers for managing change" (p. 9). While disruptive tactics could result in a general chaotic state, a clear understanding of motivational theory will support disruptive innovation.

Strategic Responses to Change

Oliver (1991) explains five types of strategic responses to change. Members of the organization may present varying levels of resistance from "passivity to increasing active resistance: acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation" (p. 151). In order to move forward, avoid acquiescence, and disrupt habitual and mimetic processes, leaders must alter the processes in order to evoke a drastic enough action to have authentic change take place. If a leader is not drastic enough in the alterations to the system, members will fall back into old habits. Rowan (1982) emphasized the central role of balance in explaining the diffusion and stabilization of structural innovation" (p. 153). In combating defiance to organizational change, "Attacking organizations strive to assault, belittle, or vehemently denounce institutionalized values and the external constituents that express them" (p. 157). "Manipulation involves the

active intent to use institutional processes and relations opportunistically, to co-opt and neutralize institutional constituents, to shape and redefine institutionalized norms and external criteria of evaluation, and to control or dominate the source, allocation, or expression of social approval and legitimation” (p. 159). These varying strategies on change resistance are supported by disruptive leadership and in order to successfully apply this method of leadership, one must understand each of these tactics.

Piderit (2000) supports the idea that disagreement and discomfort can serve as important triggers for expanding expectations and knowledge. Piderit quotes Barnett (1994) to prove, "an emphasis on failure, negative feedback, stress, or 'crisis' as a learning stimulus has eclipsed the potential importance of other meaningful stimuli (e.g., opportunities, people, and success)" (p. 8). Arts organizations are often threatened in this manner and a successful leader will capitalize on that moment in order to provoke change. Similarly, the concept of organizational renewal is supported in the work of Barr, Stimpert, and Huff (1992), Burgelman (1991), and Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) which proves that if leaders do not experiment, it seems unlikely that they will be able to carry out a renewal process (Piderit, p. 790). The previous research advocates for disruptive processes in support of change resistance but also as a means to sustain institutional change.

Resource dependence theory provides additional tangential support for disruption as a tactic for change management. Due to the limitations on resources for the arts, it could be argued that these specific organizations face additional implications to change resistance. The basis of the theory is the power related to outside resources. In times of scarcity, emotional reactionary responses are heightened and the arts are often in a state of scarcity of resources.

Conclusion

“Innovation by its very nature is the domain of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs thrive in an unstructured environment. They shun management structure because it impedes creativity and slows them down. Instead, they are most successful in a highly networked world where a free-flow of information provides the ability to invent, learn, and adjust at a very rapid rate” (Kotter). At its root innovation is change and development. Arts organizations are not dissimilar to traditional business models; innovation and growth are essential to both.

The model of disruptive leadership is a clear method of lessening organizational resistance to change as well as inspiring and cultivating substantive change. A leader must consider planned behaviors of both individuals and groups in relation to change within an organization, disruption to current systems, protocols, and policies that evoke an unbalanced and unstable work environment. Once the employee has experienced a particular level of discomfort, it becomes obvious that the only way to diminish the discomfort is to evolve. An individual cannot remain stagnant in times of distress-fight or flight will take over.

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