On the Evolution of Organizations

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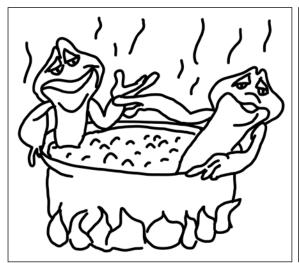Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Division—Retired

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KEY POINTS

- People and organizations must have the capacity to evolve over time to stay relevant in an ever-changing environment.
- Having a mission and vision, taking appropriate risks, utilizing adaptive processes, and asking for help can guide an organization to choose whether to respond to change or resist change.
- Individuals must collaborate, effectively communicate, honor their commitments, and use interdisciplinary approaches within their organizations to help drive change.

Like people, organizations—groups of people working together toward a common purpose—come in all varieties. Whether you joined the Boy Scouts or Brownies, pledged a sorority or fraternity in college, obtained a job, or acquired membership to a professional society such as the American Fisheries Society (AFS), you have probably been a part of an organization at one point or another in your life. Similarly, we (the authors) have been associated with many organizations, and each of us feels as though we have been shaped both personally and professionally by our involvement in these organizations over time.

Serving in a leadership role in an organization, however, like many of us have done, comes with its challenges. Not only should you be knowledgeable, work well with others, and have vision and good communication skills, but you should also be flexible and adaptable—all hard traits to master! For, as time goes by, people and, thus, organizations go through periods of change. Sometimes, change occurs because an organization wants to change to either augment its mission or remain competitive with similar organizations in changing biological, physical, and social environments. Other times, change occurs because an organization has to change if it wants to excel or simply survive. At the bottom line, change occurs, so organizations need to prepare for it rather than fight it. Organizations that can be flexible in, and appropriately choose to adapt to, times of change will flourish while those that cannot will likely become obsolete and, ultimately, perish.

In our history of working with an array of organizations ranging from universities and state and federal management agencies to binational commissions and for-profit and nonprofit groups, we have all experienced change and evolution in our organizations over time. It is often easy for us to become content and comfortable in our respective roles within our organizations and difficult for us to get in the habit of anticipating or sensing
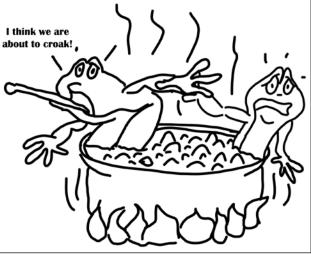

Figure 1. Two frogs feeling content and comfortable in warming water (left) only minutes before the same frogs perish as the water comes to a boil (right). Credit: Joseph D. Good.

whether change, or a response to change in the environment, is necessary. In our experiences, however, we have found that the need for organizational change has the potential to creep up on us. We can liken these observations to those of a couple of frogs in a pot of slowly warming water, as described by systems scientist and Massachusetts Institute of Technology lecturer, Peter Senge, in his 1990 book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. At first, like us at times, the frogs appear to be comfortable in the warm water; so comfortable, in fact, that they fail to sense that the water is warming. When the water comes to a boil it is already too late for the frogs to sense the threat that they were gradually experiencing and, thus, the frogs perish (Figure 1). Similarly, an organization that does not acknowledge the need for change or anticipate it can also perish once it becomes too late for change to occur.

Even though it may be challenging and uncomfortable to prepare ourselves for change, we must acknowledge that change in the environment and the need for organizational evolution are inevitable. In last month's issue of *Fisheries*, authors M. Good and W. Taylor discussed the impact of change on an individual working in his or her profession, using fisheries and aquatic ecosystems as the context for their discussion. In this article, we present some of our strategies for organizations to avoid the same unfortunate fate as the frogs found themselves in when the water came to a boil, failing to sense their ultimate demise. We hope the following "lessons learned" from our past experiences help others anticipate, and make a choice about, facilitating change as needed in their own organizations. For, in the end, organizational change is important. It can drive large-scale future progress and overall growth that is required to maintain and enhance an organization's relevance and responsiveness as the environment changes.

DETERMINE THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Organizations are structured and function to fulfill their goals and objectives, which generally are ever-changing. As such, organizations need to have systems in place that allow them to change in relationship to the changing environment.

This is always balanced with the need for certainty of processes within an organization so that chaos does not reign. Bureaucratic procedures, while not always appreciated, allow for stability in an organization, just as routines do in individual lives. However, these procedures cannot be so confining as to not allow change. It is not enough to say, "Well, this is how it has always been done," as you can get better at doing the wrong thing! An organization must therefore have the capacity for change if it wants to stay important and relevant to society.

The sigmoid curve (Figure 2) described by Charles Handy, an Irish philosopher, depicts the dynamics of the evolution of an organization. The sigmoid curve illustrates the success and performance of an organization based on its choice of how and whether it responds to change through time. Successful organizations already possess the procedures and processes that allow them to innovate, grow, and improve their success. But, many of these organizations do not make a change or respond to change until it is too late (Figure 2, B), or when organizational innovation, growth, and improvement become more difficult to achieve due to hesitation or lack of time and resources to pursue and potentially strike out in new directions. If an organization waits to respond to change until point B, then the organization can become inefficient or, worse, ineffective, leading ultimately to failure. Fear not, however, for organizational failure can be avoided by responding to change earlier (Figure 2, A). Whether an organization eventually chooses to accept change or resist change, the decision should occur before there is evidence of the potential need for change. At this time, when the organization is performing well, a decision to implement change may produce confusion (Figure 2, shaded area) among members of an organization who wish to maintain their current performance and those who wish to capitalize on the potential benefits and opportunities of future change. We argue that experimentation with new ideas at this time is crucial for the future success of an organization.

So, what's the trick? How can organizations continue to innovate, grow, and improve their success without losing time and depleting their resources too early? We believe that organizations must be anticipatory; they must rethink and re-
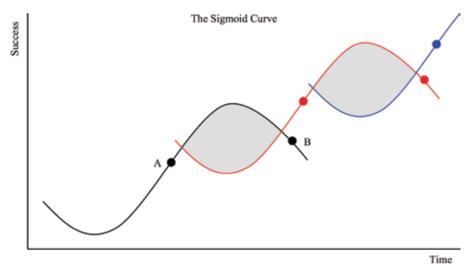

Figure 2. The sigmoid or S-shaped curve, adapted from Charles Handy in *The Age of the Paradox*. The black curve represents the evolution of organizations that choose to anticipate future change and take action at the right time (point A) or choose to maintain their current performance until it can be too late for organizations to persist or simply survive (point B). The red and blue curves represent the continuing growth and success of organizations that choose to anticipate future change and take action at the appropriate time. The shaded area represents the confusion and chaos that can occur between individuals within organizations.

evaluate what they are doing and how they function regularly, even if they seem to be functioning seamlessly and appear to be on the right trajectory with their organizational performance metrics. Organizations can do this by utilizing multiple strategies and processes that enable their members to think about future change in the context of their organization and the environment in which they currently live, as well as the one they project to live in. If an organization regularly considers future change and, concurrently, needed organizational evolution, then the organization is more likely to be better prepared to transition to a new growth period. As such, the organizational evolution cycle continues; slow growth, followed by rapid growth, followed by declines that can lead to the demise of an organization or, if an organization is prepared, can lead to new growth opportunities. The choice is yours!

TAKE RISKS

As is evident from the sigmoid curve metaphor, organizations should anticipate change and monitor changes in trends in their environment if they wish to remain successful. Sometimes, in an effort to anticipate change and remain successful in a changing environment, organizations have to take risks that have uncertain outcomes. Though it is true that taking risks can occasionally end in unfortunate circumstances for an organization, there are some significant advantages to "smart" risk-taking or risk-taking that is deliberate in stretching organization members outside of their comfort zones. "Smart" risk-taking can lead to unforeseen opportunities and benefits. For example, in the 1990s, as former chief of the Fisheries Division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, I (J. Robertson) wanted to understand why salmon populations were collapsing in Lake Michigan. At the time, there had not been much research done on the salmon fisheries in the Great Lakes, and as a result, I made a decision and risked a significant portion of my division's program funds, staff, and time to begin a close working relationship with university researchers in the state of Michigan to understand the dynamics and drivers of salmon production in the Great Lakes for improved future management. Though this decision was met with opposition from my division initially, we were soon successful in establishing partnerships and collaborating on research, program development and implementation, and education initiatives. In the end, these partnerships led to a wealth of new knowledge on salmon populations in the Great Lakes and more effective fisheries management programs.

Additionally, appropriate risk-taking demonstrates confidence, belief in yourself and your organization, and a determination to achieve an end goal or objective that can improve the organization in the future. It does not pay to play it safe here. All in all, even though it can be scary and certainly uncomfortable, risk-taking is, at its core, a learning experience that allows organizations to develop new ideas and chart new paths as they move forward in the future, offering new products and ways of thinking.

DEPEND ON VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS

In times of change, an organization should routinely reflect on its vision and mission statements. Here, a vision statement is defined as the ideal, overarching goal that an organization hopes to achieve over time, and a mission statement is defined as the current state or purpose of an organization.

Developing ownership among the members of an organization of its vision and mission statements is important for the organization for several reasons. First, it will help ensure that all members of an organization, including its leaders, believe in and are working toward a common goal. Without vision and mission statements, an organization could easily fragment and fail due to conflicting interests and priorities among organization members. Additionally, the lack of vision and mission statements within an organization could result in disorganization and confusion both inside the organization and to the outside world. When this occurs, organization members risk falling prey to the "demand of the hour" or the most pressing and urgent need rather than reflecting on their organization's vision or mission statements to help them consider the long-term picture: the broader goal or objective of the organization. As the executive secretary of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC), a binational commission that facilitates fisheries management in the Great Lakes basin, I (R. Lambe) am often in a position to take action on a myriad of issues that impact fisheries resources and aquatic ecosystems basinwide. However, to ensure the effective use of my organization's time and resources, the members of my organization and I regularly reflect on the GLFC's vision and mission statements, guided by the Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries, which founded the commission, for direction. Thus, in accordance with these guiding documents, I can make an informed decision about whether to take on a lead, advisory, or observatory role given the issue at hand.

Lastly, strong and bold vision and mission statements that enable an organization to grow and evolve over time can bring people with similar passions and like-minded goals together and, most importantly, instill in them a sense of determination and enthusiasm that enables an organization to move forward to make a positive impact in the world.

UTILIZE A PROCESS

Organization members should determine and agree upon a process or set of processes to assist them in conceptualizing how their organization needs to change or evolve over time. Organizations and their visions and mission statements are unique, and therefore, there is not one universal process that functions effectively in facilitating change in an organization. However, there are examples of general processes, ranging from straightforward and short-term to more complex and longer-

Authors, William Taylor and Robert Lambe, discuss the future before a day of salmon fishing on Lake Michigan. Photo credit: Molly J. Good.

term, which can be utilized to help members of an organization facilitate change.

Clarity and Consequence: Leaders of an organization might first ask its members to consider the consequences of any decision to change or a response to change in the organization. This process will give individual members in the organization an opportunity to ask questions, voice their concerns, and provide suggestions about the need for change and how the organization might most effectively evolve over time. This process could additionally stimulate discussion about legitimate consequences of an organization's choices; if the potential consequences are deemed to be overly negative, then perhaps the choice to change is not warranted at this time. Without these clarifying discussions of consequences, it can be all too easy for an organization to choose a course of action without fully thinking about the potential results of their actions on the organization and its members.

Horizon Scanning: An organization and its members might choose to utilize a process called horizon or environmental scanning to facilitate organizational self-reflection. Scanning of this type, known primarily as SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), is flexible, which allows leaders of organizations to think in categories that are best suited to the current organizational moment and frame of change. In my role as a facilitator, I (J. Beck) often utilize the process of horizon scanning when I am working with an organization that wants to understand a very broad range of environmental factors that may have an impact on that organization in the future; such an analysis is meant to truly free those involved to think of the future without the strictures of current realities. This often enables organization members to be more creative, which may push the boundaries of the current organization, redefining its vision and mission to better function in the future. With this information, it becomes more feasible for an organization to plan and facilitate change to address threats, overcome challenges, and take advantages of opportunities sooner (at point A of the sigmoid curve) rather than later.

In and Out: Though organizations might acknowledge that change and evolution over time may be necessary to meet the anticipated threats, challenges, and opportunities of the future, organizations should be cautious about facilitating too much change. Not all change is positive, and organizations that commit to too much too hastily may lose sight of their overall vision and mission, leading to ineffectiveness, discontent, and, potentially, failure. Therefore, an organization might utilize a process to determine what current responsibilities or actions may be "in" or "out" in terms of priority to that organization. This process, which is founded upon the vision and mission of an organization, results in a common understanding within an organization about the scope of its work (what it should do and what it should not do), its role in the broader community, and its priorities and responsibilities now and in the future. This process also provides an opportunity for an organization to check that its goals and objectives are in sync with its prime function, and it identifies previously unknown interests in, and highlights opportunities to pursue, different priorities and responsibilities in the future.

ASK FOR HELP

It is evident that various processes or strategies can provide critical support and structure to an organization that acknowledges and facilitates change in response to changes

Author, Molly J. Good, looks out into the distance on Lake Michigan early one summer morning. Photo credit: Unknown.

in the environment. What may be even more critical, though, is external assistance—help from outside of the organization. Leaders of an organization might approach these efforts with tunnel vision, refusing to explore options outside of their lines of sight or comfort zones, or they may neglect to consider options or alternatives that stray too far from whatever, historically, has been needed to maintain and grow the organization's success. Oftentimes an unrelated, objective voice is the most critical voice in the room, for an individual who is external to an organization, but who can adequately lead the discussion within an organization, is not afraid to ask questions, challenge others, and raise controversial views or points. These types of people— trained professionals or facilitators—and the processes they utilize, have the potential to drive the most change and evolution in an organization while still preserving its main purpose and its integrity.

EVALUATE THE PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

As in many fisheries and aquatic ecosystem management processes, one of the last and most important steps in the process of facilitating change in organizations and responding to change in the environment is evaluation. Evaluating any kind of process and its outcomes yields a greater understanding of what was actually accomplished, any lessons learned about the process that were selected and implemented, and necessary improvements that might streamline similar processes in the future. As long as an organization continues to anticipate change over time, responds to change on a regular basis, and evaluates the processes and outcomes of change on its vision and mission, the organization, unlike the frogs, will surely jump out of the pot before the water boils.

Wayne Gretzky, a former professional Canadian hockey player, said it best when he stated that we must "skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been." Let us—both individuals and organizations—think about these wise words as we continue to forge on with courage and persistence in the world to be our best selves, changes and all. **AFS**