

THE CXO'S GUIDE TO MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

By Michael O'Brien, Ed.D.

The change initiatives have been agreed-upon. The reasoning behind each initiative is clear and compelling. Well-crafted communications have been printed. Tightly choreographed kick-off meetings held. And yet, with all this . . . change does not happen as expected. Turf battles rage. Heels dig in. Team breakdowns slow the pace of key initiatives. Deadlines are missed and results suffer.

And, this is all normal

To the human mind, change is a bad idea. All of us are hard-wired to maintain the status quo, to keep running old habits and to avoid uncertainty. It's normal, natural and usually quite healthy. But if the change is significant enough, we actually fear the change that we are charged to lead. It is this fear that exists in all of us and throughout the organization that often is at the heart of why change initiatives do not accomplish what was intended. Fear gets in the way of the critical work that needs to be done.

Fear is a normal emotion designed to protect us. We are built to *automatically* fight, flee or freeze in a fearful moment rather than *consciously* confront. Throughout the O'Brien Group's change coaching efforts at large healthcare corporations, we continually see that in the moment of stress and conflict, when leadership is needed the most - that's where leadership is the most difficult to create. It is where teams become fearful and emotions take over. It is where interpersonal "breakdowns" occur that get in the way of accomplishing our goals and objectives. It is where change does not happen as quickly as we like or important work takes too long to accomplish. And results suffer.

While much has been written about the process of change management, this Executive Brief addresses a fundamental leadership practice – *intentional* conversations, that overcome fear and turn breakdowns into breakthroughs.



Change Starts with a Conversation

Having open and productive conversations is absolutely critical in making sure that change drives the results we want. Powerful conversations create actions that lead to change. They turn normal breakdowns into breakthroughs. Powerful conversations

can happen in meetings, one-on-one with key staff members and sometimes in group presentations.

The head of a large multi-hospital health system said it best: “We used to have over 100 change initiatives going on in the field all at once. Quite frankly, the Regions were overwhelmed and we were not helping matters because we were not having powerful conversations. They were loyal to the mission, yet frustrated by the scope of demands we placed on them. I’ll admit that the home office would sometimes go into meetings thinking the Regions would say no to our requests and ideas, so this bias naturally affected our ability to be completely open to their input. But when we began to practice the key elements of having more effective and powerful conversations, we started to listen to their point of view. We started slowing down and prioritizing. Consequently, their commitment to the agenda increased and we got more work done.”



The best place to begin having more performance-driving conversations is to look at how successful your most recent conversations have been. In the last week, did you have any conversations or did you witness conversations that:

- Were meant to produce a course of action or develop an understanding that fell flat?
- Got bogged down in a meeting when consensus was needed?
- Focused on some point of conflict or difficulty that never quite got resolved?

Most likely, your answer is yes.

The problem is simple – most of us think we’re having conversations when we really aren’t. For us to have powerful conversations, a *dialogue* should be taking place and it usually isn’t. Instead, we are having consecutive monologues.

I talk and tell you what I want to tell you; you talk and tell me what you want to tell me. Or you tell me what you think I want to hear so I’ll leave you alone.

We’re very good at taking turns talking. But neither side is exploring and discovering and building on what’s being said. We aren’t solving problems. We’re usually creating them.

There’s a difference between what typically passes for “conversation” and what is a true dialogue. The difference is that for dialogue to occur, at least one of those engaged in it has to be curious:

- Question each other and be genuinely curious about why the other thinks the way they do.
- Draw out each other's beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, speculations, hopes and anxieties, etc.

By being curious about another's point of view, you can create a two-way, non-defensive, open communication that examines assumptions and becomes a conversation geared to mutual discovery.

To help promote powerful dialogues, you and your team must be willing to:

- State your own view and ask others for their reactions.
- Be wrong about your assessments and conclusions.
- Be curious as to why others think what they believe is correct or true.
- Accept that you may be unaware of certain facts and be open to new information and to changing your mind.
- Interpret how others are thinking and reacting and seek to understand their underlying feelings.

When the value of creating dialogue is seen from this perspective, it's easy to see how most conversation is more like two related monologues. Monologues are usually about telling the other person what you think, giving directions and/or convincing someone to adopt your point of view. Sometimes outright manipulation is the real

agenda. When this happens, the promise of a new discovery or breakthrough is lost.

Dialogue lets us discover more of our own intelligence and blend it with the knowledge and wisdom of others. It allows us to uncover otherwise hidden fears that are creating resistance to change. Clear and powerful agreements on overcoming these areas of resistance can result from dialogue, whereas little worthwhile insight is likely to come from simultaneous monologues. And they rarely inspire anything more than weak commitments to act.



Breakdowns are Normal

Breakdowns and conflicts are a natural and ordinary part of any healthcare organization operating in today's environment of hyper change. It's hard work to keep all your team's interpersonal relationships aligned and priorities balanced. Breakdowns usually occur when someone did not do something that you

thought they should do or when something “should not” be the way it is. Discussing these conflicts feels risky. You could be wrong or you could make matters worse. But it is during these breakdowns where leadership is the hardest—and is the most needed. Left unchecked, breakdowns will cause our “best intentions” to get side tracked.



As part of our change coaching process, we work with the executive team to imbed a new set of skills to help turn these breakdowns into real opportunities for breakthrough thinking. At the core of this approach is teaching executives *how to accept someone else's concern and, just for a few moments, make that concern their own*. To become genuinely interested in another's viewpoint and to hold your view of the situation as only your opinion and not the “truth.”

Under pressure and stress, breakdowns in communications are “normal.” When the breakdown occurs, instead of having a conversation that supports the mutual discovery of a clear path of action

to success, words become weapons with combatants wielding them in an attempt to force others to surrender their viewpoints.

Nobody wins when that happens. Nothing gets accomplished. The truth is, when conversations become miniature battle grounds, nobody is even thinking about accomplishing anything. They're thinking about themselves. And leadership is absent.

You can help facilitate your critical meetings in a way to help the team avoid these miniature battle grounds by first understanding how conversations break down. When people are engaged in this type of combative discussion, they're engaged in what we call a “reactive cycle.” It takes place when people “react” in a conversation instead of participate in one. And if left unchecked, the reactive cycle can do more than kill the productivity of a conversation – it can damage relationships.

To understand reactive cycles, let's look at how our mind acts when we're engaged in one. It starts when someone says something you don't like or agree with. At that moment, you judge them. In a split second, you have decided they're insensitive, uncaring, selfish, dishonest or irresponsible – or all of the above. They haven't changed. What changed is that your emotions kicked in. That happens when we feel threatened, out of control, defensive and/or have some form of fear. We react by attempting to control the situation, the person or we simply retaliate.

When you react in this manner, you inevitably say something the other person doesn't like – and then

they assess you; just as we described above. Their fears kick in and – you guessed it – they react to you by attempting to gain control much as you did. This, in turn, appears to you to justify your original assessment of them and causes you to react again – which reactivates them!

You are now locked in the downward spiral of the reactive cycle with predictable results – you hold another unproductive discussion or meeting that produces no action. A breakdown remains broken.

There are three steps we can take to break the reactive cycle when we see one or we directly experience one in our day-to-day conversations:

1. Name it – one of the parties notices they're engaged in the reactive cycle and "names" it.
2. One or both of the parties "claims" their responsibility for being reactive.
3. Both parties try to understand their own – and

the other's – perspective and emotions and enter into a dialogue. They "reframe" their perspectives.

After we've named, claimed and re-framed our reactive story about the other person or persons, we can engage in the type of open, honest and productive discussion needed to change and transform our team for the better.

It's Hard Work

As one of the senior-most leaders, you have a unique and challenging opportunity to facilitate an ongoing organizational dialogue that keeps change on track. And it's hard work. Helping senior management keep discussions open and productive as they steer their organizations toward a better future is sometimes messy – yet it is critical. Pay attention to breakdowns as they occur – name them and then use the concepts discussed in this article (with a dash of courage) to get projects and teams back on track.

About Michael O'Brien, Ed.D.



Dr. Michael O'Brien, O'Brien Group's CEO, one of the country's foremost executive leadership educators in the health care industry, has been a pioneering force in helping senior executives and their teams lead better and achieve more in the face of some of the most dramatic changes the industry has ever seen.

A successful executive educator and CEO, Michael is also a dedicated leader, teacher, author and sought-after speaker in the industry. He has addressed association and executive meetings throughout the U.S., including AHA's Center for Healthcare Governance, ACHE, The Governance Institute, ASHRA and many other leadership, executive and board retreats.