



CHANGE WITHOUT PAIN: HOW MANAGERS CAN OVERCOME INITIATIVE OVERLOAD, ORGANIZATIONAL CHAOS, AND EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

By *Eric Abrahamson*
(Harvard Business School Press, 2004, \$26.95)
Reviewed by *Klaus D. Sitte, Executive Director*
Montana Legal Services Association

I like this book! Maybe it was because of the many real-world examples to illustrate significant elements of the title's theme. Maybe it was because the idea of change without pain struck a responsive chord. Having observed several episodes of creative destruction in legal services programs, managing change in such a way as to avoid any unnecessary anguish, anxiety and heartache is particularly appealing. The ability to understand such a positive management technique was inviting.

Eric Abrahamson does a masterful job of making his case for what he calls "creative recombination." Abrahamson currently teaches management at the Columbia Business School. He has apparently assembled several of his prior academic, scholarly publications and expanded them into this easy-to-read volume. He, himself, has witnessed several disastrously ineffective attempts at creative destruction — change which destroys and removes existing organizational assets to make room for and fill organizations with newly created ones. His goal, he says, is to convince the reader that "less pain enables more change." In an era of what seems to be nearly constant change, his theme is most alluring.

I must admit it took awhile to become accustomed to the book's cadence: tell the readers what you are going to say, it and then tell them what you said, almost like an expository public speaking class. To a certain extent, the chapters do feel more like a series of business lectures, best heard at a continuing education or management seminar over the course of several weeks. Having forgotten last week's lecture, I might want to be reminded of the most important points at this week's lecture. In the book, however, this flow was sometimes annoying, having to wade through similar material

more than once. Yet Abrahamson has an uncanny ability to reiterate similar material in differing ways. So, when tempted to skip what I thought was redundant material, his rephrasing techniques engaged me once again.

Little effort was required to persuade me that creative destruction is a less desirable management tool than Abrahamson's concept of creative recombination. If any doubts lingered, he convinced me in his first chapter in which he describes the "repetitive-change syndrome." Symptoms include initiative overload, change-related chaos, employee anxiety, cynicism and burnout. Sound familiar? There are times when organizations simply cannot cope with more changes. Rapid and continuous change, says Abrahamson, simply rips an organization apart. Whether in the legal services program context or in other private, nonprofits, we have all observed this phenomenon first hand.

So what is the alternative to creative destruction? Abrahamson argues that recombination is the best method for managing change. Creative destruction presupposes that existing organizational assets will be destroyed and removed, under the palliative of "no pain, no gain." Creative recombination, on the other hand, seeks to use an organization's currently existing assets and recombine them in a new, different and more useful way. Abrahamson urges organizations to adopt creative recombination as the default standard for managing change.

Once the reader adopts the premise that change without pain is desirable, the "how to" of creative recombination becomes the next imperative. Abrahamson divides potential recombinants into five categories: people, networks, culture, processes and structure. He then addresses each of those elements individually,

often dividing them into several subparts. Throughout, the strategy remains the same: find the strength in each category and look for opportunities to be addressed by those strengths.

Abrahamson peppers his discussion with intriguing examples for each of the five categories. When he urges redeploying people, rather than downsizing, he suggests taking an inventory of an employee's unused skills. To illustrate, he notes that Southwest Airlines tends to hire people with teaching and social work backgrounds for flight attendants. People skills are absolutely essential to a consumer-oriented company. "Skills, such as handing out peanuts, are not." His discussion reminded me of how many legal services programs have "recombined" experienced support staff into trained paralegals, or generalist attorneys into unit specialists.

In discussing the culture category, Abrahamson advocates reviving an organization's values, rather than reinventing them. He cites the example of Mercedes-Benz. The early days of Mercedes-Benz were intertwined with automobile racing history. In the mid '50s, a tragic accident involving a Mercedes race car at Le Mans killed 83 people and injured more than 200. In the aftermath, Mercedes stopped racing for two decades. Inexorably, its car line drifted from sports cars to "geriatric-conservative" sedans. To survive in the future, Mercedes needed to develop a strategy for attracting newer, younger, more prosperous consumers. Obtaining Mercedes employee "buy-in" to this strategy appealing to the new consumers was fairly painless because the company's latent values were simply dormant. Reviving its historical values required no cultural revolution within the company.

The Mercedes example reminded me of legal services programs which used the same strategy. In the mid-90s, shrinking federal funding necessitated triaging the increasing number of applicants for assistance. Programs examined their organization's culture and determined to return to their roots. These programs reexamined what it was they did best and developed approaches to enhance those core values.

If there is a fault in *Change Without Pain*, it is in Abrahamson's use of charts and graphs. Many of us in the nationwide legal services community have experienced the immediately enlightening and fundamentally helpful charts of Ada Shen Jaffe, the former director of the Columbia Legal Services. Ada's charts were famous for providing insight into complex social, economic and political issues facing legal services programs. Abrahamson's charts, on the other hand, are frequently confusing, often ineffective and even distracting. Perhaps they may have more meaning to a reader with a corporate background. Or maybe, some people are simply not good at charts. I would suggest spending little time on them.

If you need no convincing that change without pain is a better option and all you need is a crash course, peruse Abrahamson's introduction and the helpful tips chapter: *Becoming a Better Recombiner*. For leaders who believe cleaning house is required for good management, *Change Without Pain* is a must read. For those who believe there must be a better way, Abrahamson's book is a refreshing affirmation. Either way, you will like this book.

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