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LEAD 638
Reflection on Change Theories

The case that I chose for this change reflection is an international project of TWICE. TWICE (Two Way Interactive Connections in Education), is Michigan's K12 videoconferencing organization. TWICE began in 2001, and in 2002 Sue Porter and I, the founders of TWICE, began a project called Read Across America. The project is a celebration of Dr. Seuss' birthday and we match classes with each other to connect via videoconferencing and share a celebration of reading. In 2002 we had 200 classes participate, and since then, almost every year 200-300 more classes have participated. This growth precipitated three major changes in how we run the project. We added a procedure to verify equipment to improve the way that classes were matched with each other. We sought corporate sponsorship to make the project sustainable, and finally, we began funding the development of a website to manage the registration and matching of participants. The Beer (1988) model of change can be applied to each of these scenarios.

Change to Verification of Equipment

The first major change occurred in 2005. Before 2005, we trusted people to enter correct information about their equipment. Most everyone was using ISDN connections. However, we had a few cases where people registered and didn't have videoconferencing equipment. This meant that classes were matched with each other and then disappointed because the connection didn't work. In addition, as schools began switching to IP based videoconferencing in 2004 and 2005, we ran into a new problem. Some schools could

only dial out to other locations. They could not receive a call. If we matched two classes that could only dial out, they could not connect to each other. This scenario represents the D or **dissatisfaction** component of Beer's model. The dissatisfaction with the status quo was rising fast, and threatening the success of the project.

The **model** (M) for change that I proposed was that we implement a new verification process. This process would require everyone to complete a test call with us before they could register for Read Across America. The first year we had a fairly rough **process** (P). Our registrations dropped by 200 from the year before because people missed the verification deadline. They didn't realize the new process. Many schools couldn't participate that year. In addition, the first year of verification was heavy with labor for TWICE board members who did the verification test calls. It was obvious that verification wasn't sustainable with that method. The **resistance** (R) came from the board members and from the schools that didn't realize the new procedures and therefore missed out. However, this resistance was overcome in the second year of verification (2006). We began building a team of TWICE Verification Partners across the country. We especially targeted high participation states to find a verification partner to bear the load of verifications for their area. The amount of **change** (C) was appropriate for the challenge. It basically solved our problem of equipment incompatibilities, and built a larger team to support the continued growth of 200-300 new classes participating each year.

Change to Corporate Sponsorship

Through 2006, Read Across America was coordinated by one of four board members who understood the process and traded off coordinating each year. The

challenge of matching classes by hand was extreme, and many extra hours of labor were contributed during work time, as well as off work time. This meant that the board member who was responsible for Read Across America put in an extraordinarily larger amount of time supporting the organization than the other members of the board. In 2006, this challenge came to a breaking point. That year, I coordinated Read Across America, and we had 1000 classes participate. In January I spent three full weeks of work time matching the classes. I found myself making errors, and it was clear that this method was no longer sustainable. I told the board that the project either needed to be shut down or a source of funding should be acquired so that we could pay someone to coordinate it. In this case, the **dissatisfaction** (D) came mainly from me. There was some dissatisfaction at the slowness of receiving matches, but the participants in the project, the followers, were generally happy with the project and wanted it to continue. This included the board members whose schools regularly participate in the project.

The **model** for change (M) included scanning the environment for a potential sponsor, casting a vision for paying a coordinator, setting a goal of securing funding and finding a coordinator, and finally identifying needed system changes. The board initially sent interest letters to both major manufacturers of videoconferencing equipment, Tandberg and Polycom. After a few months of hearing nothing, in a conversation with the education director at Polycom, interest was raised. The board approved the vision and sponsor and we worked out the details of the contract. In addition, we adjusted the TWICE Projects Committee structure so that the chair of the committee was not the same person responsible for Read Across America. Now we had a chair of the projects committee responsible for Read Across America as well as the other projects of TWICE,

a main TWICE coordinator of Read Across America who would work closely with the paid coordinator of Read Across America. The paid coordinator would bear the brunt of the daily communication and coordination of the project. The **process** (P) of implementing this change went very smoothly. A TWICE board member who had coordinating the project in the past was retiring and willing to accept the position. There was very little resistance (R) to the change because everyone knew it was necessary to the success of the project. Because the project is TWICE's signature event, everyone on the board was willing to support the necessary steps to create a sustainable structure. Again, the **change** (C) was appropriate and smooth.

Change to Database Driven Matching Process

The final change was a switch from matching partners by hand to using a web database to match the partners. This change was not smooth; in fact it was very challenging. The **dissatisfaction** (D) started with me again, when I said to the board that we couldn't match the classes by hand anymore. The **model** (M) for change was to hire someone to write a database that would manage the registration and matching for Read Around the Planet. However, in this change, the **process** (P) was seriously lacking. The change plan included a sequence of events, key deliverables and timelines; however they were unrealistic and not well defined. This meant that the programmer was rarely able to deliver what we needed on time. The responsible parties were just me and the programmer, so additional perspectives which could have brought better implementation were missing. The feedback mechanisms were that the participants of the project emailed the coordinators and we were overwhelmed with frustrated emails. This meant that the **resistance** (R) was very high in this change process. The participants were frustrated, and

some of them dropped out of the project due to the difficulty of actually participating. While the coordinators exhibited patience and attempted to help the participants set realistic expectations for getting through the bumps of the project, there was still a large amount of frustration on all sides. Amazingly, even though this **change** (C) was incredibly frustrating for everyone involved, we still saw the 200-300 class increase in participation that we had the previous years.

As a side note, the year between 2006 and 2007 also included a change of name for the project. In 2006 we piloted Read Across America with partners in Alberta and the United Kingdom. Their participation made it clear that another name was necessary, so the project is now called Read Around the Planet to be inclusive of our international friends.

In early 2007, Polycom approached me with another project idea, that of a directory of people who could participate in collaborative projects. In the midst of Read Around the Planet problems, I saw an opportunity to gain sustained funding for the database development, build on the Read Around the Planet project, and find a new programmer. We applied the **process** (P) lessons from the previous difficult change, and created a subcommittee to oversee the programmers work. We were then able to create much more appropriate and realistic timelines and key deliverables. We implemented a blog to communicate with the participants, and this allowed us to keep the participants apprised of changes to the procedures as we continued development. While the Read Around the Planet project in 2008 was not entirely smooth, we were able to address many of the problems from the year before and participation jumped by 400 classes. It seems now the project has become much more sustainable, entrenched, and appropriately

supported. Certainly there will be additional growth challenges in the future. We expect over 2000 classes for the 2009 project. However, the change processes that we have put in place for support of this project seem to place it on solid footing for future growth.

References

Beer, M. (1988). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing Division.