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## *Dissemination in a Time of Great Change*

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Change is the point of all strategies for information dissemination and utilization. Research findings, successful community programs, and other sources of innovation have impact only by changing the way things are that is, by stimulating creation of new or improved programs, policies, or practices.

But how are these strategies faring at century's end, when, as Peter Vaill (1989) so famously put it, "we're all living in permanent white water"(p. 1)? How do dissemination strategies need to be reshaped to be most effective during a time of great change?

As we end the 1990s, human history is at a crossroads we have never exactly faced before (Drucker 1994). We are at the end of a decade, the end of a century, the end of a millennium, the end of a zodiacal age of about two thousand years, and the end of a "yin-yang" energy cycle of about five thousand years (Vash 1995). Around the world there are extraordinary changes:

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- the end of communism as a political system, and the end of socialism as an economic system;
- the globalization of economic activity;
- the increasingly central importance of information technology in all areas of life;
- the end of the employment contract, and many other changes in the nature of work; and
- increasing influence of environmental issues on economic and lifestyle decisions.

In short, "as citizens of the 20th century, we have witnessed more change in our daily existence and in our environment than anyone else who ever walked the planet" (Cascio 1995), in at least three related ways.

First, the pace of change is increasing. Peter Drucker (1994), for instance, predicts that most of the jobs people will hold after the turn of the century haven't been conceptualized yet and depend on technology not invented yet. Change also often "sneaks up on us" without our realizing its profound implications; for example, there are now more English speakers in China than in the United States, forcing businesses to redefine markets just as they did with the emergence of the "universal teenager."

Second, an increasing amount of change involves both destabilization and diminishing resources. Two examples: 850 of the Fortune 1,000 corporations have downsized in the last three years, and few public organizations remain unaffected by repeated cycles of budget cuts and decreasing stability, such as staff layoffs even for civil servants and tenured academic faculty.

Third, the nature of change itself is changing. Tom Peters, in *Thriving on Chaos* (1987), talks about a paradigm shift not just from an old to a new set of rules, but to a world in which at least some rules are changing all the time, and in increasingly unpredictable ways. Hazel Henderson, the economic futurist, says that the fundamental logic error of our times is assuming that anything will ever go back to the way it was (quoted in Backer 1993, 3).

Yet our skills for surviving and thriving in the face of change are mostly based on a linear, slow-change and return to equilibrium model of the world. We want to be able to tweak the system, maybe take our medicine of sacrifice and hard work, and then have things go back to the way they were. As recently as the 1950s, the models used by economists set annual growth in the Gross National Product as a fixed number! Problem solving based on such outdated and inaccurate models is not likely to be effective in the currently rapidly shifting environment. Twenty years ago, management science literature was filled with references to "planned change," but now the best we can do is

somehow to manage all the change thrust upon us by this increasingly chaotic environment.

In his book *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, Peter Drucker (1995) asserts that "information is replacing authority" as the key to effective management of all types of organizations and that "power comes from transmitting information to make it productive, not from hiding it." Innovation production is constant in today's world: more innovative programs and products, of a more sophisticated nature, are emerging constantly. Moreover, advances in information technology make sharing of what's new easier and faster than ever before.

All of this would seem to make strategies for dissemination and utilization more important than ever before—a lifeline to the new tools we will need to survive and thrive into the twenty-first century. But new challenges are also arising that can compromise the effectiveness of the information dissemination and utilization strategies developed over the last seventy-five years (Backer, David, and Soucy 1995; Rogers 1995).

*Information access.* Poor and rural populations over the world have limited access to the information and technology that can improve their lives. They cannot afford to go to school or buy a computer. And even in many U.S. nonprofit and government agencies there are access problems, for example, computers insufficiently powerful to download complex documents, especially those with graphics. During recent work for a large U.S. federal agency, I asked how many of the thirty senior managers in the room could readily download documents from their own office computers. Only a handful responded yes. Dissemination strategies must take account of inequities in access and develop alternative delivery methods to reach those lacking it.

*Information overload.* For the rest of the developed world, however, the problem is not access to information, but avoiding drowning in too much of it. Information overload not only reduces efficiency, it cramps creativity and can compromise individual or community health. "Information fatigue syndrome" is now the subject of health and behavioral research, and one of its prime causal agents is the much-ballyhooed Internet (Rosen and Weil 1997; Shenk 1997). In designing dissemination approaches, we must ask ourselves: Who will get our information without wanting it, and to what extent are we (however unintentionally) contributing to "information smog"?

*Cumulative stress of change.* Each of the many changes all of us encounter every day brings with it some stress, which all adds up. Thus, any dissemi-

nation strategy must be sensitive to the larger context: how much other change is going on in people's lives at the time we're asking them to consider and use new information? Do we need to adjust our timing, or even make more humble our goals, in order not to add unreasonably to the stress load of people already coping with monstrous amounts of change?

*Need for partnerships.* The complexities of change today require partnerships between people, organizations, and communities to create effective dissemination systems. So much information is needed by so many that only joint efforts can mobilize the needed resources, often by taking advantage of naturally occurring opportunities (one group's work can also support another's information dissemination, without much added cost to either). Yet despite the public push for partnerships everywhere—from the White House, to the corporate boardroom, to the grassroots community gathering—many partnerships fail. There is good science available on how to create and sustain partnerships, but few use it (Center for Improving Mental Health Systems 1995). How can we employ dissemination strategies creatively to get "best practices" about partnership out in the public, private, and government sectors? The author is currently conducting a study for a California foundation about the successes and challenges of interethnic coalitions throughout the state—community groups which are vitally needed in the melting pot that is California. How can the results of such research be used to improve partnerships that support dissemination activities?

*Role of philanthropy.* In the United States and Canada, foundations are playing an ever more important part in creating change, both through the grants they give and through their ability to convene the community and provide leadership on the challenges of change. As the extraordinary \$10 trillion intergenerational transfer of wealth continues, foundations will become even more important in providing "society's risk capital," and also in helping to build the capacity of nonprofits and grassroots community organizations. Foundations are increasingly learning to use dissemination strategies in their work (Backer 1995). How can their involvement in dissemination be increased?

*Need for infrastructure.* Ever since the beginning of the Reagan administration, the infrastructure for dissemination has been neglected. With respect to health, education, and social services for our most vulnerable populations, this has severely limited the effectiveness of dissemination strategies, as Lisbeth Schorr (1997) makes clear in her book *Common Purpose*:

There has been a widespread reluctance to aggressively assemble, analyze and disseminate what is, in fact, known. . . . Most wasteful of all has been the absence of well-funded, concerted attempts to learn systematically from current experience and to disseminate that learning to those responsible for community-change initiatives, to those who make relevant policy in the private and public sector, and to the general public. (P. 370)

How can we help build or rebuild the dissemination infrastructure that is even more needed in this time of great change?

The road ahead is a hard one. A recent *Fortune* essay says that in a world of rapid and discontinuous change, the most valuable quality a manager can have is the willingness to make large, painful decisions that drive change (Colvin 1997). In the end, the dissemination strategies that will work the best in a time of great change need to concentrate on what *hasn't* changed—*human nature*. Our psychological responses to change or the anticipation of it have not altered significantly in thousands of years. Dealing sensitively with fears, resistances, and anxieties, and building felt reward and involvement in the change process, these methods are still the royal road to effective dissemination and utilization of information that creates change (Backer 1994).

Taking human nature into full, vibrant account in this time of great change is the most urgent challenge ahead for the field of information dissemination and utilization.

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