



## CHAPTER 6

# Change

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*Blessed are the flexible for they will not allow  
themselves to become bent out of shape!*

—ROBERT LUDLUM

Change is the hallmark of the social services sector. Every social services-sector organization exists because something in society needed to change. In order to enjoy working in this sector and be effective in it, you must be able to live with, respond to, and even generate change at any given time.

To give an example, in 2017 the streets of Puerto Rico were deluged by wind and rain as the island was hit by category 4 storm Maria. My colleagues tell me that not just the streets but the street signs were destroyed by the storm, forcing them to locate structures by longitude and latitude coordinates. Power lines were disabled, making generators the only source of electricity for cooling medications and satellite telephones the only option for communication within and outside of the island. These conditions, combined with limited drinking water, fatalities, and flattened structures, compro-

mised access to healthcare. And yet, despite this devastation and the changes it demanded in how to deliver healthcare, community health centers were expected to keep meeting the needs of patients.

In the Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) sector of health, where I work, we are required to change the way we provide medical services in response to any kind of disaster. In the aftermath of a hurricane, that means filling prescriptions, providing diabetic testing strips, and checking on the well-being of newborns out in neighborhoods when community members can't find their way to our doors. The ability to adapt to the situation, no matter how disastrous or demanding, is a foundation of organizations that work in the social services sector.

Social services organizations are often founded in response to broad societal needs for change. In 1912, women were expected to follow strict social guidelines and stay within narrowly defined groups,

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limiting their options and their power. In response to this, Juliette Gordon Low gathered eighteen girls in her home with the purpose of changing the way they looked at the world, fostering the belief that they could do anything they put their minds to. With presidential funding and recognition, those “Girl Scouts” launched a nationwide and eventually global

movement to emphasize in the lives of young girls qualities such as inclusion, self-reliance, love of the outdoors, and service to society.

Because of the work of the Girl Scouts and other self-empowering organizations, girls are no longer held to strict paths in life.

However, there is still an achievement gap for girls and women in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math. In response to this, today's Girl Scout programs have an increasing number of badges for achievement in these areas, along with particular programs that encourage girls to embrace and master computer science. Even this well-established, 110-year-old organization is still evolving and responding to the need for change!

## Getting More Comfortable with Change

Becoming comfortable with ongoing change is an important self-management process. Continual change equates to continual motion. The following steps can ease the transition that change requires:

**Be aware of timing.** According to Dr. Katy Milkman, the author of *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*, we are wired to embrace change more readily during times that already feel like a new beginning. This can be the start of a new year, or even of a month or a week, or during a celebration that we associate with new beginnings, such as a birthday, graduation, wedding, etc. Whenever the beginning of a change is something you can control (and, admittedly, often it isn't), set those new goals, launch that pilot project, shift the way you're doing things at a time that feels like it's ripe for a fresh start. Doing this makes it easier for your mind to accept—perhaps even celebrate—the change, instead of resisting it.

**Build in default behaviors.** If you take choice out of the equation and achieve a change through required actions, you'll be able to make that change more quickly. For example, in order to increase staff interaction with its clients, one social services organization disabled the side door for staff entry and exit. This required staff members to enter and exit the building from the front, where the organization's clients

waited for and accessed services. This forced the staff to encounter and greet their clients—and seeing staff members arriving on time to help them also amplified for clients the message that “we are all in this together.” All this was achieved simply by taking away the choice of which door the staff used! Another example is that the supplemental food benefits given through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program help clients change their eating habits. Participants can buy fresh, loose, prepackaged, cut or whole fruits and vegetables, but the benefit does not cover those same items if they are mixed with dips, sauces or dressings, which make them more fattening and less healthy. These exclusions free the clients from having to agonize over the choice and accelerates their shift to nutritious meals.

**List barriers to change, and identify specific strategies to overcome them.** This gives you a positive mindset toward change because you establish clear ways to deal with the difficulties it entails. For example, if your social services organization has to move to a new location, one of the barriers to making this change successful might be the added distance that clients must travel to get to your services. One strategy to deal with that would be finding a location on a bus route or securing grant funds to offer transportation to the new location through ride services.

**Hold yourself accountable.** It’s easy to put the burden for achieving change on an accountability partner or on your boss. This goes back to what I said in chapter 2 about needing an owner-versus-renter mentality in the social services sector. You must act like an owner, and hold yourself accountable, by linking what you do or don’t do to propel change to the *cost* of keeping things the way they are. You also need to be conscious of the consequences of a missed step in any change activity you undertake. For example, all grants that support my organization come with requirements, and I know that if

I fail to meet one of those grant requirements, ongoing funding for the organization will be put in jeopardy. Considering the seriousness of the consequences that might occur if you *don’t* make a necessary change will help motivate you to embrace that change, or at least tolerate it, for the greater good.

**Consult with peers who are dealing with change.** Whatever change you need to make, it’s likely that some other individual or organization in the social services sector has already made a similar change or is working on making that change. Talk with people from those organizations to find out what kind of problems they’ve run into and how they dealt with them. When you interact with peers facing similar issues, you can learn from what they’ve done and duplicate or adapt their tactics to make your change process successful, as well as gain encouragement from the fact that they made the change successfully.

## Setting Boundaries

Because working in the social services sector requires the daily navigation of competing priorities, setting your boundaries is important. You need boundaries, structure, and order to keep yourself moving through the steps required to deal with change. Start with outlining what your responsibilities are and clarifying what tasks are not your concern. Think of this as establishing your “lane” in the race toward change. Once you establish your own boundaries, it has to become a two-way street: those around you must respect your boundaries, and you must respect theirs.

The need for firm boundary setting can be seen during periods of significant team-member change through turnover. During this period of instability, I have seen gossip flourish about people who

were leaving the organization and people who were joining it. These untrue conversations are distracting and unproductive, so to change the way team members connected conversationally throughout the day, team members were asked to respect the following boundaries:

- Do not discuss personal information about other people.
- If you mention a current staff member in an email, a team message, or a text, you must copy them on the communication.
- If you speak about a staff member's personal business or work performance, that person must be part of the conversation.
- Find ways as a team to lift each other up and connect individually or in a group around our mission or goals.
- When someone comes to you with gossip, don't respond to the gossip, and quickly change the subject.

The absence of order and structure is a breeding ground for chaos. To use a very simple example, if you are trying to hand out box lunches during a community outreach session, failure to form lines, have enough people to hand out the boxes, and to note the food contents on each box could turn a good deed into a confusing, negative experience for the participants.

## Making Change Effective

Whether it's individual or organizational, for change to happen with a minimum of disruption, your attitude has to be calibrated in the following ways:

- Be open to new things, and remain flexible.
- Be patient. Change does not happen instantaneously.

- Try another approach if something doesn't work, instead of deciding that the change is bad or can't happen. It may be a cliché, but it actually works in real life: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."
- Celebrate wins along the way toward making the change. A good short-term win that deserves celebration has three characteristics: it is visible, unambiguous, and clearly related to the change effort the individual or organization is undertaking. For example, if you were introducing a new program to educate teens about building wealth, celebratory milestones might include things such as creating a trending hashtag associated with the initiative, the opening of new saving accounts by the participants, and their attendance at the first financial education session. All the steps along the way are what build up to the change that a program wishes to make.

Lasting change requires that you go deep, not broad, in order to overcome the three obstacles that often block or destroy change initiatives: stress, isolation, and lack of resolve.

**Stress.** Uncertainty about the effectiveness of change and the outcomes it will produce are the biggest sources of stress during a change initiative in the social services sector. To reduce it, focus on the things that are within your control, even if it's something as simple as starting the day with your favorite beverage. Create routines that provide a soothing structure

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to your days and weeks as you deal with the inevitable stressors that change brings.

**Isolation.** It is easy to feel alone and discouraged when you are tackling problems that have gotten the best of your social services organization or the populations you serve. There will be periods where it feels like everyone is busy and behind, leaving them no time to give you and making you feel alone. Reject that message. You are not alone. Reach up, reach over, or reach down to identify *someone* for a brief connection that will help buoy you up. Go to someone you trust who is supportive, or find that person where you work who can always reframe things in a positive way. It can be as simple as striking up a conversation in the hall with someone who is also dealing with the change that's happening. Shared burdens are lighter.

**Lack of Resolve.** When change is new or progress toward it is slow, you will be tempted to abandon the new course. Stick with it. Reach for resilience, willpower, and resolve to stay the course.

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Now that you understand the importance of the Five Cs—Care, Community, Collaboration, Can Do, and Change—it's time to delve deeper into the landscape of the social services sector. We will explore the lay of the land, so you know how to negotiate your environment as your career progresses.

## Action Steps

**Step One:** *Increase your comfort with change.*

Think about a change that is about to launch or needs to take place. Find the place when change is already built in and make that the start time.

**Step Two:** *Leverage your relationships to support your change effort.*

Identify the relationships that are most important to cultivate the change.

**Step Three:** *Identify short-term wins that you will celebrate along the way.*

(A good short-term win has three characteristics; it is visible, unambiguous, and clearly related to the change effort.)