I've been leading change interventions in large organizations for over four decades. I've made some mistakes and experienced a lot of success, both have contributed to my learning. This post includes fifteen thoughts that popped into my head as I was writing an article on Process Consulting. I'm sure you have learned many of these lessons yourself. I'm also confident that there are some that may be new, or concepts presented from a different perspective.

Fifteen Things I've Learned Working in Organizations

1. **The sensation of stability is created by constant change and adaptation.** Things are constantly changing. Homeostasis refers to an organism's ability to establish and maintain a state of stability, body temperature, for example. The organism does this by making constant adjustments within its body or extracorporeal adjustments to its external environment. *It is a bit of a paradox that constant changes creates the sensation of stability.*

2. **Change in the environment is constant.** Even when you sleep, your body is working autonomically to maintain homeostasis. On the weekends when a company is closed, and all the halls are empty, external forces in the environment are occurring that impact it.

3. **Organizations are very much like organisms** (see: http://tinyurl.com/jp3l6ct). Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the concept of an "open systems approach to organizations." His thesis was that since organizations are "open" to their environment, they must adjust to it to survive. And, like an organism, organizations have a myriad of internal interactions and forces in motion to maintain stability or homeostasis.

4. **People seek to maintain equilibrium (a constant, predictable state).** A paradigm is a mental model or set of beliefs that people hold based upon experience. When experience or knowledge of something is lacking, people attempt to mold what is new with existing beliefs. Beliefs that fit one's paradigms are comforting and easily accepted. Situations, facts, information that are contrary to existing beliefs are uncomfortable, difficult to reconcile, and cast aside for those that fit within existing paradigms. Sometimes, the strength of a given belief is so ingrained that alternatives are invisible, ignored, or railed against.

5. **Beliefs and attitudes are very, very difficult to change.** In the OD world, deep rooted processes and beliefs are called "deep structure." The longer beliefs are held, the more comforting and immutable they become. Even irrefutable evidence contrary to a held belief is not likely to change one's thinking or attitude. Think of Galileo… He provided demonstrable proof that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system. And for that heresy, he was brought before the Inquisition and sentenced to life imprisonment. Contemporary United States history provides another example. Many supporters of the losing candidate of the 2020 presidential election believe that the election results weren't

true. They fervently believe the election was stolen and that their candidate won. Despite proof to the contrary, the believers remain convinced of their position.

6. **Things have to make sense.** People have a difficult time with things that don't fit into their paradigms or mental models. These things do not make sense. They are nonsense. The greater the variance from existing beliefs, the more nonsensical the idea. No one takes nonsense, nor those who espouse it, seriously.

7. **Most people prefer predictability and consistency to the unknown.** Predictability and consistency provide a sense of security. A great deal of effort is expended by organizations and individuals to try to establish predictability. Change disrupts predictability and consistency, opening the door to unknown consequences. The unknown generates discomfort. Discomfort can lead to fear which can undermine change efforts.

8. **Change, especially unanticipated or undesired change, generates fear.** People react to fear from the amygdala, a primitive part of the limbic system of the brain. The typical fear response is "fight or flight." The greater the perceived change, the greater the urge to resist it or "fight" it. The response to minor change is to try to ignore it (flight).

9. **People seek to avoid discomfort and tend to dislike those whose beliefs are inconsistent with their own.** People who share beliefs tend to stick with one another and castigate or vilify those who disagree with them. This is especially true when differences are perceived to be great.

10. **If something is wrong, there is probably a legitimate reason for it being wrong.** Most employees do not go to work with the idea of sabotaging the organization. Most want to do a good job. There are those who are marginalized who may think like that, but they are the rare exception (unless the organization is really messed up - a ship's mutiny for example). When a problem surfaces, start with what caused the situation, not why or who.

11. **Most opposition to change is covert.** People may feel that it is unsafe for them to express their opinions, so they hide them to protect themselves from negative reactions. If they hear others express feelings similar to theirs, they may share them. But they must feel it is safe to do so. It is the consultant's job to minimize fear and establish trust, boundaries, support to create psychological safe spaces. On the other hand, there are some things that are best kept covert. One has to consider the consequences, intended or unintended of sharing what is covert.

12. **There are two sides of work, what the book says and what is actually done.** The phrase, *"that's what the book says, but this is what we really do"* is so common as to be trite. People find and take shortcuts that may not be consistent with policies or procedures. This phenomenon exists at every level. Think of these "behind the back" fixes as containing at least a modicum of validity. Explore them and their validity before criticizing them.

13. **What works in one part of an organization, may or may not work in another.** Except for highly structured jobs (like on assembly lines) people, themselves, determine what gets done and how it is done. They perform their work idiosyncratically, with their own unique approaches. People like that kind of autonomy and dislike micromanagement. Most managers have heavy workloads that prevent them from closely observing what their people do, anyway. Consequently, employees do things in their own ways. And these ways vary from department to department, section to section, division to division, etc.

14. **There will be units and individuals within an organization that do not want to change, regardless of any benefits to them or the organization for doing so.** People like doing things the way they've always done them. They will make changes if the change makes sense (fits within their paradigms).

15. **Seek first to understand why things are the way they are before making any judgments.** Seek to understand the feelings, beliefs, and actions of the people involved with the problem as well as the problem itself. Work from the perspective that the people are trying to do a good job and that there is a valid reason for them to do things the way they do.