How Tall is Too Tall? Using Jenga to Understand Organizational Change

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Recommended Citation
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In this session I present a way to conceptualize a complex process...organizational change. Organizational change is inevitable as well as continuous. This dynamic process is important to leadership to keep the organization effective and alive. After reviewing change literature and various models in my OLS 486 Leadership and the Management of Change course I realized it is difficult to find that one magical model that is useful in guiding leaders to effective decision making during transitions. I chose to use a game as a metaphor to represent change because it is engaging and easy to understand as well as open and flexible to an organizational purpose. I propose that change is like a game played with blocks...equal sized blocks put together. The change can fall at any time if any one piece fails. Size and attributes can be similar, but there are pieces that need to be played or placed early in the game. If these are pulled out (not implemented well), the entire structure will fail. No one element automatically comes first; however, there are some pieces that need to be stabilized from the beginning. Those placed on the bottom through the change process will hold or carry the organization. All players (stakeholders, employees, community groups, and competitors) need to know what the elements are and how they are related.

As in the stacking blocks game Jenga, all change components are interactive but not equally necessary for successful transitions. Importance takes on a new meaning in this metaphor. A tower is a good image, not a stabilized structure; but one that is always evolving, changing, and taking a different shape. In fact, the object of this game, like the object of organizational change, is to move the pieces and grow with the structure.

*Nick Fleek, Brenda Goodrich, and myself created an earlier version of this model as a project in OLS 486 Leadership and the Management of Change.