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# “A disruptor; A change agent?”

-Joshua O. A



**D**isruption!

A word with much negative connotation yet in recent times has

found its way in main stream discussions as being the way to untold heights. It seems to be the buzz word everyone is talking about even in businesses. According to the Cambridge dictionary, it is “an *interruption* in the usual way that a system, process, or event works”. This indicates that, disruption can either be pulsating interruption or continuous interruption. Whether an interruption can bring a change or not is an arguable quest which this article seeks to unfold.

Meanwhile, disruption can take place anywhere at any time. However, it can also be spontaneous or a well-thought-out plan. Arguably in effect, the underlining thought of change management itself can be considered as being borne out of a well-thought-out disruption. Change is the encapsulation for

disruption. That being said, at the heart of change is the view of interrupting what the norm is to bring in a new desired state. As this journey unfolds, more light is thrown on this in the developing points.

## Concept

Conceptually, disruption is an everyday matter. Schreiber (2016), posits that as disruption becomes an everyday occurrence, we explore its primary *causes* and the megatrends that are shaping our future. To think of it in this light, gives way to consider disruption as something that has always been with us. If so, then how come we are now being conscious of it? I will say, its presence with us and its perception in the past has not been a plausible matter. Haven’t said this, one can trace in the history of man’s development, that it has always been the well-thought-out disruption that is accepted, leaving the spontaneous ones because they do not meet set criteria for development. Oh! Ok, then it forces anyone who has an interrupt idea to be in line and wait till their turn before the idea comes out. This is the main reason why the thought of disruption seems to be new with us now. Because it was associated



with something negative. A typical example of such is the great scientist Nikola Tesla. He was a disruptor. But of course, if there are no regulations too, then the more the disruptions the more society's entropy increase.

Therefore, based on the definition, the concept of disruption is that whenever there is a change to the norm as we know it to be, that is disruption. It can be managed or not. Arguably, if well managed, it is termed as change management, a formal word that encapsulates disruption. If not managed, it can become just another idea that can fall into the "idea black hole<sup>1</sup>".

However, in recent times, it seems that such ideas which fell into the black hole, are resurfacing due to the needs of the many that calls for it. That being said, since there are not many formal ways to deal with them, they end up taking the lead in bringing us into what we call the future. It is one such idea that has made it possible for this article to be in the lime light. This is purely based on personal observations and considerations.

## Application

Disruption applied brings in change. Fundamentally, it changes the way things work and even the world at large. When applied, businesses, governments and

individuals respond to the shifting that would have seemed unimaginable even a few years ago.

It is easy to identify the transformation that comes along with interruptions, but it is difficult to ascertain that this in effect is disruption applied. One can conclude that, applied disruption has many names like the tentacles of an octopus. Analogically, it is a vine with many branches growing rapidly. Just as you cannot separate the vine from its branches, because they are the same, so is disruption and its applications. The main vine is disruption and the branches are applied disruption.

Furthermore, when applied, disruption is unrelenting and can leave today's decision makers and leaders grappling with tremendous uncertainties and a broad array of challenges. Responding to disruption has therefore become a central issue for incumbent organizations everywhere (Schreiber, 2016). In its application, there are ripple effects that can last centuries. That which started as a small bucket of water has now become a tsunami. Many are still not willing to respond to these disruptions happening around, and it's sad to say that when there is a tsunami, its either you get to ride that wave, or you will be taken down by it and go on extinct.

Consider the above position and let's apply this to the people who bring in these disruptions. From the stand point of change management, a change agent is one

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<sup>1</sup> Idea black hole behaves in a way to sink any idea that comes up in time. In this regard, it can be a system that crushes ideas in a cynical manner.



or an entity that brings in change, by facilitating, coordinating and stimulating the change effort. A disruptor on the other hand, arguably is one or an entity that can take advantage of the capabilities that exists in one form or another to create a fundamental shift either where they are or in another jurisdiction. Therefore, to think of disruption as being solely a technological innovation is inadequate in this sense. It is however much broader than just technological innovations. In effect, the disruptor brings in a shift from one state to another just as the change agent does.

Consequently, it is not wrong to therefore say that a disruptor is a change agent. In any aspect this is turned, it fits well. The minor shifts that are created becomes the ultimate goal of the change that needs to happen. Just like enzymes, disruptors just hasten the process and they are not bound by time, their effect can traverse time even though they themselves may not exist anymore due to one reason or another. Since change encapsulates disruption, it is safe to say that real change agents are disruptors in many respects.

On the other hand, it cannot be said that a change agent is a disruptor. Because it is possible to have a change agent who does not change themselves. They can facilitate, stimulate and coordinate the efforts but they themselves do not change as opposed to a disruptor who themselves are the change they want to make and embodies the change they envisage.

## Cases

### AITI borstal center

On the eve of August 2008, I started my journey with this fine institution where ideas were floating in the air everyday about new things. Critics were raised who always challenged the status quo. They pushed the limits of the institution and by so doing every person who came through became a gem worth chasing for.

When I became part of this community, I will say I got infected by this in a positive way, such that I will always want to learn something new every day. This quest led to one of the things that will cause me to be retained after my 9months period of probation with them. Incredibly, it was not surprising to everyone because, they realized that my contributions to the setup was always one that made them consider things in different ways they've never thought of before.

Meanwhile, it was this same thing that will get me out of this institution. Funny how it all plays out. One regime seemed to like the thought of disruptors around who make the so-called stability of the system questionable, yet another does not tolerate that at all. To make this simple, I will break it into three phases of my experience with this institution.

#### *Initial phase*

When ideas come from familiar faces, it is always welcomed and not much resistance is experienced. On the night of October 2008, I had stayed over with my senior colleagues at work to research into ideas



for our exhibition week. I chanced on this idea which was not so common. It was a bring and burn facility which was supposed to take away the idea of always downloading and burning ISOs for installations etc. Beknows to me, I was not so familiar with the whole concept, but I immediately shared it with my mentor, and he assimilated the idea and he asked that we try it because it was going to be one of its kind in the country. On the developer's site, countries have listed their names if they were successful with the installation. Our efforts yielded good results, with our background of systems, we created the country's version and that was used to shift the conversations at the exhibition.

#### *Development phase*

In the course of time, so many new ideas came across and we worked on them with the view of changing the face of the institution. We were met with a lot of resistance even from top management, since there was a change of leadership. In this plight, some of my colleagues left the institution and moved on to other areas. In a span of two years, we had lost about 5 core staff members and that created a dent on the institution. Even though, these core members were not around, their ideas were passed on to new staff who picked up from it and followed them. One such idea is the restructuring of the institution to meet changing needs. After a period, my breakthrough at the place made me not welcomed by even some old staff. They will subtly resist anything new to the

extent that we gradually became just like any other institution with routine doings and no growth.

#### *Concluding phase*

In time all the core members who left, had so much in common. That is the ability to disrupt the norm and hence were able to make strides that propelled the institution. Finally, it was left with about two core staff members who remained, and they remained because they just wanted to remain. In effect their impact was not felt within the company but outside where the disruption they caused had been applied. One such idea is the popular tech forum which happens every year among developers and entrepreneurs in the country that keeps breeding ideas for startups.

On one hand one could say that may be the center was not enough to hold the disruptors, so they ended up resurfacing at other places and applied their shifts. The ripple effect of their effort was immense.

Meanwhile, the funny part is that the institution ends up always needing these new shifts and running after these disruptors. In the end, they get led by these internal disruptors who were not fitting for the institution earlier and left, but now are at the frontier of affairs outside the center. This clearly shows how this matter of disruption is so much important. The trend is that, be it on a company scale or national scale, always those who do not ride along the wave of disruption are always left behind. It makes pioneers become followers. This makes them jittery



and begin to show by all means why the new idea will never work. It is not because the idea cannot work but that they sense being out of touch and hence their survival method is activated and expressed in this manner.

### **Labone advent**

This experience was one that broke me and yet did make me. Again, I break it into phases.

#### *Initial phase*

When I left the center, I had made contacts who among them was this ex-oracle guys with a friend from the UK. In the early days, we spent much time discussing our new ideas and how we intend to bring in the change. This was a to be a PPP<sup>2</sup>. I worked with people via the internet. One of such will later become a great help and another opportunity for my plight today. I worked day and night, developing things which were not in existence. Strange but yes, I did. My colleagues were at different time zones so while my ideas die, theirs were awakened. One of the team members was a doer, and his views always made it easy to see how feasible some ideas will be in real life. This helped to position us properly for our mission.

#### *Development phase*

During this period, I had enormous exposure all the way to the corridors of power in the country. As

simple as it may sound, it gave an idea of how leaders of this country think of new ideas. One common speaking from them was “so who do you want remove so we fix you?”. It was always on their lips.

Meanwhile, I got to see how resistance can have multiplying effect. There were three entities from the public side that formed this PPP in addition to my team.

Furthermore, the new idea was to change the face of driving in the country. However, the devastating resistance I experienced was within. My team members took the old way of doing new things. This was a resistance I had never seen before. It was so great it thwarted the entire idea the team was championing. We went on training drivers and preaching the new way to them in the old way. I spoke against this vehemently, but it seemed I was the wrong one then. This disrupting idea yielded results just for few years and the system became numb to its new ways, because it was no different from that which was in existence.

#### *Concluding phase*

The sad ending of this venture was that, the idea black hole got activated by the partners and this swallowed up the entity that was created and it became a simple department within one of the three public entities. It is not so simple to make impact with disruption. That was one of my first lessons I learnt. The idea that was

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<sup>2</sup> Public Private Partnership, normally a joint effort by governments and private sector to provide solutions for a country.



to be on the same level as MDA<sup>3</sup>s within the country became a simple department that was being controlled by one of the partners who became the sinking hole. One of the best lessons learnt was that, in the course of this, some of the new staff employed became disruptors themselves and took advantage of the situation and made a way out for themselves. Their way out was to change the management style which gave them room to diversify. I learnt that timing was all it needed to make impact.

However, disruption which is on a large scale always require proper thought through plan for this roll out. This leaves as with the concept of change management.

Undoubtedly, this case is a clear picture of how a change agent cannot be a disruptor but the reverse works. My team members were change agents, they facilitated all the efforts but they themselves were not the change they wanted to see. They did new things the old way hoping to effect change. It does not work.

*To be continued...*

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<sup>3</sup> Ministries Departments and Agencies