

The Virus Analogy

Jennifer Brice
Fuji Xerox
Australia

When managing any change process it is important to plan how you are going to strategically influence the people involved in the change. This is as important, if not more important, than deciding what needs to change. As always, this is possibly easier to articulate than to deploy.

The *Virus analogy or metaphor* is a useful framework to help people in organisations influence and accelerate the desired change. The principle is how you can *infect* as many people, as quickly as possible, so the change that is introduced is effective and sustainable.

The great storytellers are often those that use powerful imagery to provoke our imagination, and stimulate our curiosity so we continue to engage. I am not suggesting that the *Virus* analogy is a great story, however, it can be used as a powerful image that can provoke the listener to continue to engage. I start most of my discussions on this topic by saying, "Just imagine an organization being infected by a host of positive virulent *Viruses*." Curiosity is created as most people relate to *Viruses* as negative not positive. Consequently a window of opportunity is opened in the mind of the listener. This is an ideal position to commence the explanation of the analogy and give some tangible examples, of how it may be practically applied in the organisation.

Organizations-pyramids or Organisms?

Organizations in which we work are less like the pyramidal structures that we create through our organizational charts and our military hierarchies and are more like a community of cells on a petrie dish. (*For those unfamiliar with the term; Petrie dishes are the small glass dishes used in research laboratories.*)

Organisations can thus be compared to organisms. Within the community of cells, living within this sphere, there are factors that accelerate or decline the growth of the future organism that we are trying to create or recreate.

Within our community of cells on the petrie dish, it is important to identify the key players that influence the change. For the simplicity of this analogy I have identified five groups in this community.

Who are the Key Players?

Firstly *The Viruses* are highly infective and virulent and can bring about rapid change. However to sustain the change, that will create the metamorphism required, 30% of the cells need to be infected.

Therefore, if you had one hundred people in your organization you need to start calculating how you identify, influence and create at least thirty people who could be potential *Viruses*. If you had one thousand people it would be three hundred you needed to identify. Obviously the numbers do not need to be exact, rather it is a guide to help you gain a *critical mass* of like thinking people, which will help gain momentum and sustain the change. The questions you therefore need to ask are: How do you get the numbers and have you got enough to bring about the desired change?

There are normally some people in the organization that have a *viral tendency* for the particular change that is required. For example, the IT department may be enthusiastic if it is introducing a new improved computer system. *Viruses* normally "do what it takes" to bring about change and infect others along the way either knowingly or not. Helping understand the *Virus analo-*

gy and the power of strategic influencing using this model is an opportunity to accelerate the process. It is important when managing any change to follow some guiding principles. One such principle is *to tread the soft ground first*, go first where there is least resistance; otherwise the change may never occur or be too slow to be effective. Gaining and sustaining momentum is critical.

The Attack of the Antibodies

In any organism that has *Viruses*, there are also *Antibodies*. *The Antibodies*, in this analogy not only resist the change, they attack and undermine the *Viruses*. The attack of the *Antibodies* may be overt or covert or a combination of both strategies. You need to be mindful: if you have 10% of *Antibodies* the power of their impact will in most circumstances defeat the *Viruses* or put them into remission.

However, if you can convert an *Antibody*, particularly if they are in a powerful influencing position, into a *Virus* they are the most virulent *Viruses* of them all. For example, have you ever known a smoker who has converted to a non-smoker they often become the person who speaks out most about the hazards of smoking? As a part of your strategy of influencing you need to identify the key players who by their behaviour act as *Antibodies*, and understand why. You need to understand what is in it for them to change? A strategy then has to be identified on what options are available to influence them. It may be the critical mass of *Viruses* knocking on the door or the new criteria for the bonuses. *Therefore another guiding principle is while treading the soft ground, work on softening some targeted hard ground.*

As a part of your strategy it is always important to be realistic, there will always be *Antibodies* and there are always *Viruses*, in any given situation. This is healthy. Can you imagine a world where we all just agreed mindlessly? However, to bring about the required change it is about doing the numbers and achieving the critical mass of like thinking people. As I said at the beginning, you have to think as strategically about influencing the people involved, as you

do about deciding the direction of the business.

Not all the people in an organisation fall into the category of *Viruses* or *Antibodies*. I am sure if we wanted to explore the analogy further we could come up with many more. However, as I mentioned before, this is a simple framework to help people understand the key concept of influencing. Therefore, for the purpose of this exercise there are only three other categories I would like to explore to emphasise this point.

The Resisters

The next group are the *Resisters*. These are people that resist the change but do not undermine it. The key factor, unlike the *Antibodies*, is they don't undermine the change. They do not embrace it in their area; however they let others do as they wish. When thinking about how you may influence this group, it is important to consider timing. Is it appropriate to influence them? Where is your time best spent? You may want to create enough *Viruses*, that will do the work of influencing for you, and as a consequence, by osmosis the *Resisters* are influenced. Therefore you may choose to do nothing initially, just be aware of their position. This is a judgement call. *The guiding principle here is to identify where time is best spent to achieve the desired overall outcome.*

The Neutral Neutrophils

The next category, though there is no necessary defined order, are the *neutrophils*. These are the people who continue about their daily work without taking a position on the desired change. They continue to be neutral, as they do not believe the change does, or will affect them. This is often a breeding ground for *Viruses*. The power of this group should never be underestimated. The *Neutrophils* need to know why it is important to bring about the change and the benefit of the change to their daily lives. Initially this is created by education, however, more importantly by involving them in the process, the change becomes a reality. Therefore the key

guiding principle is the more people you communicate with and involve the more chance you have of creating Viruses. Be clear to be purposeful on timing to maximise efforts.

An example of this is when I worked for a large building company. In one division we logged and manufactured timber products. We employed many saw millers in Australia. In the past they perceived themselves as manual labourers. The industry was changing to a high tech industry where this model of work was being phased out. There was however still plenty of manual work to be done and thought they would not be affected. The saw millers were told about the evolving change and how the company would educate them on the new equipment. There was not a lot of response from the group until they participated in the education program and used the equipment. To further support the initiative, as the employees began to use the computers, the company helped the family learn computers as well. They did this by providing education to the family two nights a week on site. You can imagine it was not difficult to quickly achieve thirty percent of passionate *Viruses* for the change. I remember one wonderful man, called Jim, who told me, he never thought he would be able to help his son with his schoolwork because of his level of education. Now he was able to because of his knowledge of computers. We were all very proud of this moment.

The Infected Ones

The fifth group are the ones that are *Infected*. They are as individuals doing what is required, without opposition as individuals. This in itself is useful, however, if you want to accelerate the change, you need to engage this group. You need to gain their support to influence others, even if it is only their neighbour at the next computer terminal. There are a number of ways to influence them as the next example demonstrates.

The HR department, I was managing, was implementing a new computer system. Initially there was a lot of opposition to the new system as people were comfortable with the old sys-

tem. Fortunately however the virus analogy was working and the viruses were growing as they grew to know and understand the system. One of the team was quite expert in the new system and quietly went about her work. Ann was *Infected*, but not infecting others. This was an opportunity not to miss. I asked Ann if she would help me, overcome people's fear of the system by taking some time to teach them, some handy hints she had found useful. Ann would be supporting myself, the team and reduce her rework if she was able to do this. I organised a couple of small group meetings and the rest is history. *A guiding principle in this instance is most people are willing to help if they can see what is in it for them or others. Sometimes they just have to be asked in an appropriate manner.*

Therefore within the framework of an organization as a petrie dish, there are many organisms. For the purpose of this analogy there are *Viruses, Antibodies, Resisters, Neutrophils and the infected ones*. However, it is important to realise individuals may take different positions depending on the particular situation. They may be a *Virus* in one situation and an *Antibody* in another. For example, a manager may be resistant to the implementation of working from home, however be a passionate *Virus* about introducing a computer system for the organization. *The guiding principle in this instance is to remain focused on what change you are trying to influence and not assume everyone will behave the same in different situations.*

Obviously it is not an exact science, and sometimes you misjudge a situation. It is simply a way of thinking that can raise the awareness, that it is possible to strategically influence people in an organisation undergoing change. That it needs to be understood analysed and implemented like any strategy. Change is more likely to be more successful if not left to chance alone.

Open Doors

I would like to emphasize, this is not a tool to be discussed behind closed doors, it is openly explained and communicated, or otherwise it can be seen as manipulative. Over the years, I

have taught this framework to many people, when they are thinking about introducing change, in education forums or individually. It is a valuable platform for open discussion.

It can also be used as a powerful mirror for individuals. If someone has been explained the analogy you may wish to use it to help the individual confront some non-constructive behaviours. An example of this was when two large divisions in one organization were merging. Two executive teams were forming into one and some executives, due to the merger, would no longer be on the new executive team. One manager was very upset by this and he actively started to undermine and resist the merger of the two businesses. He had been well respected and people were listening to him. I went and had a conversation with him in his office and asked him, "If we were applying the *Virus* model, to this situation, what role are you taking?" He slightly hung his head and said, "I suppose an *Antibody*". I said, "As a senior, influential leader in this organization, is this the role you want to play?" He shook his head. I asked him, "What impact would it have on your new boss and your career if you became a *Virus*?" It was a powerful and enlightening conversation for both of us.

The First Step

As we all know managing change, in our public or our private lives is not easy; they're are no specific formulas and no guaranteed outcomes. It is a new frontier for most of us, once an expected or unexpected change is upon us. We normally make our way the best way we can under the circumstances. The *Virus* analogy is a simple framework, with some guiding principles that can help the implementers of change, be more thoughtful and strategic in their approach. The first step towards achieving our outcomes however is to put a mirror up to ourselves and ask what role are we – am I - going to play in the change? *Am I, are we a Virus or an Antibody?*

Correspondence

Jennifer Brice
General Manager of Human Resources at Fuji
Xerox Australia. She can be reached at:
Jennifer.Brice@aus.xerox.com

Tables

Types of People

Viruses – highly infective, virulent and can bring about the necessary change
Antibodies – convert them, but do this strategically. They are necessary for the field of the system. Give reasons why they should change – what is in it for them.
Resisters – do nothing initially, be aware of their position. Perhaps best not to spend too much time focused on this group initially
Neutrophils – initially education, then communicate the desired future, and involve them in the process.
Infected ones – gain their support to influence others

Guiding Principles

Tread the soft ground first

Work on softening some targeted hard ground.

Identify where time is best spent to achieve the desired overall outcome.
The more people you communicate with and involve the more chance you have of creating Viruses

Most people are willing to help if they can see what is in it for them or others. Sometimes they just have to be asked in an appropriate manner.

Remain focused on what change you are trying to influence and not assume everyone will behave the same in different situations.

Am I a Virus or an Antibody?

