“Brubaker” describes an actual event of 1971-72 in which Henry Brubaker (Robert Redford) is appointed the new warden of Wakefield State Prison. In order to learn about the prison, Brubaker arranges to be admitted in disguise as a prisoner. The film depicts his attempts to reform the institution.

“Brubaker” provides an excellent vehicle for highlighting the factors that influence the success of organizational change efforts and for examining the managerial role in those change efforts. We will stop the film at several points to ask questions and to generate discussion on those topics and others. The pages that follow include discussion questions for some of the major stopping points of the film. Please do not read ahead, but wait until asked to turn to the next page.

Because the film depicts prison life and attempts to do so realistically, it includes very strong language, some graphic violence, and brief nudity. We hope that this will not obstruct your ability to see the change processes at work in this situation and to learn from them.

Even though they are often referred to as such, corporations are not prisons. Yet many of the motivational and leadership issues which arise in organizations are apparent more extremely and therefore more clearly in prison settings. By observing the obvious, we can be better equipped to observe and manage the more subtle. As you watch the film, think of the organization with which you are most familiar and try to see the subtle, psychological parallels to the physical events which take place in the prison. In the first segment, keep watch for the prison’s OBJECTIVES, STRUCTURE, CULTURE, WAYS OF SOCIALIZING NEW MEMBERS, RULES, PUNISHMENTS, and their impact on the prison’s motivational climate.

As the film begins, please turn one page to the list of major characters. Do not turn ahead further.
Some of the Central Characters in BRUBAKER

Eddie Caldwell  Trustee with navy cap and rifle
Henry Brubaker  New Warden
Huey Ross  Head Trustee
Dickie Coombes  Black Trustee with shotgun
Pinky  Cafe owner in town
Carol  Pinky’s sister, Huey’s girlfriend
Bullen  Habitual criminal, Pontiac lover
Roy Purcell  Clerk Trustee
Floyd  Trustee with plaid cap
Captain Renfro  Outgoing Warden
C. P. Woodward  Community Lumberyard Owner
Willits  State Employee
Abraham Cook  Old black man
Lilian Gray  Brubaker’s Sponsor on the Prison Board
John Deech  Prison Board Chairman (17 years)
Charles Hight  Senator
By the time the death row inmate threatens Bullen’s life, and Brubaker tells him that he is the new warden, we have learned something about the process by which people enter the organization, something about the way in which newcomers are taught lessons about the rules of the organization, and we have some idea about the culture of the organization. All of these elements have a great influence on the motivation of the newcomers.

Please write down the major elements of your organization on these dimensions:

Describe the process by which people enter your organization:

How do newcomers learn the rules of your organization?

List the major rules of behavior in your organization and the penalties for breaking them:
By the time Brubaker meets the contractor, Woodward, he has encountered a variety of people whom he must manage in order to succeed. These include his bosses (Lil, the Prison Board and its Chairman, John Deech, legislators, and the Governor), peers in the community (business people like Woodward and citizens who either supply the prison or buy from it), and subordinates (including the rankmen, the Death Row inmates, the Trustees, and the Guards.) This CONSTELLATION OF KEY RELATIONSHIPS points out how much Brubaker relies on people all around him for success and how much each group is different in terms of what motivates them and what leadership style they are likely to respond to.

In the space below, diagram the constellation of relationships upon which you depend for success in your present (or last) job.
When Brubaker forms the newly-elected inmate council, he clearly has an objective in mind. He is trying to help the men learn that their opinions, thoughts, beliefs, and values count. His theory is probably something like, “if I can get them to believe that they are worth something, there is a higher probability that they will grow here on the inside and therefore a higher probability that they will be able to succeed on the outside.”

Please list the ways that you encourage your subordinates to grow in their self-image, their skills, and their abilities to contribute to the real objectives of the organization:

Now list some additional ways that you might do this:
When Brubaker faced the Senator’s offer of financial support and freedom to reform the prison if he stopped digging for corpses, he faced a major dilemma. On the one hand, if he accepted, he might be able to make a significant difference in the prison’s facilities. We don’t know if later on the Senator might have said to Brubaker what Huey said to Pinky earlier on in the film, “Sorry, Pinky, I just couldn’t come up with two sides of beef this time, but I’ll make it up to you.” We also don’t know how the rank men would have responded to the knowledge that Brubaker had made a deal.

On the other hand, if Brubaker refused the deal, his job and career were in great jeopardy, and he might have been constrained from making any further impact on the penal system in the state.

List one or two experiences you have had when you had to decide between the desires of senior management and the desires of your subordinates. What did you do? What was the impact on both groups? What was the impact on you? What would have happened if you had done the other thing?
As Brubaker is driven out of Wakefield Prison, we are left wondering what will happen. Coombes once accused Brubaker of starting wars and letting other people fight them. Now, Brubaker is leaving, and the new warden, Roy Polk, is making his introductory remarks.

What do you think will happen? Why?
As you reflect on the film, summarize below the major principles or ideas you have gleaned about how to manage change. What seems most important to remember about managing change in business organizations?