

Changing the way we think about change

Businesses are trying to make fundamental changes in the way they operate. They struggle with a number of seemingly difficult to resolve conflicts about the way they work. Conflicts between a competitive environment, decreasing market share and sustainability. Conflicts between decision making paradigms – how much should be employee lead vs management decreed. Conflicts between business units about their roles in the business direction. Conflicts between individual and organisational needs, etc.

The pressures to perform keep on mounting, the pace of change driven by technical, social, economic and environmental forces increases. Businesses keep putting their energy resources into improved levels of quality and service and responsiveness. This holds true for private and public sector organisations. Institutions such as banks and local government authorities who thought they were immune to change forces have had to rethink the position they hold in our communities. They have seen other players enter their traditional playing fields.. Restrictions have been eased which have encouraged end users to exercise choice in the way they make decisions about their suppliers.

Now all this should tell you that change is something that cannot be all that well orchestrated. Yet despite the volumes of books and articles written on the subject, most texts infer and support a linear, sequential approach to change within organisations. This of course means planning.

Now please don't misread what I'm about to say. I'm not against planning. In fact when I've been involved in assignments involving fundamental changes to the way a business operates, one of the needed tools is a documented plan outlining the "Intentions" and future end states of the change program. In fact most approaches to change really are asking the organisation or business to address 4 questions:

"To be unsure is uncomfortable, that's undoubted. To be completely sure, now that's absurd" ... Goethe

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to be? Or perhaps what do we want to look like in X period of time?
3. How will we get there?
4. If we do this what might happen?

Most approaches to change are variations on this theme. The variations deal with the degree of sophistication to which answers to the above are specified. According to these approaches an organisation prepares for change, implements the change, then regains their 'balance' – the Lewinian 'unfreeze, change, refreeze' or Bridges "ending, transition, beginning". I think many aspects of change can be represented by these approaches – project management would encourage us to believe all aspects if you've done your risk analysis right. But many aspects can't. The world doesn't stand still. Often the next type of change is on us before the last one is bedded down. Where we want to get to changes in the action of moving towards it.

With the risk of adding to the already large bibliography on change, from my experience, it's the way in which organisations deal with their responses to the 4th question that lead to satisfying change initiatives. I'm referring here

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to the organisations ability to be flexible, responsive to take advantage of the opportunities presented by acting on the consequences (intended and

otherwise) from change activities. This is what Mintzberg calls "emergent change" as opposed to "planned change". Usually the two work side by side.

An example may help to make this point. In "An improvisational model for change management: the case of GroupWare technologies", Orlikowski and Hofman describe an organisation, Zeta, which was

implementing the development of Lotus Notes tracking system to monitor and log calls and record customer's problems. The process of monitoring, analysing and reporting proved too cumbersome and slow to respond in an efficient manner for clients, so like the players in a jazz ensemble, the parts of Zeta responsible for implementing the system and working with the client "improvised" solutions to problems 'on the run'. They had authority and responsibility to implement solutions in the areas affected by the clients problems. Like the jazz ensemble, all parts had a connection with the others and intuitively followed the leads from each section (to use Rosabeth Moss Kanter's words - they 'tuned in' constantly to their environment and responded to it, recorded their learnings, made them public, took the lead to let other affected parts know how solutions were being adapted etc, without an enforced protocol for managing the information. In fact they developed and changed the protocols as they went) .

Another example - a small pottery business which fired set pieces and was growing steadily invited existing customers and prospective customers to their workshops for a walk through. The intention was to promote the products to a new audience through an existing favourable delivery channel. During the demonstrations a few mugs didn't make it to the firing stage (they threw badly - looked ugly). One of the guests commented on its novelty. "Don't turn it back into a ball - it looks like Margaret Thatcher, you know the rubbery figures version". Capturing the moment, the potter highlighted the features on the 'deformed mug'. This started the most successful line of mugs the business now creates - character feature mugs. You can even have a caricature of yourself thrown. This is an example of the emergent change, noticed and acted on as an opportunity, which created something quite different from the intended walk through process.

"Spin Out" businesses is a phrase which captures a developing movement in American organisations. Instead of selling off novel lines/products or services, some businesses are encouraging their employees to put a business

case together for the new idea and 'spin out' the business from the parent company. The parent company provides funds, some infrastructure during development and the start of a business to business network. They are wholly owned subsidiaries, complete their own tax returns and duplicate resources.(an interesting point considering that certain efficiencies could be gained from resource sharing. The businesses find that ownership and cross selling services and products has far greater benefits). This is working so well in some established, usually family owned businesses, that the spin out businesses themselves develop spin outs etc. One such network of companies has 45 businesses that have successfully spun out of parent holdings. Some of these networks have spun out supporting businesses which give strength to the whole network of companies, e.g. training institutions, financial and legal services etc. So the message here is, don't lose the momentum, drive the momentum - instead of selling off, create anew, and its working.

Now this may sound like I'm saying "be on the look out for opportunities and take advantage of them". In part yes, but many opportunities aren't recognised as such, because sometimes in a planned change effort they don't look like the main game. They are seen as distractions or 'off course' or not fitting the model. To be able to see things for other than what they appear

means letting go of the way you are currently looking at it and seeing it through a different set of eyes. This means having a greater level of spontaneity and creativity to see things as possibilities without knowing where they'll fit. It requires a skill which many of us had as

children and have forgotten - the ability to play, not for some particular end goal, although this may happen with sufficient play, but to play as an end in itself. This is what great jazz combinations do. They play - with the tempo, the structure of sound, the percussive nature of the beat, the other team members, the audience, the boundaries to what they know and can do. And they do this 'in the moment'. Its not boudaryless - they have a strategy for what they want to do, but they constantly move between the "in the moment" play and the 'big picture' of creating an experience. And somehow they know when and how to finish.

One size doesn't fit all.

The jazz ensemble metaphor for organisations has been around for some time. I'm certainly not proposing that all organisations can or even would benefit from becoming jazz groups. There are some observable criteria which, when considered as part of what an organisation needs to "listen for" in their approach to change. These include:

The natural planning cycle:

For businesses which have longer planning cycles – i.e. the environment in which they work is slower to respond to movement, the jazz ensemble may not be as relevant. When planning and review cycles are at monthly or greater intervals, there is more stability in the approach to implementing planned changes. For businesses with shorter more turbulent cycles – e.g. share trading, knowledge intensive, or even some software development, hospitals, etc the jazz metaphor may be more appropriate.

The way in which returns are calculated;

For asset rich businesses with a large number of income producing assets (i.e. they calculate a return on assets, as opposed to return on revenue) that may be depreciated over 2-10 years, the ability to change the direction of the business quickly is reduced (e.g., an equipment hire business with tens of millions of dollars of hire equipment isn't likely to change direction and focus quickly)

The size of the niche market and relationship with similar markets:

This brings up the depth vs breadth argument as organisations position themselves with a customer base, e.g. if the business is trying to "drill the vein" (depth), how likely is it that they can tap a similar vein nearby (breadth)?

What's required by the organisation and its people to enable improvisation?

Tuning in to the environment at all levels:

This means everyone at every level in the organisation becomes an "antennae" for what's happening inside and outside the business. The leader can't know everything and be in all places at one time. The organisation can create networks that listen to movements in customer, supplier and provider information.

Testing how things have been done around here.

Challenging the status quo is never easy, particularly when many organisations actions (not what they espouse) say "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". So when is the best time to introduce new practices, processes etc. When things are going OK. Its amazing the confidence and change competencies it builds when people can create short term successes in sequence.

Encouraging the enthusiasm of the vision at the senior level into living breathing desire at the operations level.

Too often what looks like a compelling vision at the strategic level becomes a vague notion at the level of operations. Most people have individual desires and hopes. These are centred around what's meaningful in people's lives. For an organisational vision to be meaningful to an individual at an operational team level, it needs to have an outlet for expression. Teams need to have their own compass and use it as a guide. In Senge's terms individual visions enrich the organisations vision by being able to be expressed through the individuals work.

A structure which encourages and supports innovation.

I know this has been said before, but senior managers need to be able to 'let go' and trust capable people at all levels of the organisation. This isn't based on blind faith, but a recognition that people can learn how to have ideas, test them in action and promote them across the business. This means having a structure where people can work across boundaries and create and recreate them as needed.

Ownership at the work team level:

This builds on the structure issue above. It means linking teams with the resources they need to design, test and implement the changes they see necessary. This doesn't mean lumping new responsibilities on top of a teams existing work. Even highly innovative, opportunity seeking teams need to "take their own time quotient' into account as they attempt new things.

Having a greater appreciation of time as a factor in change.

Even football games are played over two halves. What may seem like a desperate situation at half time, can be a stage along the way to winning at the end of the game. People at all levels (even leaders with boards of management breathing down their necks) need to be able to step back from where they are at times and look at the whole path. So 'patience' can be part of the improvisational approach.

Individual Spontaneity.

According to Moreno, Spontaneity is " a new response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation". This implies action when faced with novel or challenging situations. Obviously risk taking is part of this, but we're not talking about reckless impulsiveness. The ability to see things "like the first time"

encourages new perceptions about situations that confront us. Like a child, we can learn to experiment and play with the "objects", both innate and human that we deal with in our working worlds. And its contagious - watch a child at play who has the ability to draw others in with her - they all start to engage with their own creative geniuses and before long a group masterpiece in action is created.

Getting in early and recognising all contributions in the change.

Rewarding and celebrating efforts and accomplishments can't be emphasised enough. This isn't just the responsibility of senior managers. Everyone does heroic deeds in the ever-changing workplace. Extraordinary accomplishments are done everyday by ordinary workers. Change is ongoing and businesses can't afford to lose the abilities and energies of the people who create it and maintain it.

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