

New Perspectives on Change

What would it mean to your organization if you could undertake whole system change with some confidence that it could succeed?

Can you recall a time when you were part of a group achieving exceptional results? People respond very consistently to this question: the purpose is clear and meaningful, everyone pulls together to make it happen, natural leaders emerge, people do the work they feel best able to perform, people willingly take risks. And later, when they reflect on the experience, they are often astonished by their accomplishments. They seem to have tapped into something larger than themselves. What if this deep sense of community and ability to produce extraordinary results were the norm for how organizations and communities worked?

Over the last 30 years, the number of stories about creating and sustaining such experiences has grown. In these efforts, engaged people work in new ways to achieve very ambitious and fundamental changes, with astonishing results: for GTE, Appreciative Inquiry was cited as the backbone of an award-winning change initiative that has unleashed the power of the front-line staff. At Brooklyn Technical High School, Real Time Strategic Change has supported curriculum redesign and faculty development in a unique partnership between principal and faculty. And in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, a future search conference helped a town of 9,000 overcome a tax-limiting referendum to provide double-digit school budget increases and create partnerships with local businesses to fund libraries, technology and teacher training.

These stories reflect different assumptions about what it takes to successfully change a culture. They reflect the idea that a shared and compelling picture of a desired outcome moves people to action. They operate from the belief that the knowledge and wisdom exist in the people. And they show that when participants view the "whole system", it results in committed involvement leading to significant and lasting accomplishments.

What would such an approach to change mean for your organization or community? In addition to traditional bottom-line measures of success, wouldn't it be great to create a spirited, passionate, disciplined and fun place to work? If you're like most of us, making change happen is no longer an optional skill, but rather a vital requirement for long-term success. Yet for many of us, the thought of change is laden with fear, backed by horror stories that prove change should be avoided at all costs.

Indeed, if these approaches are so great, why haven't I heard about them? Why aren't they spreading like wild fire? Ironically, there is ample evidence that when high involvement and a system-wide approach to change are used, the potential for unimagined results is within reach. But they do pose a challenge for many of us: are we ready to give up traditional assumptions about power and control?

A little history

About 6 years ago, I began searching for approaches to change that were consistently succeeding. What I found was exciting and refreshing. Not only were there ample examples of stunning results but they consistently offered a fresh view: they seemed to tap the human potential in organizations and communities. These organizations and communities were more adaptive and more effective. The people in them seemed confident, energized, and involved. What was going on? By looking closely at what people said about their change work, I uncovered seven characteristics present in every approach achieving great results. What seemed to make the difference is the assumptions held about human systems themselves.

Characteristic	Old assumption	New assumption
Vision/Purpose	Management owns	Shared ownership
Contribution	I just do my job	What can I do?
Person	They just want my hands/head	I can be myself; who I am matters
Wisdom	Hire an expert	Among us, we have the knowledge and skills we need or know how to get it
Process	That was a nice event, now back to the real work	We continually learn and change together
System	I know my part and that's all I need to know	I understand how we fit together
Information	Need to know	Public

Future vision (or contributing to something larger than themselves) compels people into action. When people see the possibility of contributing to something larger than themselves, they operate differently. The emphasis shifts from focusing on "why something can't be done" to "how can we make this happen?" There is a tangible difference in the atmosphere of organizations that have made this shift--they feel alive with possibility and excitement. It is about creating something, generating something, not just fixing and improving quality that draws us.

The power of the individual to contribute is unleashed. When people understand the whole system, when they see the possibility of meaningful intentions, when they feel their voice matters, they commit. While it doesn't happen every time, the potential for extraordinary accomplishment exists.

The whole person -- the head, heart and spirit of the members of the organization or community are evoked. Over the years, words such as *hands* or *heads* have become a way to count numbers of people in organizations. They reflect a focus on what is considered important--hands to do the manual work; heads to do the thinking work. These methods

reengage the whole person: hands for doing, heads for thinking, hearts for caring, and spirits for achieving inspired results.

Knowledge and wisdom exist in the people in the organization or community. This belief, that the people in the system know best, is a profound shift from the days of bringing in the outside “efficiency” expert with the answer. While several of these approaches rely on new ideas, such as Gemba Kaizen’s introduction to the concepts of Just in Time and Total Productive Maintenance, not one of them presumes to have the answer. Instead, they engage people in the organization in making choices about what's best for them.

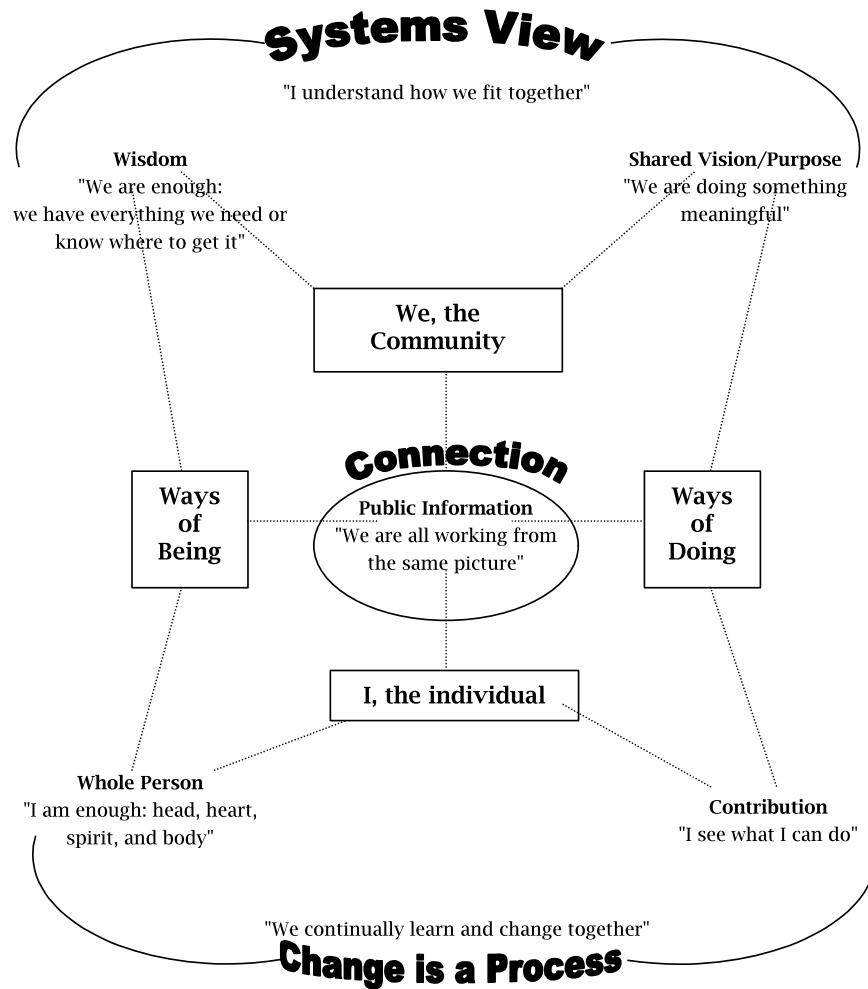
Change is a process, not an event. While most of the approaches involve one or a series of events, the sum total of a transformational effort requires more. Events help focus people’s attention, but they are only one part of the change equation. It is ongoing practice that enables long-term success.

Members of the organization or community collectively create a whole systems view. People begin to understand their system at a deeper level. They see interconnections among departments or processes or relationships. When this occurs, system members know better how to participate and therefore make commitments that were previously unlikely. Because more people understand the whole system, they can make intelligent, informed contributions to substantive decisions.

Critical information is publicly available to members of the organization or community. This is a corollary to the whole systems view. What keeps the system whole over time is a commitment to sharing information that is traditionally provided on a "need to know" basis. When people are informed of what is important to the system and how it is performing, they make more informed decisions about their own activities.

Pulling it All Together

Here is a visual map, a metaphorical compass, of these characteristics.



Two questions help establish a *systems view*:

What is our purpose? By exploring this question both intellectually (What do we what to accomplish?) and emotionally (Why is it worth investing time and energy?), the shift to thinking systemically begins.

Who participates? Understanding the system requires knowing who is involved: who affects it, who cares about it, who holds responsibility for its health and well-being.

Having established a systems view, we are well positioned to choose a *change process* that suits our needs.

Public Information is the heart of the system. Remove it and fundamental connections are severed.

The approaches that consistently succeed do so through their artful weaving of ways of being and doing, as individuals and communities through *wisdom, purpose, wholeness, and contribution*.

Useful Pointers for Getting Started

If this picture appeals to you, here are some suggestions for getting started:

- * **Be clear about your purpose for undertaking change.** Not only is this the key to mobilizing meaningful involvement, it is also vital for sustaining the work when the going gets rough.
- * **Know where your support is coming from and plan accordingly.** Different strategies for getting started make sense depending on whether support is from the top, middle or grassroots. (While we rarely hear about ambitious efforts starting at the grassroots, it is usually because by the time we know something is happening it looks like it came top-down or middle-out.)
- * **Mean what you say and be prepared to be tested -- or don't start at all.** People have an uncanny ability to read underlying intention. If the motivation for high involvement change isn't real, they'll know and behave accordingly.
- * **Determine your approach to change based not on your current culture, but based on your belief that it can move you from where you are today to the culture you want.** Change is not always comfortable so accept the fact that this will be messy and focus on how best to bring people into a future they desire.
- * **Communicate with everyone early and often.** While this may start as one-way communication about a decision to undertake change, when it becomes an ongoing conversation among everyone involved, it will carry the momentum for success.
- * **Get the support you need for success.** High involvement change can look messy. If you've never seen it, involve someone who has -- they can save you much anxiety when you're not sure what's happening makes sense.

This article presents a challenge: are we ready to give up traditional assumptions about power and control? The evidence is in. When we operate from assumptions about human systems that share power and let go of control, we all win. Are you ready to take the step?

Sidebar on The Change Handbook

Approaches for achieving whole system change

The Change Handbook is a comprehensive guide to achieving change. It features chapters by the originators and foremost practitioners of eighteen whole system change methods. The book is designed as a tool – a hands-on reference guide that answers practical, important questions about change.

<p>METHOD (FIRST USE) CREATORS 1960s Preferred Futuring™ (1969)</p>
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Ronald Lippitt & Ed Lindaman
 Search Conference (1969)
 Fred Emery, Eric Trist & Merrelyn Emery

1970s

Participative Design Workshop (1971)
 Fred Emery

SimuReal (mid 1970s)
 Donald C. Klein

Organization Workshop (1978)
 Barry Oshry

1980s

Future Search (1982)
 Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff

Whole-Scale™ Change (1982) Paul D. Tolchinsky, Kathleen D. Dannemiller & Dannemiller
 Tyson Associates partners

Technology of Participation™'s Participatory Strategic Planning Process (1984)
 Institute of Cultural Affairs & The Ecumenical Institute

Dialogue (1985)
 David Bohm

Open Space Technology (1985) Harrison Owen

Gemba Kaizen® (1986)
 Masaaki Imai

Appreciative Inquiry (1987)
 David L Cooperrider, Suresh Srivastva & colleagues

The Strategic Forum™ (1987)
 Barry Richmond

1990s

The Conference Model® (1991)
 Richard H. & Emily M. Axelrod

Fast-Cycle Full-Participation (1992)
 Bill and Mary Pasmore, Alan Fitz, Bob Rehm & Gary Frank

Think Like A Genius™ Process (1993)
 Todd Siler

Real-Time Strategic ChangeSM (1994)
 Robert W. Jacobs & Frank McKeown

Whole Systems ApproachSM (1994)
 W.A. (Bill) and Cindy Adams