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The Changing Nature Of Change:

Whole System Methods for Shaping The Future

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Abstract

The nature of change itself has changed. This article describes that change and offers insights into achieving transformational change. It provides a list of proven approaches to whole-system change and characterizes why they succeed. It then offers some useful practices and advice for starting a whole-system change effort.

Voices that Count: Realizing the Potential of Change

Through the long lens of history, change is inevitable -- a given. Just look at any history book. Everything from fashions to attitudes has changed dramatically through the years. Changes reflect underlying shifts in values and expectations of their times. When Gutenberg introduced the movable type printing press to 15th century Europe, it bolstered the developing humanism of the Renaissance. The new technology complemented the emerging emphasis on individual expression that brought new developments in music, art and literature. Economic and political shifts paralleled the changing tastes in the arts, creating a prosperous and innovative age -- a stark contrast to the preceding Middle Ages. Sound familiar?

On the surface, we see technology enabling greater freedom and prosperity, just as today. This century has brought us automobiles, airplanes, radios, televisions, telephones, computers, and the Internet. What distinguishes change today is the turbulence created by the breathtaking pace required to assimilate its impact: socially, politically, and economically.

One trend is clear: people are demanding a greater voice in running their own lives. Demonstrated by the American Revolution and affirmed more recently in the fall of the Berlin Wall, the riots in Tianenmen Square, the social unrest in Indonesia, and the redistribution of power in South Africa, this dramatic shift in values and expectations creates enormous potential for positive change today.

So, why does change have such a bad reputation?

With change comes uncertainty. While change holds possibility for good things to happen, eighty percent of us see only its the negative aspects.¹ And even when people acknowledge their current situation is far from perfect, given the choice between the devil they know, or the devil they don't, most opt for the former. The remedy we are learning is to involve people in creating a picture of a better future. Most of us are drawn towards the excitement and possibility and move through our fear of the unknown.

Another reason we are wary of change: it creates winners and losers. The real challenge is to view the change *systemically* and ask what's best for both parties in the post-change environment.

Finally, many people have real data that change is bad for them. Like the cat who jumps on a hot stove only once, these change survivors know that "flavor of the month" change promises generally fall disappointingly short. In our organizations and communities, many people have experienced the results of botched attempts at transformational change. It's simple human nature to avoid situations that cause pain and let's face it, enough change efforts have failed to create plenty of cynicism over the past ten years.

Ironically, as demands for greater involvement in our organizations have increased, many well-publicized, large-scale change efforts have moved the other way and totally ignored people. They chose instead to focus on more visible and seemingly easier to manage components such as information technology, strategic architectures, and business processes. "Downsize" was a ubiquitous battle cry of the nineties. According to a recent New York Times poll "Nearly three-quarters of all households have had a close encounter with layoffs since 1980. In one-third of all households, a family member has lost a job, and nearly 40 percent more know a relative, friend, or neighbor who was laid off."² The individual impact has been apparent in the increased stress, longer working hours and reduced sense of job security chronicled in virtually every recent book and article on change.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, "Never before in the field of human endeavors was so much screwed up by so few for so many." By ignoring the need to involve people in something that affects them, many of today's popular change methods have left a bad taste in the mouths of "change targets" (as one popular methodology calls those affected) for *any* type of change. They have also often left behind less effective organizations with fewer people and lower morale. Consequently, even well-intentioned, well-designed change efforts have a hard time getting off the ground.

If an organization or community's leaders *do* recognize that emerging values and rapidly shifting environmental demands call for directly engaging people in change, they often face another challenge. When the fear of uncertainty, the potential for winners and losers, and the history of failures define change, how can they systematically involve people and have some confidence that it will work? That is where these approaches to change come in.

A Way Through

There are a variety of approaches today that work because they acknowledge the prevailing attitudes towards change and offers a fresh view: the possibility of a more desirable future, experience with the whole system and some elusive quality that signals "something different is happening this time." That difference systematically taps the potential of human beings to make themselves, their organizations, and their communities more adaptive and more effective. This approach is based on solid, proven principles for unleashing people's creativity, knowledge and spirit toward a common purpose.

How can this be? It does so by filling two huge voids that most large-scale change efforts miss. The first improvement is *intelligently involving people* in changing their workplaces and communities. Under the right conditions, informed, engaged people can produce dramatic results.

¹ Oakley, Ed and Doug Krug. *Enlightened Leadership*. Denver, CO: Stone Tree Publishing, 1991, pg. 38.

² The New York Times, *The Downsizing of America*, New York: Times Books, 1996.

The second improvement is a *systemic* approach to change. By asking "Who's affected? Who has a stake in this?" we begin to recognize that no change happens in isolation. Making the interdependencies explicit enables shifts based on a common view of the whole. We can each play our part understanding its contribution to the system. We begin to understand that in a change effort the "one-party-wins-and-one-party-loses" perception need not necessarily be the case. When viewed from a systemic perspective, the lines between "winners" and "losers" become meaningless as everyone participates in co-creating the future for the betterment of all. The advantages are enormous: coordinated actions and closer relationships leading to simpler, more effective solutions.

The growing numbers of success stories are beginning to attract attention. Hundreds of examples around the world of dramatic and sustained increases in organization and community performance now exist.³ With such great potential, why isn't everyone operating this way? The catch with high-involvement, systemic change is that more people have their say. Until traditional managers are ready to say "yes" to that, no matter how stunning the achievements of others, these approaches will remain out of reach for most and a competitive advantage for a few.

Our Purpose

We wish to raise awareness that there are approaches that have helped numerous organizations and communities achieve dramatic, sustainable results. Our purpose in this article is to provide basic information about what we have uncovered that is common to these new approaches and some thoughts about getting started in working with them.

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.

³ The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future contains over 20 such stories of stellar results from high-involvement, systemic change.

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

Several years ago, we began searching for approaches to change that were consistently succeeding. We ultimately chose 18 approaches to look at more deeply. Here is a quick look at the methods we included:

METHOD (FIRST USE)	CREATORS
1960s	
Preferred Futuring™ (1969)	Ronald Lippitt and Ed Lindaman
Search Conference (1969)	Fred Emery, Eric Trist and later, 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 and Sandra Janoff
Whole-Scale™ Change (1982)	Paul D. Tolchinsky, Kathleen D. Dannemiller, and Dannemiller Tyson Associates partners
Technology of Participation™'s Participatory Strategic Planning Process (1984)	Institute of Cultural Affairs and its parent, the Chicago-based Ecumenical Institute
Dialogue (1985)	Current interest from David Bohm's work
Open Space Technology (1985)	Harrison Owen with collegial assistance from a global cast of thousands
Gemba Kaizen® (1986)	Described as a system by Masaaki Imai
Appreciative Inquiry (1987)	David L Cooperrider, Suresh Srivastva and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University and the Taos Institute
The Strategic Forum™ (1987)	Barry Richmond
1990s	
The Conference Model® (1991)	Richard H. and Emily M. Axelrod

Fast-Cycle Full-Participation (1992)

Collaboration of Bill and Mary Pasmore, Alan Fitz, Bob Rehm, and Gary Frank

Think Like A Genius™ Process (1993)

Todd Siler

Real-Time Strategic ChangeSM (1994)

Robert W. Jacobs and Frank McKeown

Whole Systems ApproachSM (1994)

W.A. (Bill) and Cindy Adams

What we found in these approaches 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, seven characteristics presented themselves in every approach achieving great results. What seemed to make the difference is the assumptions held about human systems themselves.

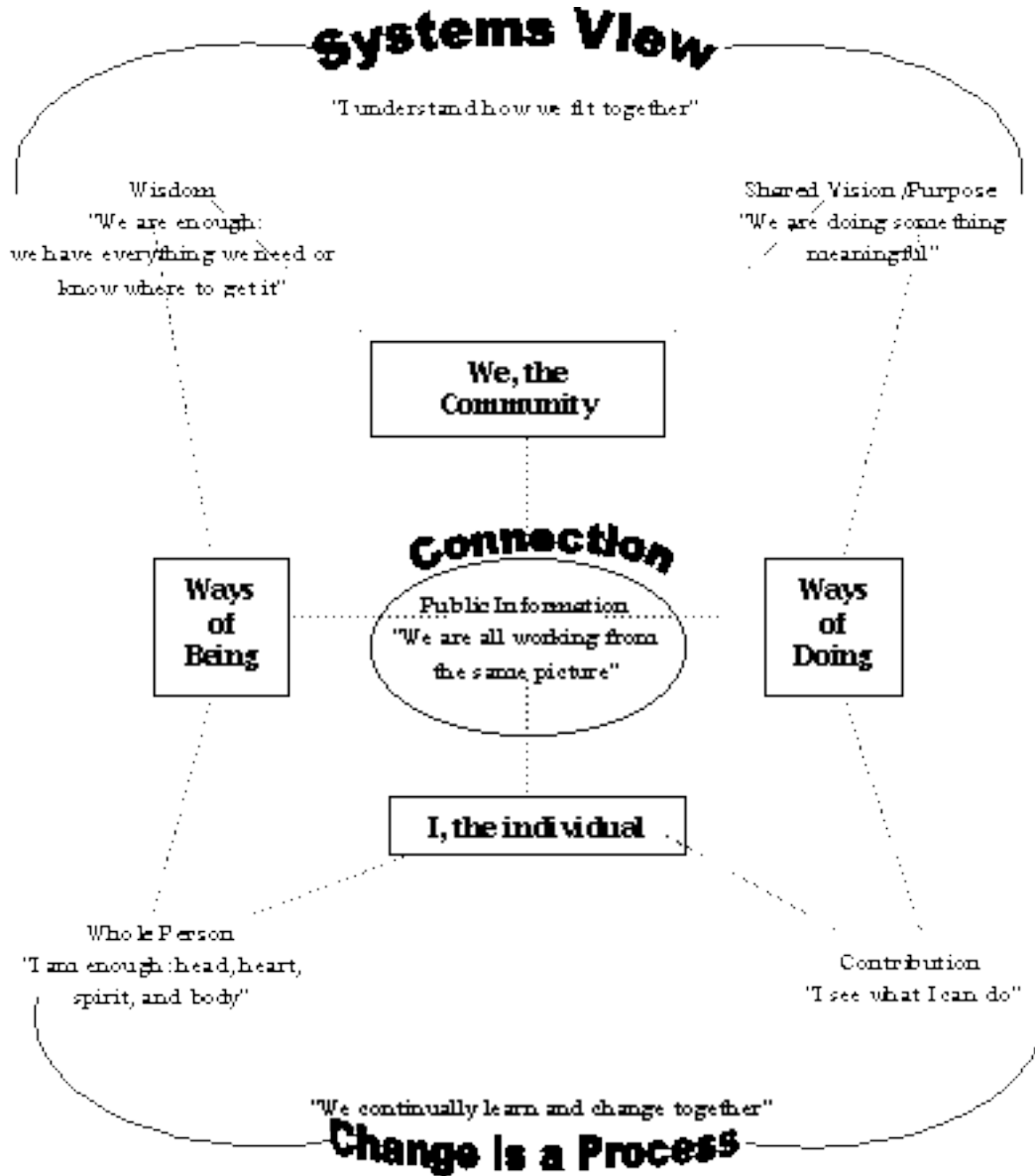
Characteristic	Old assumption	New assumption
Vision/Purpose	Management owns	Shared ownership
Contribution	I just do my job	What can I do?
Person	They just want my hands/head	I can be myself; who I am matters
Wisdom	Hire an expert	Among us, we have the knowledge and skills we need or know how to get it
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

Several new assumptions are key in developing a change approach that will achieve the desired results:

- *Future vision (or contributing to something larger than themselves) compels people into action.*
-
- *We need to unleash the power of the individual to contribute.*
-
- *The whole person -- the head, heart and spirit—are invited to actively participate in the change process.*
-
- *Knowledge, and wisdom exist in the people in the organization or community.*
-
- *Change is a process, not an event.*
-
- *Members of the organization or community collectively create a whole systems view. Critical information is publicly available to members of the organization or community.*

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 want 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*.

But having a good conceptual understanding and a collection of proven methods aren't enough. From a practical implementation standpoint, we need to lay down another piece of the change puzzle. We've uncovered seven practices that seem to universally apply to all successful highly participative change efforts.

Useful Change Practices

Here are seven practices we recommend when initiating any high participation change effort:

Practice #1. Be clear about the need for change.

Practice #2. Get senior management support early.

Practice #3. Remember that Practice #2 is not always possible and adjust your strategy accordingly.

Practice #4. Communicate with the people who will be involved with or affected by the change work.

Practice #5. Eliminate dependency on outside consultants as soon as possible.

Practice #6. Remember, "You can fool some of the people some of the time. You might even fool all of the people some of the time. But you can never fool all of the people all of the time."

Practice #7. Focus on the whole change process, not just the "events."

Finally, we offer five pieces of closing advice for the would be change traveler.

Advice #1. Choose the method(s) that may not necessarily fit your current culture, but that you believe can move you from where you are today to the culture you want.

It is important to be sensitive to the *cultural match* between the change method and your environment. Not every approach fits every situation or working style. This does not mean do nothing that will make people uncomfortable. Nor does it mean that you can't attempt to change the culture by using one of these methods and its accompanying principles. It means think through the implications and prepare for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Advice #2. Be prepared – your commitment to change will be tested.

Remember, *not everyone may want to make the change journey*. As Frank Sinatra once belted in a popular song, "That's life." Great leaders throughout history have never shied away from change just because some people might not have embraced their propositions. A leader's responsibility is *not* to convince everyone immediately to change. Rather, it is to be clear about the need for change, the implications of the change and their expectations of all involved. Great leaders know to respect that people make their choices along the way to join the expedition or to leave.

Advice #3. *Work with a knowledgeable, experienced change guide.*

Changing human behavior is complex. Merely applying the suggested steps of any of these methods as if they were tasks in a cookbook recipe may not produce the results that you, your organization, or your community desires. Beneath each method is a good bit of theory. Make sure someone involved understands the theory and principles of the selected approach. While some methods are more bulletproof than others are, *a guide* who has been there before can make all the difference.

Advice #4. *Get the external support you need for success.*

Engaging an *outside consultant* can be worthwhile. They can see the organizational waters in which insiders swim. The consultant, of course, needs to be qualified in whatever method they're helping you with. But, beyond that we think there's yet another element to look for when selecting a consultant. When choosing a partner, "*good chemistry*" is an essential, but often overlooked criteria for selection. During the change effort your relationship with a consultant may need to weather some uncomfortable times. Be sure you've got an ally who will be there when things get rough and will tell you the truth when you may least want to hear it.

Advice #5. *Spread the word.*

Plan for *dissemination* as early as possible. Each method we explored has the potential to create highly satisfying, productive workplaces and communities. A common tragedy is that organizations achieve benefits in one part of the organization, but they do not spread to other parts. Look for opportunities to invite others to learn about your accomplishments. The more widespread the change, the greater the likelihood that it will be sustained. There's power in spreading the wealth!

Naturally, when dealing with complex systems of human interaction there are no guarantees. However, you can take some positive actions that can increase your chances of success when introducing change into your organization or community. These actions are not difficult, and after reading this article you have the start of a solid foundation for any type of successful change project. The key? Simply apply the concepts and principles of participative change and utilize a proven change method. The results and ease of introducing change may pleasantly surprise you.

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Peggy and Tom co-edited *The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999).