

Three Change Strategies

Change is not merely necessary to life -- IT IS LIFE

--Alvin Toffler

Where does change begin?

Change, any change, begins with the energy of disturbance. It can be caused by something as small as a broken promise or as large as a hurricane sweeping across a populated city. It could be perceived positively – a new job, a new contract, a new baby or experienced with dread: loss of a job, a contract, a life. No matter what the disturbance, because it is disturbing, it evokes a response.

I have noticed three common strategies that we all drawn upon when responding to disturbance. Mismatches between the chosen style of response and the disturbance create much of the tension when dealing with change. The more conscious we are of our options, the greater the likelihood of successfully navigating the many changes that seem to be moving through our lives at an increasing pace.

Just Do It

Take a moment to notice a disturbance in your world. What is the nature of your first impulse? Was it to wish it would just go away? Welcome to being human! And your second reaction? For most of us, it is to **act from habit**, to ignore or suppress everything but the symptoms that are in front of us, fix it and get back to business as usual. Often, this is sufficient to our needs. It is useful to know that there is a dependable steady state, that cars and airplanes run reliably, that hearts beat regularly, that social processes, such as voting or shopping work as expected, and that the sun rises and sets in a livable temperature range every day.

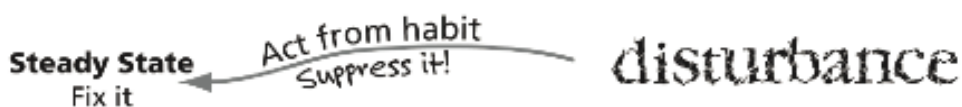


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Beyond the obvious fix, how do you know if there is more to do? There is a wise phrase that provides useful guidance: remedy first then seek root cause. This is a pathway from habit to something more. Still, since most of us don't routinely investigate root cause, we discover something else is called for when the disturbance gets louder.

Take Charge

Perhaps you are in an organization in which there is a natural tension between different functions, as is often the case between, for example, marketing and operations. Louder disturbances may show up as low-level disagreements escalating into vocal conflicts between people or departments. Perhaps a broken promise leads to diminished trust, causing more check-points to be inserted in a system as an alternative to developing a deeper understanding between people and their respective needs. Or perhaps a situation that seemed to be localized now requires more functions to get involved. When the volume is sufficiently loud that the situation can no longer be ignored, the strategy perhaps most commonly associated with change efforts is called upon: **act from certainty** and manage it!

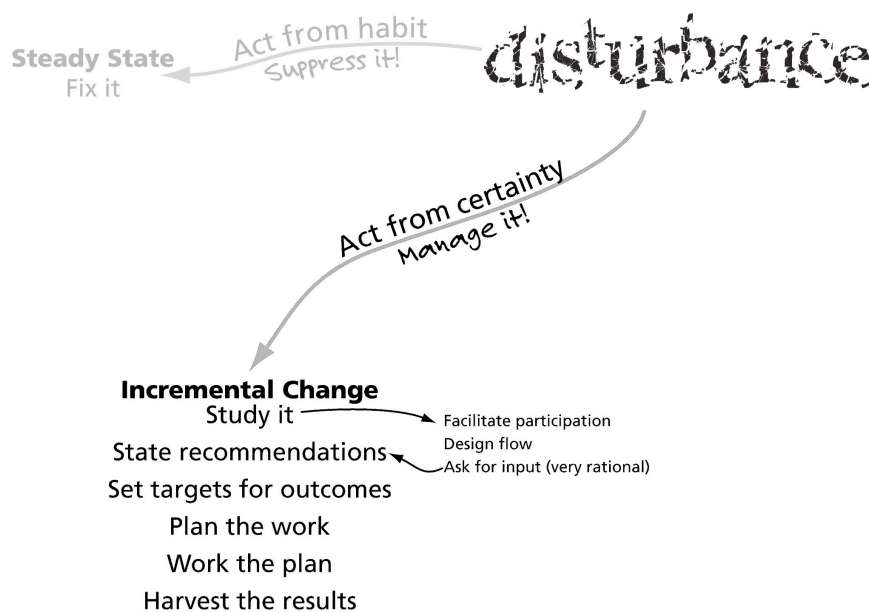


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This is where the traditional tools of change management shine, providing both quantitative and qualitative ways of measuring so that we can study the disturbance, state our recommendations, set targets for outcomes, plan the work, work the plan, and harvest the results. Given the increasing understanding that it is important to involve people, some facilitate focus groups with customers, suppliers, employees, community members or others to influence our recommendations and/or engender buy-in.

Again, there have been very important gains made in organizations and communities who have employed strategies for managing the disturbances that demand change. The Total Quality revolution was fueled by such practices, saving time, money, and lives, increasing our effectiveness and efficiency.

Sometimes this is not enough. How do we know? These practices tend to be most effective for dealing with issues in which rational solutions work. They are often data driven and procedure oriented. When the root causes of disturbances are from other

sources, such as feelings or deeply held beliefs, such approaches are likely not sufficient and the disturbances get louder – and hotter.

We are surrounded by a variety of very fiery symptoms right now, from virtually every sector: failing financial institutions, rising gas prices, rising food prices, an epidemic of young people dropping out of high school, a sky-rocketing incarceration rate, particularly among African-American men, 40% of Americans uninsured or underinsured. The scope, scale, and complexity of it all are beginning to overwhelm even seasoned managers. Our most cherished assumptions about change – and our ability to manage it – are breaking down.

An Interlude on Certainty

Just as the capacity to sustain a steady state is essential to our individual and collective well-being, so is the capacity to act from certainty. The work is to discern when and how certainty can serve when faced with a myriad of complex mysteries. One very powerful use of certainty is to get clear about intention. Intentions are powerful shapers of action, and shared intention -- rather than a command-issued plan -- can help align self-organized, relevant action among diverse actors in profoundly complex situations. Expressed as a question, intention goes a long way towards inviting the different voices within a system to participate in finding responses that serve the good of individuals and the good of the collective.

Acting from certainty is so culturally rewarded that it can be quite difficult to see its traps. We have been taught that to lead is to be in charge -- to master our subject and be confident and skillful in execution. There is no gold medal for the person fumbling at the margins, unsure of themselves or what to do. In school, we are expected to know answers. What if we also rewarded inspiring questions? What would it mean to honor the pioneers who blaze the trails, who, no doubt, fumble constantly as they enter uncharted territory? What would it mean to honor the mistakes of dedicated, creative risk-takers and then use them for the learning they offer? What have been the unintended consequences of focusing with such fervor on familiar territory and ignoring those working at the margins? What would it mean to celebrate those exploring the edges between what we know and what we don't know, the metaphorical places where, on maps of old it said, "there be dragons"?

There Be Dragons

Our social systems are currently rife with some very loud disturbances. What we could depend on is failing in our schools, our health care system, our international relationships, our organizations, our communities, and more. The scale, scope, complexity, and speed of these disturbances are all increasing, eliciting a very common and human response. Many are throwing up their hands and saying, "I'm stumped. I don't know what to do." Business as usual is over. More and more leaders and change agents are asking for help.

Stop a moment and breathe. This is a very special moment. It signals a change comparable to a change in chemical state – from ice to water, or water to steam. It

requires such radically different beliefs and skills to succeed when the landscape is filled with such uncertainty -- even mystery -- that virtually every effective action is counterintuitive. And yet, what is called for is so familiar, so deeply in the cells of our being that we actually do know what to do. Successful responses require accessing not just our rational minds, but much, much more of ourselves. Not only that, once we begin, while it is likely to be challenging, it may awaken us to the best in ourselves, connect us to the best in others, and discover the power of what we can be and do together that is impossible alone. I believe these times are calling forth a shift in how humans organize themselves to accomplish meaningful purpose. We are just beginning to understand the implications.

What Now?

We are entering the terrain of **acting from inquiry**, when, once we really “get it”, we embrace disturbance because we know that the promise of creative and innovative answers on the other side of the unknown is real, and that powerful simplicities emerge on the other side of disturbing complexity. To enter this terrain is to acknowledge that uncertainty and mystery are givens -- and to become open, receptive to what arises. This seeming passivity turns out to be a very active, albeit unfamiliar state; an example of the counterintuitive work required. It is not easy to be receptive to the unknown when we have been trained to *just do something*. It is to be humble, discovering that finding our way through is not a solo act and demands more than “input”. It takes whole-hearted (and whole-minded) involvement on the part of people from the many aspects of the system touched by the disturbance. The greater our capacity to be curious as we get clear about our intentions and to stay unattached to the form outcomes take, the greater our ability to ask powerful questions that attract the diversity of a system to join in the quest.

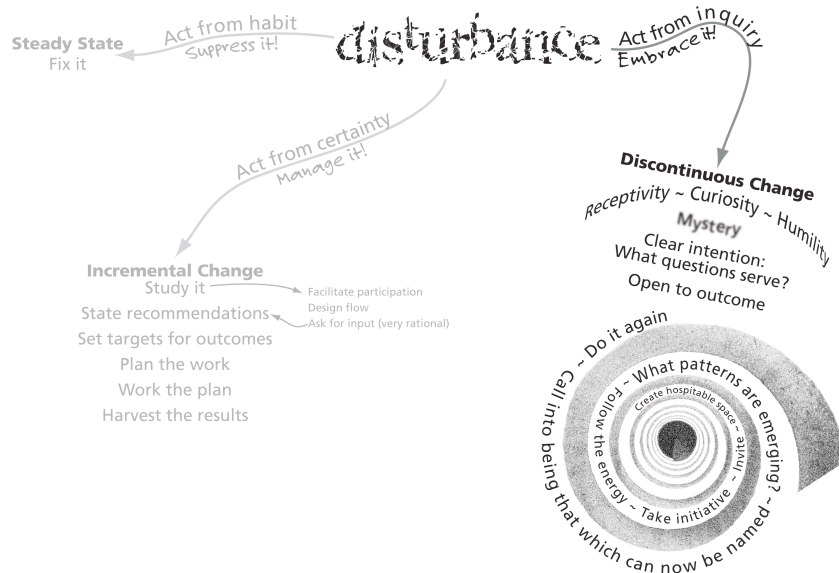


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Addressing discontinuous change is radically different from the predictable flow of managed change. It requires a willingness to face the unknown with equanimity, curiosity, receptivity and humility. The work of leadership is vastly expanded, it is not the “take that hill”, “leading the charge” work of old. Rather, it is the work of creating hospitable conditions and asking questions that focus our attention towards deeply felt, aspirations that attract the diversity of the system to step in and take initiative, knowing that clear intention creates an organic boundary for the work to be done. By following the energy, sensing what patterns are emerging, and calling those patterns into collective awareness, novel and often utterly unpredictable solutions appear. Who could have imagined the remarkable public response to the people of New Orleans when the U.S. government fell so far short of what was needed?

Achieving one great result doesn't always mean that new ways of working together are sustained. For many, such experiences set a new high-water mark of what is possible for a diverse group to accomplish. Creating awareness of what went right and how to do it again involves making the patterns visible. This is a step towards creating new habits. Practicing what it takes to successfully enter into the unknown yet again is essential. With repetition, new behaviors become familiar and integrated.

As we learn to work with the fiery energies of emergent change, it rounds out our capacity to meet the natural needs of a system; sustaining the dance that keeps dynamic energies stable, managing improvements to our systems over time, and stepping in fully when radical shifts are what we need.