Why we must change the way we change

By Andrew Wells[1].   December 2018

Change unlocks value. Challenges to conventional wisdom are a basis for change.   When we push our thinking we can find greater value even in our everyday ways of working.

Let's change the way we look at change.

The way a business goes about introducing change is a product of that organisation's culture. Getting change to happen is critical to success in most business organisations, and in many individuals' business careers too, at some point.

There is a widespread way of regarding change: we mostly look at change as process. When we look at change this way, as activity, we see that we do lots of it. We can measure our activity when it suits us, and we can reassure ourselves that we do it well. If we look at change as a desired effect though, as outcome, we need to get better at it. We should be much more ambitious in what we achieve than we are now. We should be much less self-satisfied.

When we look at change as an effect, and then start adjusting our expectations of the effects we get, that leads us towards opening up our thinking and our ambitions: about how we go about getting the desired effect, and make it stick, and how we might do that at pace.

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A Board Director of a medium sized manufacturing business got in touch with me recently. He had taken up his role not long beforehand. He wrote:

"I am now on the Board at [he told me the name of the company of course but it is not relevant to our story]. As a Board we have identified that we need to put in place a culture change programme. I wondered if that would be something you might be interested in helping us with? I can fill you in with the details over the phone, so give me a call, and then I'll put you in touch with the CEO who would welcome a conversation with you."

I took the meeting with the CEO and her HR Director colleague on a sunny autumn afternoon. We had a constructive conversation: about the backstory to their business, how they had got to the point they had got to, what they saw as their needs, and so on. It was clear they had some issues to deal with.

During the conversation the HR Director described a programme that had been run previously at the business: a leadership development programme. Leadership, rightly, had been pegged as important to getting change to happen. He expressed his disappointment with the outcome of that previous programme

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and he compared what had happened with what was needed now. It had been a training programme, like so many leadership development initiatives. The training had been well received by participants, many of whom reported that they had personally gained a great deal. But nothing much had changed afterwards. The participants had not universally gone forth into the business and applied their skills. In fact very few had taken much out of the classroom at all to apply in the workplace…

This is a mundane scenario for an essay, and an ordinary story. It is of interest and of significance to those involved, of course, but perhaps not much of a case study for the rest of us to pick over? It is precisely because it is so ordinary that we should look again. There are many commonplace ideas in this story that repeat time and again in the way culture change is approached in business organisations. And there are a few very simple adjustments which could be made to make a world of difference.

One commonplace idea is the notion "we need a culture change programme". This assumption has been made too early on by the Board, CEO and HR Director, and now confirmation bias will start to circle around it. Because that assumption is made so early on it becomes self-fulfilling: the answer is a culture programme. Now, what's the question?

A "culture change programme", in the sense that it is used here, is an input. It is an activity, a process to go through, not an objective to reach. The sense in which our protagonists use the term is to imagine a series of interventions, of workshops, coaching and training, and other inputs that would be provided by a suitably experienced and qualified consultant whom the managers of the

business feel they can work with. This is what I, as an expert and consultant, am expected to sell to the CEO and her HR Director. Their interest during the conversation was in my proposals for the methods we would use, less so the effect we would help them get.

This is the basic model on which much of the change industry works. But, there is a misdirection involved which holds us back from achieving the change we could achieve, and which is probably what is really needed as the outcome. It guides us onto and along a particular track, and that might not be the right track.

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How many HR Directors would lay claim to their organisation's culture agenda as their bailiwick? Most? In my experience most I have worked with would at least suggest that organisational culture is something they should have a substantive involvement with, and most of their "C-class" colleagues would expect that too. In my example earlier, for instance, it was her colleague the HR Director who the CEO brought with her to the meeting to discuss a culture programme for her organisation. How many HR Directors though would imagine that the experience that employees, colleagues, contractors, and visitors get when they visit the lavatory should be their responsibility?

A number of years ago now I worked on a change project at a large industrial complex. The goal of the work was to influence safety behaviours and was to do with the improvement of the organisation's safety culture. To start a process of understanding what was going on in the organisation, we gathered a few groups of the employees together to set up a series of conversation groups, to

listen to people around the patch, to get a sense of how they saw their work-a-day world, and to understand from them what they felt about their safety. The very first of those conversations was one of the most insightful. It involved a group of industrial tradesmen (they were all men).

I confess that at the time the site did seem a hazardous place to me. When I had been walked around by the company's health and safety manager, I sensed a fair potential for mishap and the potential for injury. The statistics for the company on accident rates were not particularly good either, although thankfully no one had lost his or her life. The operations director of the company had said he wanted a culture change programme. The first group of employees we spoke with expressed a different view though. Sure, this was a dangerous place to work, but "we know what we are doing", they chimed. Then one gentleman added his perspective.

"Look, we know you probably mean well and you've got a job to do," he said to me. "But do you think the people who employed you to come here and talk to us really care about us? They're doing this to cover their own backsides. They're under pressure because accident rates are obviously too high and they need to get those down, not because they care about what happens to me or to any of the other people sitting around this table. But I'll tell you a health and safety issue for you to go back to them with. Did they show you the changing rooms? Go and take a look at the toilets in our changing area. That's a health issue for you. That counts as health and safety, doesn't it?"

He went on, to the obvious glee, and with the full encouragement of his colleagues around him. "It's filthy. The traps are broken and there's foul water spilling onto the floor because of the blocked toilets. It stinks in there. And the water out of the taps is too hot to use and it burns your hands, and the plugs are missing so you can't wash properly in any case. They've put duckboards down now. That's the solution they've come up with. Can you believe it? They don't fix the toilets, they've just put down duckboards so we can walk over the **** without having to step in it."

The room went silent, waiting for my reaction. But he had just told me as much as I needed to know about the experience of the place to advise on how to get any process towards change underway, for safety or any other issue for that matter. His story checked out. It would be premature to entertain embarking on a culture programme of the type envisaged by the company hierarchy at that time. I advised my client to fix the washrooms, then we should talk about what to do next.

The episode reminded me of a short period in my career I spent working for a company that specialised in putting products and services into washrooms. I was given the job of figuring how we could help our sales people get a better hit rate on the sales they made when visiting new sales prospects for the first time. I think what my manager had in mind was that I would do some sort of training needs analysis and develop an additional module for the company's sales training programme. After a week on the road with the sales team though we devised instead a very simple set of qualifying questions for our sales people to drop into the conversation early on with a new prospect. With those questions and an early visit to the washroom our sales people would know immediately how to take the

conversation forward with the potential buyers of our products and services, what angle to come from, and where to take the conversation to find the value for the customer. Sales performance of our representatives with new prospects improved dramatically, and we started taking large share from our competitors. In the process though, we identified two categories of customer. Those who cared about their people, "do-it-right", and those who were just "gimme the money".

Want to get some quick insight into the culture of an organisation? Visit the loo. Not the one the Chief Executive uses, but the one the shop-floor workers are obliged to use. Want to get some traction on changing the culture of an organisation? Set aside some budget for improving the built environment, and then spend it on the things that will make the most difference to the experience and comfort your people have in their workplace, like the washroom. Show them you care, by actually caring.

Latterly, now my stock in trade is to do with change, I still use the "toilet test", often quite literally, when I visit somewhere new for the first time. It tells me so much about what to expect, and rarely lets me down. Cleaning up the washroom, or some other similar or equivalent adjustment, could be one of the most important steps you could take to reshape the culture of your organisation. Fixing the washrooms could be an actual step to take or you can see this as a metaphor. Either way, whilst it took much more than a single step to put the first man on the moon and bring him and his fellow astronauts safely home again, we all remember Neil Armstrong's iconic small step/giant leap.

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The first principle of change is the selection and maintenance of the aim. What are we seeking to achieve, and why? The desired effect.

The desired effect though is rarely binary: either we have achieved our goal for change or we have not. A binary, pass or fail goal is not a particularly inspiring mode of thought or measurement anyhow, and as a leader, of course, inspiring people is on your charge sheet.

A more psychologically effective way of setting out an aim for change is to describe your goals on a scale or a trajectory. There should be three gradations on that scale:

i. The minimum "security goal".

This is the very least you would wish or need to reach. Falling below this minimum standard would be failure. A security goal should not be a push over. It should be an achievement to be proud of in itself, once you have moved past it.

ii. A realistic "stretch goal" to aim for.

This should be a tough goal. Anywhere between your security goal and your realistic stretch goal will be a success. One just recognises that there are varying degrees of success to press for, and always more and better to work towards.

iii. A "barrier breaking goal".

This is the type of goal which takes you down the range, into new territory. Set a barrier breaking goal and it precipitates an especially valuable thought process. To tackle a barrier breaking goal we must first understand what barriers, real or imagined, we must address. We must find the limits of our current ways of doing things, understand what determines where those limits exist, and figure out what we must do to step across to the next developable S-curve.

Setting the aim for change on a scale gives direction and a dynamic to the what and the why of change. Somewhere on this scale, also, is where your real ambition will lie. You might look out for that, because those around you will take note of where your ambition actually lies even if you are not aware of it yourself.

For those of us who make our living from helping implement change, we cannot escape either. There is a challenge placed on us here: "physician heal thyself".

Imagine a way of getting culture change to happen in organisations that is reliably highly effective, lasting in its effect, cheap to do, and fast. That would start to take us into barrier breaking territory for our trade. We could then start to scrutinise the barriers that need to be overcome, real and imagined, to extend the expectations of what a "change programme" should deliver and over what timescale it should be done.

We should resolve rather than accept the traditional project management triangular trade off between the constraints of quality, cost and time. It is unlikely that the next S-curve for change will involve the same traditional long term culture change programmes and same conventional thinking about organisational change that prevails now. The standard fare consult:train:coach approaches that go with prevailing expectations of "change programmes" for business organisations could prove too limited. Just as climbing trees will not help you reach the Moon if going to the Moon is something you could imagine and is where you want to go.

Ah, the Moon, again.

Fifty years ago, on Christmas Eve 1968, the photograph on the previous page was taken. That picture became known as "Earthrise". It was a photograph of planet Earth shot from Apollo 8 by the astronaut Bill Anders as his spacecraft emerged in lunar orbit from the dark side of the moon. Life Magazine later published Earthrise on the cover of its "100 Photographs that Changed the World". That is some claim. The image has been cited as the most influential environmental photograph ever taken, and as the picture that marked the beginning of the environmental movement. I was a child when Earthrise was published, and I remember it when it came out. If that image launched the environmental movement, then my life has run concurrently with that movement.

I still have a sense of wonder when I see the picture now, and of the hope that was spoken of at the time. An expectation that we in our humanity would look after our planet, for our children and our children's children, and for the life that shares our world with us.

A picture that changed the world?…

WWF reports that in the fifty years since Bill Anders and his fellow travellers saw Earth rise over the horizon of the Moon we have wiped out 60% of wildlife. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns us we now have just 12 years to avert climate change catastrophe. Then there is the plastics in our oceans, and… so on. The tragedy of the commons.

The perspective that goes with Earthrise was born of the "overview effect" of seeing our only and precious home in its beauty and fragility in the vast and hostile expanse of space, and of realising how tenuous our existence really is. If change is activity then we have done lots of it on the environmental front. If change is a desired effect then we are not changing fast enough; nothing like.

In business we tend to rub along, as is our habit most of the time. We run our change programmes, we make a living. We can let inefficiencies ride: until the volition strikes to do something better, and someone with the authority to do it stands up and demands something different. In other arenas there are imperatives that we should not ignore any longer. Arenas in which it should not be a matter of choice but a matter of conscience. On sustainability the case is clear. Business has a central role to play, not a walk on part. It must play its part, along with the body of science, government, and every one of us as individuals. We are running out of time. Problem is, the case has been clear for the last fifty years. In the interim we have been doing lots of activity, and our knowledge has improved exponentially, but the statistics have gone down hill and are still getting worse.

It is time to look differently at change, and treat it as "the desired effect". Even on the grandest of stages. Perhaps especially on the grandest of stages.

Is there an appetite for looking at change differently? There is certainly a compelling case to be made in some aspects of business. Outwith the role of business in the sustainability of our habitat, adding pace would be a clear and obvious win for behavioural change when it comes to, say, safety, sales, or customer satisfaction, just for examples. In those arenas at least any proposed change should be expected to add immediate, lasting, measurable benefits.

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I know of a scenario of a corporation and a consultant who worked for it for many years. She had individual clients in various roles and parts of the company, for whom she worked loyally in an advisory capacity on and off, whom she challenged and coached, and from who she in turn had learned.

Over the years she had been asked to do projects to get people at all levels of the organisation to talk, to open up, to share their voice. Her clients had wanted to engage their people by giving them a good listening to, and the consultant's job had been to make sense of what they said, to extract some insights to feed into the goal setting and policy making for the company's "people agenda". The work she did of this type was always well received it seems. She was congratulated on how insightful she was, and how well she wrote her reports. That made her feel good. Her clients thanked her and she got recommended. They asked her back for more, and the people she engaged with at the different levels in the business always welcomed her back, time and again, like an old friend and a respected member of their team.

Same with the company's customers. They liked chatting with the consultant too, and sharing their thoughts and observations. Every so often some of the more senior of the consultant's clients at the corporation would send her out to listen to the customers' voice. Listen, make sense, provide insight, and recommend what should be done.

The company has had some elegant and well thought out aspirations and goals for change over the years. There should be little criticism of them for the selection and maintenance of their aims in that regard: the "what" and the "why" had been developed and discussed and then written down, presented, transmitted. And full marks for willingness to put effort into the mechanics of engagement, into capturing the voice of their people and seeking out the perspectives of colleagues and customers.

For the consultant it had been a privilege working with those individuals and a delight to spend time with the employees at the company. But as a company customer, it had been a frustration personally and professionally to work with that organisation. If change is an effect then the company was crippled with inertia when it came to actually taking the essential steps to get lasting change underway.

Perhaps as a consequence, every so often, when there is a downturn in the business cycle for example, or a poorly performing business unit needs to be brought back to par, when needs must, change does happen at that company. And when it does, it happens fast. A "theory X" style of motivation technique kicks in. Every problem becomes a nail, and the answer is always a hammer. The "X-men" step up to the plate.

"Here we go," they say, "we have the culture challenge to do all over again."

But, as far as real change goes, Neil Armstrong would still be on the footplate. The washrooms really are still in a state.

Good people drift off, disgruntled, to pursue their careers elsewhere, and others stay, in similar state of mind. The corporation's stock of good will and human capital is that little bit poorer each time.

That type of approach to change is a form of disruption. It is direct action. It can and often does get financial results, quickly when needed. It is not at all the "constructively disruptive", barrier breaking, enriching, lasting, motivating change that I am writing about though. It is not dynamic change.

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If we can find the volition to grasp the way we look at change, to explore where that takes us and then, perhaps, choose to see it through, the time is right to do it. Motive, opportunity, means: we could look at how to speed up change <u>and</u> make it stick, if we want to.

The answer for faster, more effective and more effort efficient approaches to change lie in the direction of doing more of three things in particular:

1. Looking at and understanding the process that underpins change in terms of a buying process rather than a selling activity.

2. Shifting the way we see and regard leadership in our organisations and communities, and resetting expectations for what it is "to lead".

3. Responding better to the shift which has recently taken place in the pre-eminent model for dialogue.

I have addressed points 1 and 2, the engagement of leaders and leadership development, and the nature of the buying process involved in change, in another essay: "Time for some leadership development. Start with WTF…"[2].

The way we conduct dialogue about change, exchange ideas and transfer knowledge in our world has shifted, and that shift has far reaching consequences. The shift in the model for dialogue can be illustrated by analogy in the way we now consume news and exchange of views through news and social media channels. Importantly, the shift in mind set that comes with that evolution has happened at large, in business organisations too.

Time was when the predominant mode of exchange about change and transformation was in the form of vertical and hierarchical communication. The process proper would start when analysis and perspective, the preferred message, was provided or endorsed by an authority figure or group: the guiding mind, someone who carries weight in the assumed hierarchy of knowledge, someone who knows better or best. In the news media this would be the editor, commentator or journalist who would run a story out, a definitive view for his or her audience to digest. In a democracy at election time, leaderships of political parties would put out a definitive manifesto into the media, and run it through their party machineries and the People would get to vote on the alternatives.

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[2] *"Time for some leadership development? Start with WTF…" [ISBN 978 1 9996780 0 5] is available gratis via onepointthree.com*

In business organisations for the equivalent it would be the managing director or the executive team at the top of the organisation (the recognised business "leader" or "lead team") who set out what is to be what when it came to required change. Other ranks would be expected to follow the lead of the seniors, and the process of change is about getting people to follow a shift in direction set out for them. Conversation and dialogue serves the purpose of getting people to assimilate the prescribed wisdom. The hierarchy and power distribution expected for communications flow in a vertical mode. That flow is reinforced by organisational diagrams which set out the relationships between people, groups and inter-related entities, either in a pyramid or in a matrix layout for that matter, to reflect where the authority lies and who is supposed to take notice of whom. Power lies in control of the message and in governing the response to it.

This is not going to disappear as a model for communication *per se*. It still has and is always likely to retain an important role in the control of a corporation, and for good reason. But when it comes to change, mandating that "top down" is becoming much less appealing and effective, not least because the people who are expected to do the buying-in are now getting used to something else happening outside work, which they are increasingly expecting to be reflected in their workplace as well.

Communications formulated for change which are founded according to the vertical model have a common, typical and distinctive deductive logic to them:

compelling argument - followed by a plan - engagement - action leading to effect

Many, perhaps most even, change efforts are still weighted heavily to this communications model. This is the model which is slow to have effect. Significantly though, this no longer reflects the communications experience that the people who inhabit our contemporary organisations are now becoming most familiar with.

The pendulum has swung. Our pre-eminent form of communication on news, politics, shopping… …and so much else is now based on lateral conversations: a dialogue which works in a horizontal dimension. Our expectations for dialogue, of the type relevant to communication about change, have shifted fundamentally to a more egalitarian form of exchange.

In our consumption and assimilation of news, for example, this has resulted in greater flow and freedom, with greater opportunity for inclusion and diversity of views, greater involvement and individual expression, and a step change in engagement. Those factors would be something to aim for in business organisations too. The democratisation of ideas, knowledge and information exchange has not just happened in the outside world. This is happening inside our business organisations already, it is increasingly expected, and it matters to the efficiency with which we can get change to happen.

In my trade, I engage in dialogue, sharing of ideas, and knowledge transfer with people in London, Paris, and Johannesburg, San Francisco and Chicago, Singapore, Geneva, Shenzhen, Fremantle, and Colombo…. This marks me out in no way whatsoever. I can express my views to a global audience, but if I want any dialogue to happen and to continue I should not assert that my

voice is any more nor any less important than anyone else's.

This is the world in which we now live. We all live in it. And it is different to the way it was only a short time ago. We are all getting much more certain of the value of our own worldview now, and more assertive about it, and thus what we will be minded to buy-in to and why.

There is a dark side too. The pre-eminence of lateral conversation in news consumption and politics has led to the rise of fake news and gas-lighting on a mass scale. "Fake news" in a business organisation can kill the buying process on which change depends.

Miscommunication is easy, it is a factor, and it does not have to be deliberate.

If we only switch our view to that of change being the desired effect, and not just process and activity, but then stick doggedly to conventional approaches to getting it to happen, disappointment looms large. So it is time to look again and look differently at how we set about change. The deductive logic approach, in which we start with a compelling story -

make a plan - engage the populus - then action leads to effect, only gets us so far and only gets us there slowly. The direct action approach only gets us a short term effect, and/or it invokes resentment and resistance. These approaches do not serve us well enough.

All this leads us into different territory in the way we should approach change. In organisational change that translates into making much more use and placing much more weight on methods concerned with inclusion, co-creation, and self-organisation. We must bring such methods to bear alongside, and at times instead of, other techniques we use now. But why shouldn't we? We are social, sapient, self-organising people, and so are our colleagues around us. So let's make better use for ourselves of our evolutionary biology, perhaps...

And the roles played, and skills brought to the table, by protagonists and change agents will need to shift too: from authoritative self-professed experts with all the answers, to servant leaders with the wisdom to steer.

It is time to step off the footplate.