

Change is not what it used  
to be. Understanding the  
role of the change agent

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## **THE NATURE OF CHANGE**

**'There are two things we can say for certain about the future. It will be different – and it will surprise.'**

Philip Watts, Chairman of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group

Change is not what it used to be. Whatever we thought about it is having to be revised. Today, change management does not fit with the old idea of moving from one relatively fixed point to another, neither is change achieved by a neat process of sequential stages. It does not have a start, middle or end. From the point of view of human experience as well as organisational performance, change is increasingly paradoxical. It is exciting and terrifying. It requires discipline and opportunism. It is revolutionary but can end up with a surprising amount of continuity, planned or otherwise. It is intensely personal and a phenomenon involving many millions of people. It takes power from some people and gives it to others. It can tear up old relationships while building new ones. In the words of Charles Handy:

**'Everywhere we look, paradox seems to be the companion of economic progress.'**<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to see why this restless situation should exist, as organisations struggle against each other using technology, knowledge, innovation and above all people, to develop competitive advantage and superior performance.

Organisational change takes many different forms, including mergers, acquisitions, commercial alliances (ranging from licensing and franchising agreements to joint ventures and everything in between), downsizing, personnel changes, commercialisation of new products, market entry, arrival of competitors, process improvement, cost reduction, customer focus, and other forms as well. Furthermore, change is both organisational and individual in nature. It is organisational in that it affects the strategic direction and overall approach of the business. It is also individual, affecting people on a personal level by influencing their motivation, behaviour and ultimately their effectiveness. The term 'change' is therefore very widely used and encompasses many, many different situations. However, our research indicates that the way in which each individual

can initiate or respond to change remains essentially the same, whatever the particular manifestation of that change.<sup>2</sup>

Given this, is change management an oxymoron? Is it possible to actively manage change – or is change too unruly to be tamed? Is it advisable to manage change, or will the attempt rob it of its energy? Would it be better to give up and do something more profitable? But then again, do we have a choice? This article examines these questions, explaining how change can be harnessed effectively and, in particular, how change agents can work to ensure a successful outcome.

## **Making Sense of Change**

At the outset, it is also important to accept that change is not always and necessarily good, and neither is it bad. Like a force of nature, its consequences can be fantastic or disastrous, in equal measure. The issue is therefore whether one stands in the way of change, or harnesses it. The premise for this article is that change, whether desired or not, must be proactively managed to derive benefit (or to avoid disadvantage) for the organisation.

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**Change is paradoxical – how we react to it very much depends on our motivational state. Even the most extremely negative situations can sometimes provide moments of ‘positive exhilaration.’ Conversely, change viewed positively can also be seen sometimes as negative. Uninformed optimism can give way to informed pessimism – and vice versa.**

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If we are to manage change successfully, we have to accept that we will not understand the final destination – our ultimate goals – in detail before we embark on the change. Nor will the maps we have turn out to be particularly accurate or informative.

**‘The higher we climb, the more comprehensive the view. Each new vantage point yields a better understanding of the interconnection of things. What is more, gradual accumulation of understanding is punctuated by sudden and startling enlargements of the horizon, as when we reach the brow of a hill and see things never conceived of in the ascent. Once we have found our bearings in the new landscape, our path to the most recently attained summit is laid bare and takes its honourable place in the new world.’**

Julian Barbour <sup>3</sup>

Change management from this perspective is a messy and ambiguous activity. Increasingly, developing the capability to manage change proactively, even routinely, is acknowledged as the primary leadership task. This article seeks to help leaders gain an enriched understanding of how to influence the course and experience of change.

To do this successfully, leaders need to take on board three new perspectives on the impact and management of change. Leaders need to:

- Recognise that the people who are the targets of change are not fixed in their reaction and response – people are essentially inconsistent.
- Understand that change impacts upon different constituencies and that specific strategies are required for all of them.
- Accept that change management is not about following a process; rather, it is more akin to managing the ebb and flow of different forces.

## **REVERSAL THEORY AND LEADING CHANGE**

If management is about achieving results through others, then leadership is about securing the future by enabling people to deal with change effectively. To do this, we first need to understand others and ourselves. We need to rid ourselves of a view of people as fixed and static. Instead, we must prepare ourselves to deal with people who veer between quite different responses to change at different moments, and who need to be helped to handle these different responses in ways that benefit the organisation and themselves.

New insights and research from the field of psychology provides a powerful framework for first understanding and then managing paradox. Reversal theory is one of the most significant theories of motivation to be developed in the last twenty years. Consequently, its impact on understanding the ways in which we make decisions, are motivated and behave when confronted with the opportunities and risk of change, is considerable.<sup>4</sup> The fundamental insights are outlined by Professor Michael Apter:

**'We are not always the same: we are inconsistent, we develop and we change, and so too do the people that we need to influence or lead. We are different people at different times, even under the same circumstances. This is important to understand if we are to work successfully with others and build effective relationships.'**<sup>5</sup>

### **How Reversal Theory Works**

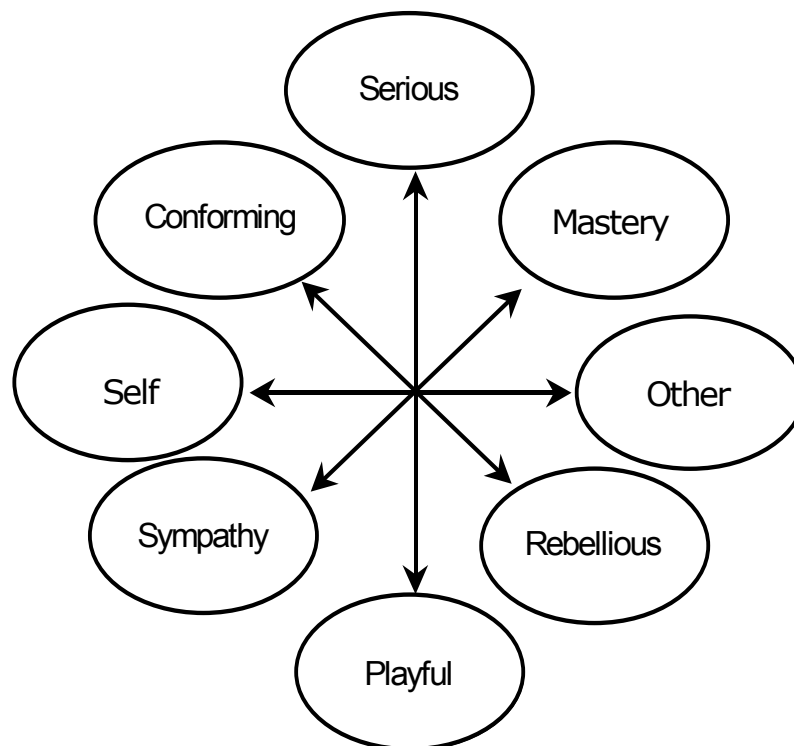
Reversal theory provides a powerful framework within which approaches to leading change, based upon both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, can be accommodated. Crucially, it provides an understanding of the differences that lie within and between individuals in the way they are motivated. Reversal theory recognises the paradoxes of human behaviour, suggesting that individuals are:

- Motivated to be **serious** and pursue goals, but also motivated to **play**, take risks and look for excitement.
- Motivated to **conform** and fit in, but also motivated to **rebel** and challenge.

- Motivated by issues to do with **mastery** – not just control of people, but also of processes and ideas – but also by caring, friendship and affection, notions of **sympathy**.
- Motivated by interest and focus on **ourselves**, but also on **others**.

Each of these statements encapsulates two motivational states or ways of being. A state is a position we take in the way that we view the world, and we may at different times see the same activity in quite different ways. The activity is the same, but our response to it changes because our motivational state changes. Figure 1: Pairs of motivational states, shows the four opposite states which we frequently switch or reverse between in the course of everyday life and under a variety of circumstances.

**Figure 1: Pairs of motivational states**



These states combine with each other in various ways at different times, giving rise to the full range of human emotions and behaviour. Additionally, each of these states can drive organisationally useful behaviour, as Table 1 illustrates.

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**Table 1: Contribution of motivational states to organisational behaviour**

<b>Motivational state:</b>	<b>Experienced as:</b>	<b>Potential response to change:</b>
<b>Serious</b>	Focus on goals, achievement, direction, planning, risk-conscious	Change can be threatening, creating anxiety by presenting uncertainty. Change may be positively received if it is clear how goals can be achieved
<b>Playful</b>	Focus on experimenting, trying things out, creativity, open thinking, and intrinsic pleasure of the activity or job itself	Change can look exciting – full of new opportunities. It will be perceived negatively if it makes life more predictable
<b>Conforming</b>	Focus on implementing established plans, following agreements and processes. There is a concern for maintenance and routines	Change again can cause disquiet, with questions such as: ‘What are the new rules? What new expectations will affect me?’ Knowing what to do next is a powerful change management tool for those in this state of mind!
<b>Rebellious</b>	Focus on being different, challenging, breaking conventions, critical analysis and conflict	The thrill of breaking new ground, of being different inherent in much change, is powerful when people are in this state. If change makes someone’s life feel more rigid, it will be seen as negative in this state of mind
<b>Mastery</b>	Wanting oneself, the team or the organisation to succeed. Focus on building up the power and resources of oneself and others	What is critical in this state is whether change makes oneself or others feel in control. If one feels less in control when coupled with the self-state, then the result is a feeling of humiliation. A change agent’s ability to build a sense of control is critical
<b>Sympathy</b>	Focus on building harmony and good interpersonal working relations, wanting to co-operate and showing empathy. Wanting to support and be supported	Concerns in this state will centre on how relationships will be affected by the change. Change can disrupt long-standing relationships, leading to feelings of loss and even grief

Motivational state:	Experienced as:	Potential response to change:
<b>Self-oriented</b>	Focus on personal success and a willingness to take responsibility, control and master new challenges. Willingness to be in the limelight	Change is experienced in terms of how it impacts upon 'me'
<b>Other-oriented</b>	Focus on guiding and caring for others, willingness to sacrifice one's own needs for others. Team spirit	Change here is evaluated in terms of what it means to others: colleagues, family, friends, a team, the organisation, the community or society as a whole

The critical insight from Michael Apter is that, potentially, we could experience change **in all of these ways** at different times. Of course, typically only a few of these states will come into play, but it won't be just one and, over time, all eight states are likely to be invoked. Moreover, it is not safe to assume that objectively 'good' change will always be positively received and that 'bad' change will be viewed negatively. Consider, for instance, the exhilaration and release that is often reported by people who have been made redundant, compared to the survivor syndrome of guilt and depression by those who find that they have kept their jobs.

Change agents need to immerse themselves in the flow of these shifting patterns of how people experience change – both in the way that it affects themselves and the way it affects others. As we shall see below, this requires constant awareness on the part of change agents, so they are not surprised by the startling ways in which people demonstrate their inconsistency.

### **Motivation and the Capacity to Change**

Each of the eight states emphasise a particular value – what someone would want at a particular time – and change is more likely when what is offered in the future is greater than what is available today. This arises when the ways in which someone can achieve satisfaction of a particular value now is limited and under threat, whereas a greater motivational richness can be recognised in the future.

People can nearly always be forced to change, but real, lasting and positive change occurs best when they can recognise the possibility of greater motivational richness, and feel able to take steps towards enriching their lives.

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**Change occurs when people:**

- **Feel they have the capacity to change**
- **Accept that the current situation is not viable**
- **Have a motivationally rich vision of where they are going**
- **Enjoy a 'protective frame', enabling them to take the first step**

At its best, this situation is a win-win. Organisations need people to experience all eight states in organisationally useful ways. They want people to fix upon new goals, capturing the energy and enthusiasm that arises from the playful state. Also, organisations need people to identify and fit in with new expectations, to challenge wrong or muddled assumptions, to build new capabilities, to establish new relationships and look out for themselves and others.

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Given this, change agents need to build a **change imperative** that captures these concepts. This is the reference point for all change management activities. A change imperative ensures that people feel they have the capacity to change by establishing:

- The current situation is not viable (motivationally diminished)
- The future looks compelling (motivationally rich)
- There is a protective frame – a feeling of security – that enables change to be initiated and continued.

**1. The current situation is not viable**

The current situation is unsustainable when it is too motivationally narrow. For example, in a particular situation it may only be possible to gain satisfaction in the serious or mastery state, it will be impossible to gain reward in the playful, rebellious or sympathy states because the opportunity for enjoyment, challenge and strong

relationships does not exist. Change agents can highlight this in various ways. Dissatisfaction can also occur because the means by which satisfaction can be achieved becomes less and less viable. Change agents need to identify how they can disrupt the viability of the current situation in motivational terms. Often, this is simply achieved by making everyone aware of the reality of current conditions. Change agent honesty is critical here – or messages will be ignored and future visions undermined.

## **2. People need a motivationally-rich vision to guide them**

Ensuring that people are not only able to access their full range of motivational states, but in particular, can access the most appropriate state at any given moment, requires a motivationally-rich vision. For a vision to succeed, individuals need to know both where they are going and how they are going to get there. They also need to understand what is expected of them and, above all, feel committed to it. At its best, vision is something that is owned by the whole team, not imposed upon it.

So, what might a motivationally rich vision look like? There are many examples of visions that motivate and energise organisations – there are even more that quite simply leave most people out in the cold. Of the latter, one example is the Chief Executive of a major plc whose vision – oft repeated – was simply to ‘maximise shareholder value’.

My favourite is the following wonderful vision of social entrepreneurship: the creation of a Berber hospitality centre in the High Atlas Mountains, out of the ruins of the old Kasbah du Toubkal. Its vision is:

- To be a showcase for sustainable tourism in a fragile mountain environment
- To be a viable business involved in the development of the Moroccan economy
- To make a significant contribution to the enhancement, viability and vitality of the local community
- To be a centre of excellence for academic work on the High Atlas Berbers and in Morocco
- To be an exclusive mountain retreat providing exceptional privacy and entry to almost anyone.

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The Berber Hospitality Centre also intends to:

- Generate a change of thinking and attitude in their guests through exposure to something different
- Modify corporate behaviour by receiving feedback from the local community
- Reward stakeholders and create a product they are proud of.

This vision may not be focused, but it is motivationally rich: it offers a great deal to a motivationally inconsistent person who values different things on different occasions.

A real test of a leader or change agent's skill is their ability to create and communicate an effective vision for their organisation or team. This is what defines a successful leader and organisation, sustaining both through good times and bad. However, it is also more important than that. A change agent's role, within the broader leadership community of an organisation, is to make that vision come to life, fostering it as a tangible, practical, behavioural reality.

### **3. People need a 'protective frame' – a feeling of security – to access all of the motivational states**

Change disorients the motivational map that we have of the world. If we are uncertain about a situation, then we no longer connect our motivational needs with the opportunities and threats posed by that new situation. Because of this uncertainty, we increase the likelihood that we will anticipate the negative emotions of failure in each state. The intervening variables in this situation are our personal levels of confidence, and the overall perception of threat. People therefore need a protective frame: a frame of reference enabling one to feel, at least to an extent, secure and confident. This in turn enables one to experience the uncertainty and ambiguity as exciting and stimulating, a challenge, rather than frightening and anxiety provoking.

From the perspective of inconsistency and motivational diversity comes a counter-intuitive proposition: **an over-emphasis on the goals of change inhibits its successful implementation.** This happens because goals are most valued in the serious state – a state in which, as we have seen, any ambiguity is perceived as stressful – causing a level of caution and fearfulness at critical points resulting in a fatal faltering in ambition and intent.

There is an organisational pathology here. Companies with great plans and objectives find out that things don't go the way they were supposed to. Anxiety mounts. People are blamed. In the end the original thinking is put on trial, taken out at dawn and shot. A new idea is sought. Why is this? 'We tried it and it didn't give us the results we expected' – is often a way of really saying, 'We tried it and it didn't give us the results as quickly and easily as we hoped.'

We handle ambiguity much more successfully when we are in a playful state – and being in this state for a significant amount of time has the knock-on effect of enabling us to more find satisfaction more effectively in other states.

When a protective frame exists, people can contribute from a much broader motivational stand-point. Set-backs are seen as opportunities for learning, people feel able to challenge and question, and they are much more willing to take personal responsibility for the change, keen to sacrifice resources, such as time and energy, for the greater good.

Building a protective frame, therefore, is a critical concern of change agents. It is not the purpose here to go into all the practical ways and means through which change agents can achieve this frame for their organisations. But all interventions fall into two categories that should be highlighted. Firstly, change agents should show where the 'safe ground' is. The absence of this information creates a vacuum that people fill with their own imagination – and often with worst-case scenarios. Making clear what is and not envisaged in the change effort is also vital in that it fosters an atmosphere of open communication. With free-flowing communication, people can keep re-assessing how the change will impact upon them. The second type of intervention is around building 'personal' control, and this is discussed below.

## THE DIFFERENT ROLES IN MANAGING CHANGE

### Clients and Consumers

It is useful to understand the different roles in change management, and one of the first distinctions is that between **clients** and **consumers** of change. Fair or otherwise, the people who perceive that change needs to occur are not always the people who are affected by it. The clients of change are those who benefit from it. Consumers are those who will be most affected by the change. Most obviously these may be two different groups of people inhabiting two different roles. It is likely that the patterns of motivational response –

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**Change involves several ‘roles’, including clients, consumers, stakeholders, and the change agent who frequently drives the change activity and harnesses it for the benefit of the organisation. A common error in change management is not to take sufficient account of the different needs and perspectives of these roles.**

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what people see as important and how much they feel those needs are being met – will differ. However, the roles can be combined in the same person or persons – alternating motivationally between quite different positions.

The pattern of motivational response when I am seeing myself as the client or initiator of change can be very different from what it is when I consider the ways it will affect me as a consumer. From the first, client perspective, I might see the change as a necessary way of improving the capability of the organisation (serious, other and mastery states), and from the second, I regret the disruption to my life and relationships

(sympathy and self states). Small wonder that initiators of change often manage the situation in such a way as to be least affected by it. Change agents need to realise motivationally they are dealing with

two different people in each of these circumstances. (This, of course, is not to say that either the client position or the consumer will always be characterised in this way.)

### **Stakeholders and Leadership Community**

Change also brings with it a group of **stakeholders**. These are people who, whilst not the focus of the change activity will be affected by it, and therefore have power and influence over it. These can include senior management who can lend or withhold support and resources. They also can include end-users, legislators, suppliers and others that may impact the change activity. Successful change is often highly influenced by a special group of stakeholders that can be termed a **Leadership Community**. These are the managers within an organisation who, through allegiance to each other and the organisation, operate within a complex and strong network of relationships that transcend the formal boundaries, such as structure, geography and function. Given this, the limits of change within an organisation, and the viability of the change imperative, will be defined largely by the collective attitudes of a dominant leadership community. This community sets the limits to how far and fast change can be implemented.

At its most entrenched, a Leadership Community can inhibit any change in an organisation – it may be seen as its ‘conservative core.’ At its best, a Leadership Community that can distance itself from old assumptions and expectations, may be the well-spring for the energy and resourcefulness which a change agent can draw upon to make change happen. It is also useful if a change agent already belongs to an established Leadership Community.

This is the reason why, when one or more senior managers attempt to initiate change, the implementation of it falters if members of the community of leaders do not back it.

The demands of change (characterised earlier) require a Leadership Community with several particular qualities, namely: intensive communication, spontaneous collective action, innovation and influence. Furthermore, it needs to be one that reacts proactively to new threats and opportunities and is prepared to face up to risks and uncertainty.

Change agents need to understand and be able to characterise the nature of the Leadership Community, and then begin to mobilise it as a servant of change. Leadership Communities can arise in a number of different ways:

- These can be a network of recruits developed within the organisation with roots deep within the culture of the business, such as the cohort of International Managers at HSBC who are ‘The glue that sticks the fabric of a federal organisation together’<sup>6</sup>.
- Alternatively, they can be naturally occurring – often within smaller organisations or as the result of individuals who have shared some common significant part of the organisation’s history.

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**Whatever the background to the Leadership Community – and there be more than one or it may be poorly defined – a change agent needs to be able to mobilise the people in it in support of the changes that are planned.**

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- Finally, they can be created as part of a deliberate piece of organisation development. This was the case with Boots Manufacturing, where 150 managers – all the managers within a particular grade – attended a leadership development programme in the French Alps which broke down the culture of permission and ‘Helped to redefine the organisation’<sup>7</sup>.

The last role involved in change is that of the **change agents** themselves. This is a complex and ambiguous role. Any change agent expecting a neat and complete job description should try something else. Change agents need to focus on different things on different occasions, and they also need to understand very fully their own shifting perceptions on the change – as is highlighted by Reversal Theory – at any one time. They are only seeing the nature of the change they are attempting to manage from a limited and temporary perspective.

## **THE CHANGE AGENT'S ROLE**

### **Understanding the Four Strands of Change**

Change is a messy process. It is a recurring myth of change management literature that it can occur in a neat sequence of stages and we suffer, according to King and Andersen,<sup>8</sup> from the illusions of linearity, predictability and control. Put another way:

**'Change is much more likely to occur through an array of parallel events, some of which advance the process and some of which turn out to be blind alleys or wrong turnings. Change can be characterised by new plans being drawn at all stages, reacting to unforeseen forces and issues... highlighting... the limited influence senior management can have on the outcomes of a change initiative.'**<sup>9</sup>

A much more realistic view, borne out by experience across many diverse organisations, is that change management consists not of a sequential process but of four parallel and interlocking strands, the relative importance of which changes over time. The four strands are:

- Initiation
- Organisation
- Implementation
- Impact

In what follows, particular motivational states will be highlighted in relation to each of these strands. But it should be borne in mind that, in principle, all of the states may usefully be brought to bear in each strand.

### **Initiation**

This is the 'grit in the oyster,' the need to recognise when problems require change to resolve them; when change is likely or actual, as well as its consequences; when innovation is needed, and so forth. To manage this strand, the change agent needs to:

- **Develop an awareness of the need for change.** The change agent needs to understand when a performance gap is emerging between potential market performance, and the organisation's actual performance. If performance is below par, or at a risk of falling below what the organisation might potentially achieve in the market, then initiation becomes a priority. One of the unseen dangers facing many organisations is that of strategic drift, with the organisation gradually falling below what it might achieve in the market. The reason that this can often be hard to perceive is because the results of the organisation may actually be improving – it may simply be the case that the organisation's performance is ebbing away at a slower rate than its current competitors, for example. Benchmarking is therefore an important part of the change agent's role in this strand. Highlighting the fact that organisations are beset with turbulent change is this insight from Igor Ansoff, written in 1965:

**'No business can consider itself immune to the threats of product obsolescence and saturation of demand... In some industries, surveillance of the environment for threats and opportunities needs to be a continuous process.'**<sup>10</sup>

However, the need to develop an awareness of the need for change extends beyond the level of strategy and planning. It encompasses every aspect of the organisation's activity, and to be effective, the change agent needs to drive change across the team or organisation and through the required activities as well.

- **Understand the change landscape.** Change agents need to explore the change environment to understand what will inhibit and promote the change internally. For example, it may be necessary to understand the stance of the Leadership Community or the likely reactions of the shop floor. In doing this, they are defining the climate for change within the business. Victory – as a successful general might say – comes from knowing the battlefield.
- **Become an agent provocateur.** In a situation where the change agent senses that performance over time is faltering, if not in absolute terms then in relation to the market potential or competitors, then the solution is to become an agent provocateur. In the most general terms, this involves disturbing the organisation

in some way, getting people to accept that the status quo is not sustainable and motivating them to change the situation.

The tasks of the change agent in this strand are, typically, mapping the change requirement from different perspectives, and building the constituencies of people whose support is going to be required. The change agent needs to make people feel uncomfortable with the status quo, putting them in touch with reality and its future motivational inadequacy. The change agent will also need to work in this strand to begin to fashion a picture of a viable future.

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**People are changeable and inconsistent in their view of change. Effective change agents understand and respond to this.**

**Change agents are inconsistent as well, and will naturally focus more or less on different strands in the change process.**

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In Reversal Theory terms, the motivational states that are particularly relevant both to the change agent and to others in the Initiation strand are **playful** and **rebellious**, since they are both about disturbing the status quo. The playful state does this through being exploratory, experimental, creative and risk-taking. The rebellious state does this by being critical, sceptical, rule-breaking and innovative.

### **Organisation**

This strand is about making the organisation ready and fit to change. It often involves defining new objectives and priorities in the light of the disturbance that is threatened, has taken place or is continuing to take place. The tasks

of the change agent in this strand are all focused on planning new ways for achieving these objectives in terms of processes, procedures, roles and equipment, building rapport, clarifying roles and 'contracting' with individuals to make necessary changes, building constituencies of people committed to changing.

To manage this strand, the change agent needs to:

- **Develop a new, motivationally rich vision of the future.** The vision must be grounded by a compelling reason to change from

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the perspective of people most affected, the 'consumers' of change.

- **Ensure that the organisation is 'looser' and fit to change.** This can be accomplished by encouraging mutual problem solving and innovation, encouraging people to 'think out of the box,' not only about their own internal issues but about potential market developments as well.
- **Build communities for change.** These are groups of people working together across functional or hierarchical boundaries, providing support, stability and, above all, resourcefulness – the qualities needed to meet the challenge of change. In particular, the change agent will be trying to mobilise the Leadership Community to both provide the practical support required and protect the change.

In this strand, the change agent is ensuring that the organisation is adequately resourced and prepared to meet current and future challenges. In Reversal Theory terms, the motivational states that are particularly relevant in the Organisation strand are the **serious** and **conformist** styles. The serious style contributes to organisations by defining a new vision and engaging in long-term strategic thinking and planning, and the **conformist** style contributes by establishing new procedures, systems and routines for pursuing the goals implicit in the vision.

## **Implementation**

This strand focuses on the detailed working through of new processes, putting plans for change into practice and driving the change. It also involves sustaining changes that have occurred, and monitoring progress. Essentially, the Implementation strand is about 'hard' work: not necessarily in terms of time, but because it requires challenges and problems to be actively confronted and resolved. Fast and effective action is often needed to ensure that difficulties do not last, slowing momentum and eroding commitment in the change activity. To manage the Implementation strand, the change agent needs to:

- **Maintain and promote the performance climate.** This may involve elements of the other strands so benchmarking, creating

awareness and urgency, communicating a powerful vision, fostering a supportive environment, are all significant.

- **Keep the momentum and the resolve to change.** This can be achieved by building a sense of responsibility and sensitivity, often by emphasising organisational learning and learning loops, managing boundaries and building a performance climate.

Above all, the change agent in this strand is knocking down barriers, actual and potential, and helping the organisation and change activity to develop its own sustained momentum. This is when the good work that may have been done with the Leadership Community and others pays off. This strand is more tactical than strategic, concerned with converting strategic ideas and plans into practical, workable solutions, putting these into operation, maintaining and improving them. In Reversal Theory terms, the motivational styles that are particularly relevant in the Implementation strand are **mastery** and **self**. The mastery style is the most appropriate, since it is concerned with control and tends to be tough-minded and practical. The self-oriented style is also appropriate, since change agents need to display initiative and take personal responsibility for their part in the total implementation process (and also promote the contribution from these states in others).

## **Impact**

This strand deals with the personal and social problems arising from the stresses of change. It is concerned with building confidence and removing psychological barriers. For change to be beneficial, self-sustaining and permanent, it needs to be accepted and embedded within the organisation, and this requires the change agent to pay attention to its personal affects. To manage the Impact strand, the change agent needs to:

- **Develop an awareness of the impact of change.** In Reversal Theory terms, this means being sympathetic to others, and helping them to develop their own mastery. People often feel uncertain or threatened by change, so the change agent needs to enable people to take greater control. It also means being concerned with people as people, rather than as just workers. It may also involve maintaining certain types of continuity in the organisation.

- **Build confidence, resilience and a sense of control.** The existence of a protective frame mentioned earlier will help to build confidence and competence. Fundamentally it is about feeling secure, knowing that although change is taking place the important elements are being understood and managed. Control is usually seen as control of a situation, and being able to shape how events unfold. In this strand, the change agent focuses on three levels of control: control of the situation, contribution and reaction. At any point, each of these may be more or less viable as a strategy for maintaining confidence. The formula is quite simple – the more a person is in control, the more confident they will feel and the more they will be able to deal positively and proactively with the unknown.

Control of the situation asks the question ‘Can I shape what is going to happen?’ Here, the existence of a powerful and emotionally supportive network is important in harnessing the power and influence of others.

Control, however, is not just about shaping events, but it can also be about how each individual contributes to them. For example, can I choose whether to be involved or not? Alternatively, if I must contribute, how much control do I have over how I contribute? Lastly, can I be more confident in my contribution to the change by developing or improving my competence?

Up to this point, much of the impact of change may well have been taken care of within the Organisation and Implementation strands, in which these issues should have been thought through. However, for particular individuals, these issues may well require further review, as they represent a redrafting of the psychological contract that an individual may perceive they have with an organisation. It is also likely in any case that a change agent will have to deal with the third feature of managing impact, which is control of reaction.

Controlling reactions to change can often be achieved by helping someone see a situation in different ways. Looking for other motivational values will also give a sense of control. For example, instead of seeing a situation in terms of frustrated personal achievement, view it as an opportunity to enjoy oneself or to help others.

Finally, in terms of helping people manage their reactions to change, it is useful to remember that it is often not the ogres of the present but the ghosts of the past that make someone hesitate. Organisationally, it is the myths and distorted memories that start with the line 'The last time we did this.' Building confidence needs also to be about exposing these flawed judgements and letting go of limiting beliefs about the organisations and its people. It is very much helped by knowing that others will be emotionally supportive and will refrain from blaming and from unhelpful criticism.

The Impact strand is about the effects of change on the personal lives of everyone in the organisation, and about overcoming the emotional stresses and strains that may arise. In Reversal Theory terms, the motivational style that is particularly relevant in the impact strand is **sympathy**, which is most concerned with emotional and personal aspects. The **other-oriented** style is also likely to be especially helpful, since it asks of people that they show genuine concern and support for others. If the Impact strand is not ameliorated in this way, then achieving further change is likely to be difficult.

## **CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE**

Clearly, the significance of being able to manage change effectively is enormous. Initiating and harnessing change is fundamental to building competitive advantage and organisational effectiveness, as Philip Watts, Chairman of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, highlights:

**‘None of us needs reminding today how unexpected events – beyond imagination – can set the world on a new path... Our aim is to be prepared for a wider range of eventualities – ideally, to be able to interpret as normal human affairs what others see as crises.’**

The change agent’s role in maintaining the motivation and control needed to use change is more complex than ever, beset with paradox and inconsistency. However, as we have seen, there are now two valuable tools to help with this task. The first is the ability to view change as four separate, interconnecting strands that need to be managed: initiation, organisation, implementation and impact. The second, related tool is to use the insights into behaviour and motivation provided by Reversal Theory, which accepts that the same people can have different and opposite motivations and behaviours, at different times and in different circumstances. This is a view of human behaviour and motivation that is entirely congruent with the paradoxical, contradictory challenges of change. Maintaining motivation, managing each of these strands and ensuring that people are prepared for the unknown, is the challenge for the change agent.

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### **Further Information**

Please email us at [enquiries@apterinternational.com](mailto:enquiries@apterinternational.com), or telephone +44 (0)1509 228896

Change is not what it used to be. Understanding the role of the change agent

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Charles Handy, **The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future**, 1995, Random House (published in the USA by Harvard Business School Press as **The Age of Paradox**)

<sup>2</sup> Details of the scientific research that has been undertaken are available in M.J. Apter (editor), **Motivational Styles in Everyday Life: A Guide to Reversal Theory**. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press (2001). Further information about Reversal Theory, and in particular its implications for individuals and organisations, is available from Apter International (see [www.apterinternational.com](http://www.apterinternational.com))

<sup>3</sup> Julian Barbour, **The End of Time**, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Reversal Theory is an approach to behaviour and decision-making that is gaining fast in interest and acceptance from a diverse range of sources. These include established private sector businesses and public sector organisations, as well as health and stress management professionals and sports psychologists. Some of the basic ideas were originally expounded by Dr. K. C. P. Smith, a British psychiatrist and Dr. Michael J. Apter, a British psychologist (then working in the University of Wales), in the mid-1970s. Michael Apter, then systematically researched, elaborated and developed these ideas into a complete theory. The theory has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners around the world, and has now been commercialised with a string of products focused on supporting individuals and organisations to become more effective. Dr. Apter is currently affiliated to the Center for Professional Development at Georgetown University (U.S.)

<sup>5</sup> For further information see, **The Apter Motivational Style Profile Manual**, published by Apter International Ltd, 2002

<sup>6</sup> J Ridding, **The Ties That Bind**, Financial Times 25 April 1997

<sup>7</sup> **Radical Retreat**, People Management 2 May 2002

<sup>8</sup> King and Andersen, **Innovation and Change in Organisations**, Routledge 1995

<sup>9</sup> Steve Carter, **Renaissance Management** Kogan Page 1999

<sup>10</sup> Igor Ansoff, **Corporate Strategy**, McGraw-Hill, 1965