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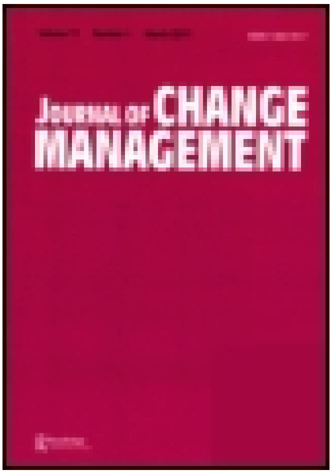

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Leading Change - Insights Into How Leaders Actually Approach the Challenge of Complexity

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Leading Change – Insights Into How Leaders Actually Approach the Challenge of Complexity

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ABSTRACT *In recent years, a multitude of authors have compared and contrasted traditional, episodic approaches to change management with more dynamic and continuous approaches that have emerged from thinking around complexity and complex adaptive systems. This debate has taken place alongside a narrative that suggests that most change interventions are unsuccessful, a claim based on little substantive evidence, and that most change leaders are not deemed to be capable of effectively leading change. This paper outlines the findings of an exploratory piece of research designed to find out what change leaders actually do. The results suggest that many leaders are at least intuitively aware of the limitations of traditional approaches to change and tend not to rely upon traditional change models. Many aspects of emerging change theory were reflected in the stories they recounted about their personal experiences of change. The content of those stories is reflected in the Emerging Change Model, which captures aspects of both rationalist and emergent change theories and which, it is hoped, may prove useful to change practitioners as a reflective device.*

KEY WORDS: Change, change management, organizational development, leadership, complexity, complex adaptive systems (CAS)

Introduction

Shaw (1997) characterizes ‘classical organisational development (OD)’ with reference to the work of Lewin (1958) and Schein (1988) and suggests that this approach to change is based on an assumption that change can be planned centrally and implemented accordingly. She contrasts ‘classical OD’ with approaches based on complex adaptive system theory and cites Stacey (1996) who compared

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the 'legitimate system', the organization's intentionally designed ideology, policies and processes, with the 'shadow system', self-organizing processes mediated through other networks in the organization. According to Stacey, in a complex system, change emerges from the interactions within and between these systems in a way that may be influenced, but not controlled. Change is not linear, and organizations as systems do not necessarily tend to states of stable equilibrium (Stacey, 1996). Building on this theme, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) frame change as an ongoing process rather than a set of episodic events and also depict change as emerging from interactions between different members of an organization. They argue that change is pervasive and constant, and critique the work of authors who suggest that continuous change is a property only of some organizations. Werkman (2010) contrasts 'traditional OD' with 'New OD'. Traditional OD is individualistic, with a focus on the potential of the individual and aspects of the organization that may be getting in the way of that individual potential being realized. Change is depicted as a series of planned processes through which obstacles and barriers to the realization of individual potential are removed, and is a participatory process through which people are increasingly empowered. A problem with traditional OD, Werkman suggests, is that it locates OD practitioners externally to the events that they are seeking to orchestrate. It implicitly assumes a single perspective and again frames change as being essentially episodic. The 'New OD' acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and positions change as continuous and ongoing. Some accounts also incorporate the idea of 'sensemaking', the process by which people seek to construct a narrative that brings meaning to events. Grant and Marshak (2011) characterize the 'New OD' squarely in terms of the theoretical emphasis it places on socially constructed realities, and the practical emphasis it places on facilitating change with reference to individual and system consciousness. According to this social constructionist perspective, discourse is the principal means by which the members of an organization co-create a coherent social view. 'Realities' and 'truths' therefore represent social constructs.

In summary, these authors and others (e.g. Burnes & Jackson, 2011; Ford, 2008; Jabri, Adrian, & Boje, 2008) depict a traditional approach to change as being discontinuous, episodic, and linear, with the role of the change agent being to frame a predetermined outcome based on a single perspective of events. Early descriptions of a new post-modern approach to change suggested that not all organizations could be described in this way, while more recent accounts suggest that change should always be regarded as continuous and emergent and place a heavy emphasis on social constructionist theory and the social nature of sensemaking. Before considering further the extent to which these two approaches represent alternative approaches or contingent approaches based on context, aspects of the 'New OD' will be considered in more depth.

Sensemaking and Identity

Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) depict sensemaking as a process by which people rationalize their own actions and the actions of others. The outcome of sensemaking is the ability to articulate the meaning of circumstances in a way that serves as a springboard into action. It is 'an issue of language, talk and communication' and is intrinsically linked to the notion of identity. It is to our sense of identity that we look to when faced with uncertainty, and at the same time, our identities are subject to the outcomes of the sensemaking process. Sensemaking can therefore be a high-stakes process because issues of identity are involved (Weick et al., 2005).

The sensemaking process is complex because people may have multiple identities. Bond and Seneque (2012) outline the evolution of social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT). SIT contends that people tend to classify themselves and others into categories. The process of categorization enables people to define themselves relative to others and with respect to their workplace. SCT builds on SIT, proposing that self-conception and identity formation occur at multiple levels such that people will seek different identities in different contexts, always looking for an identity that best meets their needs in the moment.

This sensemaking process is social (Weick et al., 2005) and the development of identity is therefore a socially constructed process (Beech, Kajzer-Mitchell, Oswick, & Saren, 2011; Reissner, 2010), a reflexive narrative in which people experiment with different identities through talking to others as well as themselves. Gover and Duxbury (2012) outlined a 'faultline theory' that describes how coalitions develop within organizations on the basis of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Sources of commonality and difference are based on identity, be that a readily observable factor, such as age or gender, an informational factor, such as education level or work experience, or indeed any other aspect of identity. These faultlines may be activated, to the detriment of organizational effectiveness, by triggers such as differential treatment, differing values, an expectation that all members of a group will act similarly, insult, or simply being forced to interact with a different subgroup. The focus of any change initiative therefore becomes the redefinition of identity (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009), multiple personal identities as well as collective identities, which continue to evolve over time in a dynamic process of ongoing human interaction.

Dialogue

If change is the outcome of sensemaking, and sensemaking is a social process, this positions social interaction at the heart of change (Ford & Ford, 1995; Marshak & Grant, 2008; Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010). Accordingly, many contemporary approaches to change emphasize the importance of facilitated interactions between members of an organization. In the experience of Jabri et al. (2008), many of these change efforts designed to increase participation are monologic, with the emphasis placed on persuading others to align to a predetermined 'common' vision. These authors frame effective interaction as an ongoing dialogic process in which a multiplicity of meanings is encouraged. Efforts to achieve consensus are often framed as dialogic, but the desire to arrive at a predetermined outcome usually means that they are actually monologic, such that a consensus apparently attained is often fragile and illusory. The authors cite Bakhtin in arguing that the possibility for illumination and for seeing things differently exists when people are free to respond and interact openly. McClellan (2011) tells the story of an art college's attempt to redesign building spaces to accommodate increased student enrolment and promote environmental sustainability. The change process included collaborative workshops at which it was intended that the different stakeholders would come together and agree a way forward. McClellan sat in on some of the workshops and found that change proposals supporting people's existing understanding of what the art college was, what it did, whom it served (its identity) were generally supported. Those that challenged that identity were closed down. Consequently, all of the agreed changes supported the existing identity of the organization and transformational change was not achieved. In other words, McClellan experienced an absence of dialogue and the domination of monologue.

Contingency and Context

Some authors commend a contingency approach to managing change. Burnes and Jackson (2011), for example, suggest that the congruence between an organization and the type of change required should be considered in making a choice, and that we need to be able to categorize change initiatives in service of being able to determine which approaches will work best in different situations. Stacey (1996) described a process by which practitioners could characterize change in terms of certainty and agreement and select a change approach depending on the results of this diagnosis. However, Stacey (2012) later wrote that he regretted having published the framework since it privileged the perspective of the individual apparently standing outside the organizational system, an aspect of 'traditional OD'. Tsoukas and Hatch (2001) argue that it is useful to simply think of all organizations as being complex, Ray and Goppelt (2011) suggest that such an approach safeguards against missing behaviours we might not otherwise be looking for, and Higgs and Rowland (2005) report that an 'emergent' approach tends to work best whatever the context.

Evidence

Graetz and Smith (2010) critique traditional approaches to change and suggest that the 'management penchant for these types of tools continues unsated' based on the content of management texts and business magazines, but there is little evidence to support an assertion that managers act upon these texts. Furthermore, whilst it is often claimed that around 70% of change interventions fail, there is no reliable evidence to support this (Burnes, 2011; Hughes, 2011) and in any case, most attempts to quantify the success of change efforts appear to be based on traditionalist approaches to change with their emphasis on pre-planned outcomes. Similarly Gilley, McMillan and Gilley (2009) report that 74% of employees surveyed believe that their leaders never, rarely, or only sometimes are effective in implementing change, but this begs the question as to what 'effective' means and assumes that leaders and followers adopt similar implicit theories of leadership. In summary, we do not really know how leaders go about leading change in practice and we have no agreed means by which to measure the efficacy of emergent approaches to change. The purpose of this study was to begin by shedding further light on how leaders actually go about leading change from which may emerge insights as to how we might revisit the notion of success and failure. Given the multitude of factors at play in a complex change scenario and problems in defining success and failure, it was decided to embark upon an exploratory study for which a qualitative methodology was deemed to be most appropriate.

Method

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology in which the researcher approaches the study with a broad question or area of interest (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Data collection and analysis are regarded as interrelated processes such that the analysis guides the ongoing nature of enquiry. The grounded theorist is not trying to prove or disprove a predetermined hypothesis; rather, the theory emerges from the research process. The purpose of a grounded theory study is to discover a new theory that accounts for all the data observed and which is likely to be generally applicable. This generalizability is partly achieved by seeking for abstract concepts. The more abstract the concepts, the wider the theory's applicability. The aim of the exercise is to build a theory that explains observed phenomena, how they arise, and the consequences of those phenomena. Where exceptions to this regularity are observed, it is the role of the researcher to account for those variations.

Sampling

Consistent with much of the change literature, the design of this study was based upon an assumption that we might regard change as a general phenomenon. The focus was on identifying what different change interventions have in common, identifying variations that might be attributable to the specific context. In grounded theory, it is representativeness of concepts rather than people that is important (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and so interviewees were sought who were known to have experience of leading change in multinational/multicultural organizations, or who had led large projects with several layers of management involved. Attention was paid to sampling a population from a diversity of different backgrounds working in different markets, and from different kinds of organization.

Fifty people were interviewed over a period of five months between June and November 2013. An initial list of 39 people was drawn up based on conversations between the author and 6 colleagues working in the change industry. Of the initial list of 39 people, 35 of agreed to participate in a 60–90-minute interview. The remaining 15 interviewees were suggested by members of the original group of 35. Whilst there were no formal sampling criteria, the final population of 50 interviewees may be characterized thus:

- 70% were male and 30% female.
- 80% were business leaders, 12% internal change practitioners and 8% external change consultants.

- Of the 80% business leaders, 62.5% had CEO experience and 37.5% had other senior leadership experience, such as a head of function or head of business.
- 80% were working at the time for corporates, 10% worked in government organizations, and 10% worked for not-for-profits.
- Of the 80% working for corporates, 22.5% worked in retail, 17.5% in manufacturing, 17.5% in integrated energy, 12.5% in distribution, 10% in technology, 7.5% in oil exploration, 7.5% in financial services, 5% in media and 2.5% each in mining, construction, telecommunications, ticketing and pharmaceutical sales.
- 40% were Australian, 36% European, 14% North American, 8% African and 2% Asian
- 18% related stories of change spanning across multiple countries. 38% told stories of change interventions in Australia, 21% in Europe, 7% Asia, 5% USA, 5% Africa, 4% Middle East and 2% South America.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the original semi-structured questionnaire had only one standard question:

> I'd like you to share with me two stories, first the story of a change in which you were involved, which you feel went well. Second, if we have time, the story of a change which you didn't feel went so well'

In grounded theory, the researcher proceeding through a series of interviews is looking for *concepts*; the basic unit of analysis, the clustering of concepts into *categories*, and an overarching theory, or *core category.* Although the methodology is qualitative and not quantitative, the researcher nevertheless pays attention to the frequency with which particular concepts show up, since a concept earns its way into the theory only by being repeatedly present. Over the course of this study, the researcher conducting the interviews tested concepts, categories and core category with colleagues on a regular basis, opening up his analysis to the scrutiny of others (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Interviews were conducted face to face where possible, else by telephone or Skype.

Results

Concepts and Categories

Figure 1 shows all the factors mentioned by at least 10 of the interviewees in response to the initial open question. For example, 36 people mentioned some aspect of power and politics in at least one of their stories, 33 mentioned the importance of a common purpose or direction, and so on.

Figure 2 shows how these factors were subsequently determined to represent concepts or categories by the researcher consulting with colleagues. Figure 2 includes factors in italics mentioned by less than 10 interviewees but that subsequently were determined to be connected to a category.

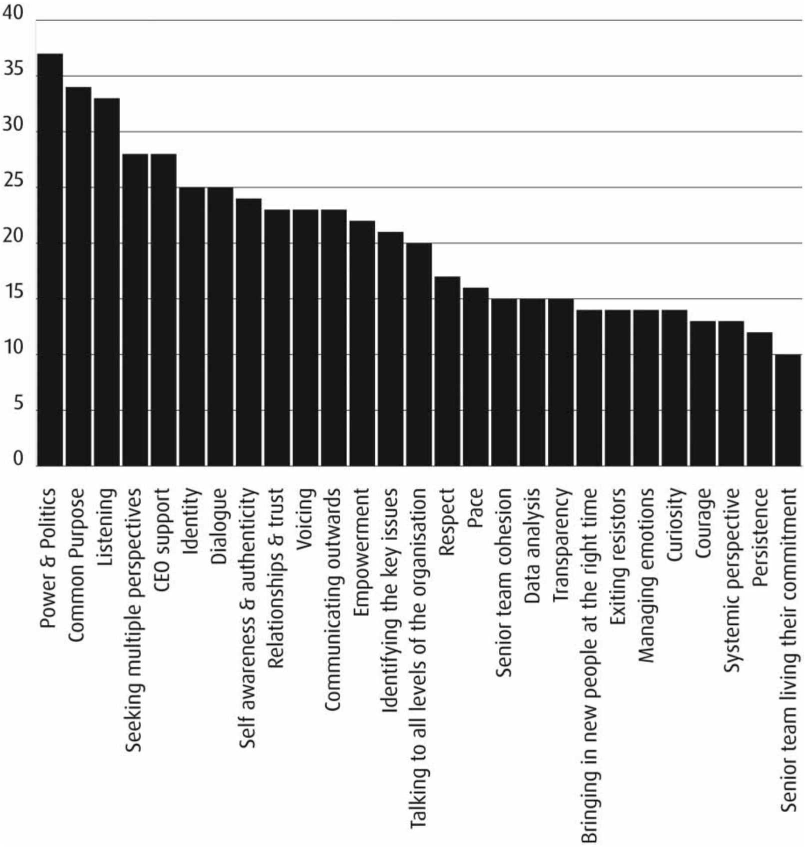

Figure 1. Concepts.

Dialogue

Listening, voicing and reflection were all ultimately defined as subcategories beneath a category called dialogue. Voicing as a subcategory includes being open and transparent, storytelling, giving feedback and crafting the message to address others concerns. Just under half those interviewed emphasized the importance of communicating the change message outwards. However, most interviewees spoke also about the importance of listening. For example, this CEO of a not-for-profit said:

> You need to communicate, communicate, communicate . . . and listen. The solution shouldn’t be hard-wired. For example, we decided to outsource our call centres. Our frontline staff said ‘Have you really thought through what clients will think?’ An account manager told us the reason one of our major clients did business with us was because he got to deal with us direct and not through an outsourced operation. I was grateful for the insights and recognised we had more work to do before pressing the button.

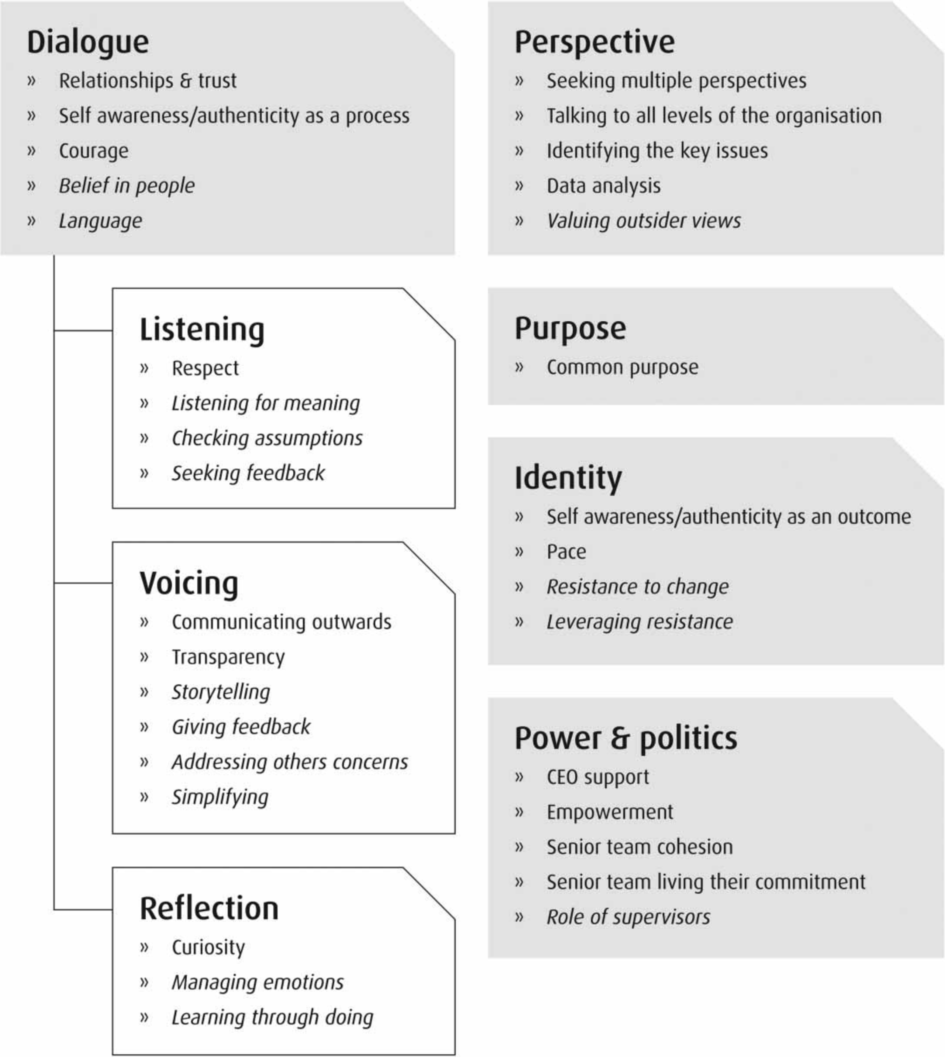
Dialogue
» Relationships & trust
» Self awareness/authenticity as a process
» Courage
» *Belief in people*
» *Language*
Listening
» Respect
» *Listening for meaning*
» *Checking assumptions*
» *Seeking feedback*
Voicing
» Communicating outwards
» Transparency
» *Storytelling*
» *Giving feedback*
» *Addressing others concerns*
» *Simplifying*
Reflection
» Curiosity
» *Managing emotions*
» *Learning through doing*
Perspective
» Seeking multiple perspectives
» Talking to all levels of the organisation
» Identifying the key issues
» Data analysis
» *Valuing outsider views*
Purpose
» Common purpose
Identity
» Self awareness/authenticity as an outcome
» Pace
» *Resistance to change*
» *Leveraging resistance*
Power & politics
» CEO support
» Empowerment
» Senior team cohesion
» Senior team living their commitment
» *Role of supervisors*

Figure 2. Concepts and categories.

Two stories illustrate the difference between monologue and dialogue in terms of approaching conversation with or without a predetermined agenda. The first story is told by a regional CFO, the second by the CEO of an Australian company:

> He does come out and visit us from time to time, sometimes unannounced, but it's always about his agenda and what he's trying to achieve. He doesn't appear to be interested in what we have to say. When I do manage to get a word in and tell him about some of the problems we're having, he assures us that everything will be sorted out. But there's no follow-up and it doesn't get sorted out.

> There's no substitute for going out and talking to people. It's about getting out and about without an agenda. I go out with no other intention other than to just talk to people and sound them out. You find out far more by getting out and talking to people than you do from a monthly report.

An ex-chief constable in the UK spoke about being encouraged to implement a monologic process, but opting instead for dialogue:

> We needed to reduce the number of senior managers. We brought in an HR firm to help us work out how to do it. Their approach was very process driven and harsh. I thought to myself – no – I'm not going to do it that way. So we designed a dialogue to bring the senior people together in one room to discuss what needed to be done. HR screamed - no! - but it was the best thing. We were able to talk to people about their concerns, and to put something together that was humane and which was accepted because we co-generated the approach.

Several leaders spoke about a personal journey in coming to recognize the importance of dialogue vs. monologue. This executive dean spoke about coming to question his model of leadership:

> I myself needed to go through a personal change journey. I needed to learn to shut up and listen. I had to be less aggressive. You get to leadership because you know the answers. You need to transition to asking questions, and it's not a transition everyone makes well. I recognised it was a journey that I needed to make.

It remains an open question as to whether reflection constitutes a separate category or whether it is a concept that might sit beneath the category of listening, depending on how listening as a category is defined. Some leaders did speak specifically about reflection. This group manager spoke about the facilitation of a reflective process being part of his role as leader:

> With the leadership team I made sure we spent time reflecting together at every meeting. What's happening? What's the current conversation? We discussed and collectively responded. We developed strategy on the run, recognising hot spots and how to address them.

The issue that remained unresolved for the researchers was whether or not reflection is an inevitable consequence of people genuinely listening to others, to the extent that they are listening for meaning, checking for assumptions and considering how their message is likely to be received by others.

Courage and authenticity were also clustered under dialogue rather than voicing. Having the courage to speak out is an obvious aspect of voicing, but what also emerged from the study was the courage required to listen. For example, this HR Director said that:

> It helps that the CEO is brave. He commissioned a strategic review after he'd already been around for quite a while. He opened himself up to the possibility that his own

> behaviours could be changed. He role-modelled being relentlessly self-critical, and always for a looking for a new way of doing things. Analyzing data with an open mind draws you to what needs to be done. The CEO put himself at the heart of it and openly committed to doing things differently, versus defending himself because he was feeling criticized.

This courage appears to be related to self-awareness, in that those who talked about being courageous also spoke about their values and beliefs acquired through experience and reflection upon that experience. This story comes from the CEO of a retailing company acquired by a larger organization:

> If the numbers falter they may hang me out to dry. That's a personal risk, but it's not my career – it's a job. If I was trying to be a corporate guy then I couldn't take risks. I used to work in private equity where your job is it; you sell the business you lose your job. That's a good mindset to have at the senior level. I'm not here to make them happy, but to do the right thing. It's a very liberating mental attitude.

Self-awareness and authenticity also show up in terms of outcome, and as such are included under identity (see below).

Perspective

Interviewees spoke about the importance of facilitating an exchange of perspectives on the here-and-now as a precursor to seeking a consensus on future state. For example, this CEO had just taken up the reins at an organization that had been losing money for quite a few years:

> For the team the key moment was when I said we were going to have an offsite. They complained, saying that previous offsites had achieved little in terms of agreeing a future direction. I told them we weren't going to talk about the future, we were going to talk about the present; the state of the market, the competition, what we were all doing. They were surprised by what they learned and the silos started to break down.

Interviewees talked of the importance of getting out and about and engaging with people face to face. The first story below comes from the Vice-President of a medium-sized retailer. The second story is told by the local managing director of a global technology company:

> With one or two colleagues I explained the change to every retail business in each state and explained it personally. What and why. Authentically and open. It made me accessible so they could understand, and I gained an understanding of what their concerns were so that I could hear and respond.

> Here I'll meet with eight people from the organisation at a time and sit down for an hour of informal talk, each group comprising people from the same level in the organization. I'll share what's on my mind for five or ten minutes and use the rest of the time to find out what's going on.

When the leadership of an organization does not seek to understand others' perspectives, the outcome may be significantly detrimental to the performance of the organization. The ex-Human Resources Director of a large multinational spoke about the aftermath of an intense period of mergers and acquisitions during which the company suffered a number of highly publicized setbacks. He talked about a particular moment which he said in retrospect may have led to many of the subsequent problems. After most of the acquisitions had been finalized, the new executive settled down to run the new business. They declared the new venture to be one company with one set of goals and objectives and one way of doing things such that there was no need to spend any more time discovering how different people viewed the world post-merger and acquisition. Whilst well intended, this declaration effectively blinded the executive team to the reality, which was that the new organization *was not* a single entity and that each heritage organization had its own way of doing things. Different parts of the organization used the same language to mean different things which created confusion. The HR Director of a global multinational said:

> People's heritage can't be brushed aside. After a big merger or acquisition you can't just say 'we're all one company now and that's it.' Even today, ten years later, there are people in one of the companies we acquired who have been watching who's done well and who's not done so well. They look at the top team now and see lots of their old bosses in that team and say that they've won.

Purpose

In this study, the words 'purpose' and 'vision' were used interchangeably to mean the articulation of a clear endpoint or destination, the attainment of which became the context for dialogue and for people's work. The importance of aligning around a common purpose or vision was mentioned by 68% of interviewees. Early on in the interviewing process, it appeared that a paradox was emerging. Some leaders described a collaborative approach to visioning, for example, this external consultant describes the behaviour of a CEO:

> The company hired a new CEO who quickly recognised that the old strategy wasn't going to deliver. He didn't have a clear idea as to what the new strategy needed to be and said that the first thing we needed to do was to come up with a new and common view of the future, one that would reenergise the company, because without that energy it was obvious we weren't going to deliver. The task was to come up with an idea, a powerful vision. The CEO and the top team decided to engage the organisation in co-creating something.

Others spoke about a process that at first glance appeared less collaborative. For example, this story comes from the CEO of a national retailer:

> I went in with a clear idea of what we needed to do. Two of us led the development of the investment thesis and set about executing the pre-formed plan. We executed it and sold the business for nine times our investment in less than four years.

In practice, however, he may have been describing a more open process than first it seemed:

> Yes, it was a simple thesis, a textbook approach I had seen used before by others at the companies where I had worked. I hoped it was directionally correct, but had I got it wrong, well then I would have copped it on the chin and said so.

The process by which change leaders come up with a purpose or vision for the organization may then be seen to always be social. The first question is: with whom does the leader engage in dialogue in order to come up with an initial articulation of that purpose? The second question is: to what extent does the leader subsequently engage in dialogue around purpose, recognizing that as the environment changes so may the purpose of the entity? This HR Director chose not to engage with her immediate colleagues in coming up with an original purpose, nor in further reflecting upon that purpose as events unfolded:

> I wanted to change the way the company did HR and I didn't think the HR team I inherited had the right capabilities. I thought they couldn't see what they couldn't deliver, they couldn't write the plan, so I brought in an HR guru from the US and I wrote an extensive paper on what I planned to do by myself. I didn't bring people along with me though and people didn't see things the way I saw them. I replaced seven of the top nine people in twelve months and the people below freaked out and decided they weren't going to play.

This CEO's story illustrates the need for a continual revisiting of purpose and vision:

> I had public shareholders to look after outside of China. The company listed at $3 but then the real estate market collapsed as did access to equity. The value of the company fell to five cents, but the Chinese weren't too concerned. They would default on their loans, but the banks couldn't do anything about it. The project simply went on hold. The Chinese were OK with that – they were in it for the long haul. My offshore shareholders were very concerned though. At that point the goalposts changed, and the focus became avoiding bankruptcy. I worked really hard and eventually managed to refinance the company. My overseas shareholders respected what I'd done in a very challenging situation and recommended me to be considered to run a new turnaround opportunity.

Identity

Several interviewees made direct reference to identity in describing how they managed specific change scenarios. For example, this storyteller came into a government organization from a corporate role as CIO. This extract of his story is full of references to identity:

> I was the transformation guy, bringing a modern way of thinking to a bureaucratic organization. But the organization's mantra was 'we're a family' and I was treated

> like a drunken Uncle Fester, as an outsider. I was the 'firefighter' rather than the 'architect' or 'builder' and I created some of the bushfires without knowing it. In the second year, when people realized I was a 'glue-man' trying to make everyone successful, I tried to turn relationships round through the use of language. It was hard work, forever selling yourself, always in interview mode. Who are you? What makes you so special, as an ex-private sector person? I assembled my team of 'green berets' to come with me on the journey, and they've all been fantastic.

So this person inhabited the various identities of 'transformation guy', 'architect' and 'builder' while others experienced him as 'drunken Uncle Fester' and 'firefighter' before everyone converged on the co-created identity of 'glueman', all within an organization whose identity was 'family'. This general manager told the story of an office move in which some people appeared to resist the move because of the impact they perceived it to have upon their personal status and the degree to which they identified the organization with the physical structure of the head office building:

> Some people had worked their whole careers in the same building. For them the building and the company were the same thing and they seemed to go through some kind of grieving process. There was something about the move that meant they lost their status as having been around longest. So we managed them differently. For example, we introduced a system for the new cafe where everyone had to have a numbered card to buy coffee. We numbered the cards according to length of service, so the person who had served longest got card number 00001, and so on.

A CEO told me about how an organization's 'family culture' proved to be an obstacle to achieving commitment to a particular strategy:

> The only option was to kill one of the brands. I dedicated a lot of energy to telling the story so that everyone understood. The problem was that killing the brand meant closing down some parts of the business. The organisation thought of itself as a family, and families don't ask people to leave. We had to ask some people to go and the organisation found that very difficult to cope with.

When faced with prospective threats to identity people require time to make sense of change and they seek out opportunities to engage in dialogue. This Vice-President spoke about the efforts of one of his direct reports in leading change:

> It was a mammoth project and required persistence. Typically, he involved people well before a rollout, doubling the amount of time he spent engaging them. All this psychology! It wasn't the technical complexity. I used to think you could accelerate human change, now I'm not sure you can. I think there's a time period over which people have to absorb information and get used to the change. It takes quite a while; in this case, nine months. I've seen big projects implemented fast, and fail.

Power and Politics

Seventy-two per cent of interviewees made mention of some aspect of power and politics. Fifty-six per cent said that support from the top is required if change is to be successful. For example, this CFO told me:

> I was trying to implement a new system. I'd done all the right things; I'd shared the vision and the benefits with everyone, and presented it to all the Asian countries. We rolled out successfully in most countries flawlessly, but one country GM didn't want it. I couldn't get to the bottom of it; all I got was a lot of excuses. Singapore was an important milestone for us and if that hadn't gone ahead, the rest of the rollout could have been endangered. Ultimately, I elevated it to the global CFO who contacted the VP Finance in Singapore and told him to implement the system – or else.

However, leveraging disciplinary power to drive large-scale change down through an organization is unlikely to be sufficient. Thirty per cent of our storytellers spoke about the importance of engaging the whole executive team. For example, this external consultant said:

> The new CEO asked me to help him get the whole organisation aligned around a new vision. He exuded phenomenal energy. He dropped by the change office on a regular basis and talked to people. The rest of the leadership team came only when invited, more out of obligation than genuine interest. The CEO left it up to them. He talked about picking our battles and questioned if their support was essential. He wanted to nudge them into taking an interest and thought if we got one of them on board we'd get the rest. In the end, not getting the whole of the leadership team passionate and on board was our biggest failure. As a consequence, they demarcated their functional agendas from the big change agenda, which meant too many people found it hard to get involved.

Many interviewees spoke specifically about the importance of involving middle management. An internal consultant servicing a number of clients in Europe told the story of middle management being effectively disempowered by a top-down approach to change:

> Up until that point, we had a real change of mood. Middle management was very committed – 'we can do it!' Then they brought in the consultants. The consultants were all dynamic and strong and they overrode the middle-management layer. I went there every four weeks and each time I visited I saw ownership being progressively given up and people becoming demotivated. The consultants introduced all their models and practices with good intentions, but they disengaged people. These were people who'd started to own their own destiny. Step by step, they got pushed back into minor roles, delivering data and doing what they were told.

Interviewees described different forms of power. For example, power through (i) knowledge, (ii) customer relationships and (iii) internal relationships:

(i) We decided to replace the legacy system with an outsourced system, piggybacking a competitor system, but there was a lot of resistance to even broaching the idea. The legacy system experts picked on functionality that could not be replicated and held it up as deal-breakers, or they did not come to meetings, or they bad-mouthed the executive and the competitor's system. But we needed them until post-migration. So we offered them money to stay even though their behaviour was poor. They had power.

(ii) The new office was to be open plan without exception. Lots of people actively fought to retain their offices and we had to ask the CEO to ring people up to tell them they were not going to get an office. All except the Funds Managers. They were key, even more important than the CEO. We had to compromise with them. We lost that battle.

(iii) When I went to the global head office I did not read it well. My predecessor was not strong and his 2IC (second-in-command), now my 2IC, had taken over. The 2IC was not interested in changing the way we worked; he was just interested in maintaining his relationship with the Vice President, and the Vice President did not want to piss off the 2IC because he was giving him what he wanted. It took me a while to realize the 2IC had no interest in my success and no interest in supporting the change. I found myself unable to do the job I had been brought in to do. I learned that you have got to make sure you know how everyone is linked to the stakeholders, and that you understand the lines of authority and how they work.

After much consideration this category ended up being called 'power and politics' rather than just 'power' because interviewees often contexted narratives on power by describing the scenario as 'political'. The word politics is therefore being used in this context to describe the exercising of different forms of power in an organization.

The Emerging Change Model

From these concepts and categories emerged the over-arching core category or theory, namely the 'ECM' depicted in Figure 3. The model depicts the relationship between the different categories. *Dialogue* sits at the heart of the change process since it appears that change generally emerges from dialogue. This might be intentional dialogue initiated in service of change, or it might be unplanned dialogue from which change emerges anyway. Dialogue is the process through which people collectively make sense of events, or *action*, that take place in the environment on an ongoing basis. Multiple *perspectives* form both an input to and outcome of dialogue, as does *purpose*, such that the relationship between dialogue and these other aspects of the model is best shown as two-way. An analysis of the stories suggests that whilst facilitating a collective understanding of multiple perspectives makes it easier to align an organization around a common purpose, it is not always sufficient. People have different experiences, values and beliefs that all influence the narratives that underpin individual and collective identities. Identity may be best thought of not as a hurdle to change, but again as both an input to and outcome of dialogue. Dialogue takes place all over an organization, all the time,

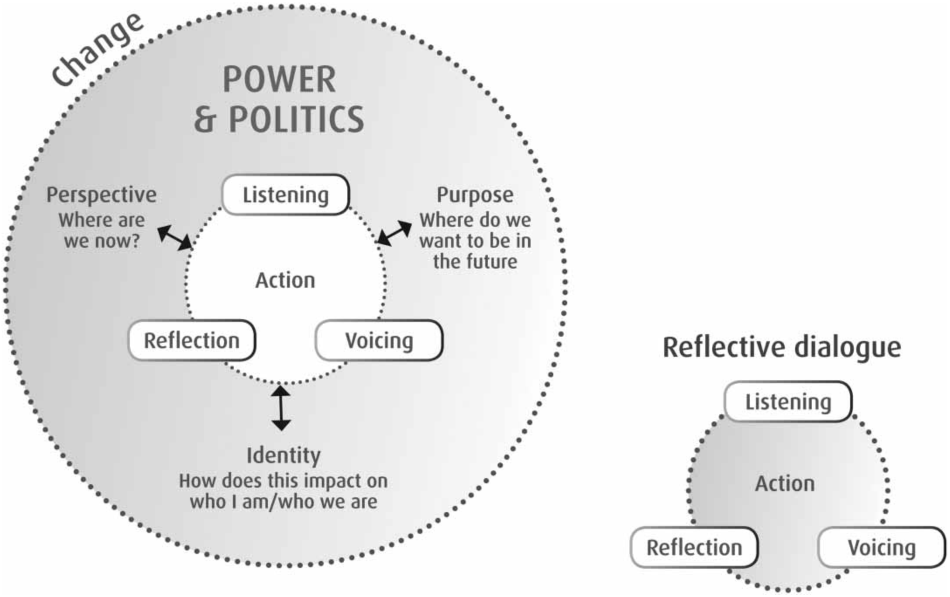
Change
POWER & POLITICS
Perspective
Where are we now?
Listening
Purpose
Where do we want to be in the future
Action
Reflection
Voicing
Identity
How does this impact on who I am/who we are
Reflective dialogue
Listening
Action
Reflection
Voicing

Figure 3. The emerging change model.

against a backdrop of *power and politics*. The nature of emergent change is a consequence of the interplay between patterns of dialogue and power.

The model thus posits dialogue at the heart of change. However, not every interviewee thought to focus on reflective dialogue was sufficient. For example, this interviewee worked on the senior executive team of one of the world's five biggest companies:

> Some people say all that matters is the conversation. It's not. It's also about power and influence.

Interviewees talked about the thought processes they went through in determining who they sought to engage in dialogue, when, and how. Similarly, interviewees spoke about interventions other than dialogue and the importance of adopting a systemic perspective to help them decide when to act, for example, in bringing new people into the organization, or exiting existing employees. This systemic perspective is not incorporated into the model itself. Rather, the model may be referred to as part of a broader reflective process. In this context, the word 'systemic' is being used loosely, as it was by those interviewees who used it, to mean consciously seeking to consider events from a more holistic big picture vantage point.

Planning

Notably absent from most stories was any explicit mention of planning. Whilst many of the stories referred to complex undertakings across a number of different functions or markets, planning was explicitly mentioned by only two of the people interviewed. Otherwise, it seemed to be assumed that some kind of planning process was being undertaken. Similarly, almost no one mentioned a specific change model. These omissions reflect the general absence of top-down accounts of change in which a senior leader set out to impose a change upon an organization. There was one notable exception, which will be recounted now in detail. One of the people interviewed was asked to transform the functioning of an entire organization and to do so quickly. The organization in question had been found by external regulators to have behaved improperly and been issued a large fine. The regulators obliged the organization to undergo an independent audit and insisted that the findings of that report be implemented else face the prospect of being closed down. The interviewee's role was to ensure that report findings were implemented. He spoke about establishing a project management office and basing his approach on the Kotter model of change (Kotter, 1995). He met with the CEO on a regular basis as part of the process and made requests of him when appropriate, all of which were responded to. He described the outcome as a success, in that the findings of the report were implemented, the regulator was satisfied, and the business was not closed down. On the other hand, he also spoke about a high number of people leaving the business, dissatisfied with the new culture, and a significant deterioration in financial performance. For this leader, the most significant aspects of ensuring the change process was implemented successfully were the support of the CEO, sticking to the plan, clear and easy-to-understand outward communications and his own perseverance and resilience.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore what change leaders actually do in the context of an academic narrative comparing and contrasting traditional rationalist approaches to change with more recent emergent schools of thought. A closer consideration of the data suggests that aspects of both are reflected in the way leaders approach change. Furthermore, an argument will be presented here challenging the notion that rationalist and emergent approaches to change are most usefully framed as being qualitatively different.

Emergent Change

Whilst the importance of clearly articulating a message outwards was emphasized by participants, the difference between monologue and dialogue (Jabri et al., 2008) was widely understood and communication was often framed as a social meaning-making process (Salem, 2008). The abilities of the change leader to understand others' perspectives, to tailor the message to the audience and to assess issues in a non-judgemental fashion were widely recognized (Buchanan & Badham, 2008; Charles & Dawson, 2011; Salem, 2008). In recounting stories of 'resistance to change', most interviewees framed this as a perfectly normal response, recognizing the need to create time and space for people to engage with change on their own terms, and acknowledging their own role in seeking to understand how others related to change. Many interviewees made direct or indirect references to identity, and 'resistance to change' was framed less as an obstacle and more as a call to dialogue (Beech et al., 2011; Caldwell, 2013; van Dijk & van Dick, 2009; Ford, Ford, & Amelio, 2008; Johansson & Heide, 2008; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). There was a general and explicit acknowledgement that top-down linear approaches to change were usually ineffective. Nevertheless, some aspects of the rationalist/linear approach *were* present.

Rationalist Change

There was one very clear example of a leader who adopted a linear programmatic approach to wide-scale change. The purpose for change was established without the input of employees and the scope was non-negotiable. Communication was largely monologic, dissenters were told to get in line or leave the organization and examples were made of people who behaved outside the new norms. Although many people did leave the organization and financial performance suffered, the storyteller described the intervention as successful. In a similar vein, Higgs and Rowland (2011) described three categories of leadership behaviour: shaping, framing change and creating capacity. Framing change and creating capacity were positioned as enabling behaviours, whereas shaping was described as a leader-centric approach in which the leader plays the role of ‘mover and shaker’, sets the pace for others to follow, and expects others to do what they do. They found that framing and capacity behaviours were most effective in effecting change, but also unearthed examples of success being achieved by means of a ‘notable degree’ of shaping behaviour, a finding they flagged as being worthy of further exploration. These findings present us with something of a dilemma. Our initial response may be to think to construct some sort of contingency theory, but Stacey (2012) suggests that since this would require some form of diagnosis, this in itself would be to adopt a traditionalist approach to change and to ignore some of the tenets of complexity theory. There may, however, be another way of reconciling the data for which the ECM may play a useful role, particularly in its consideration of power.

Power

With its positioning of dialogue at the heart of change and its emphasis on sensemaking and identity, the ECM appears consistent with many narratives on the nature of emergent change. However, the model also frames the importance of power, a variable missing from some accounts of emergent change (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Marshak & Grant, 2008; Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Werkman, 2010). Power shows up clearly, implicitly or explicitly, in most traditional change models. The Kotter (1995) model, for example, is implicitly top-down. Change, says Kotter, ‘ . . . always demands leadership. Phase one . . . typically goes nowhere until enough real leaders are promoted or hired into senior level jobs’. Power shows up less explicitly in many emergent accounts of change. The emphasis instead is often on the limitations of disciplinary power, and what happens in the ‘shadow system’ regardless of the intentions of senior leadership (Shaw, 1997; Stacey, 1996).

Power showed up consistently in this study. For example, it showed up in the narrative around dialogue and the leader articulating the purpose of the organization, and the identity of the leader as being confident, courageous and authentic. The dialogic process, as described by the leaders in this study, takes place against a backdrop of power and the expression of that power, labelled here as ‘politics’. Consistent with a traditional approach to change, some of the interviewees in this study appeared to place a primary emphasis on positional power. Whilst recognizing that positional power is often insufficient, the narrative remained essentially top-down, in that what was perceived to be missing was the enrolment of the next-level down (e.g. the senior executive team) and the level below that (e.g. ‘middle-management’). Whilst this is consistent with findings elsewhere that local management has a key role to play in effecting change (Conway & Monks, 2011; Judge & Douglas, 2009; Raelin & Cataldo, 2011; Salem, 2008), it nevertheless appears to reflect a hierarchical model for change in which positional power is privileged. Other interviewees spoke about different forms of power, for example, relational power and expert power. This hints at a dynamic perspective in which the power of the individual is framed as an aspect of identity, socially constructed through meaning making (Werkman, 2010). Grant and Marshak (2011) refer to the work of Hardy and Phillips (2004) who suggested that discourse both shapes and is shaped by power. This perspective enables us to see clearly that whilst sensemaking is a social process, it is not a purely democratic process; power determines the extent to which people are able to influence the dialogic process, and meanings do not merely emerge, but may be negotiated. To add another layer to the way this aspect of change may be perceived, Thomas and Hardy (2011) challenge the idea that power is some kind of static resource. Instead, they say, ‘power circulates through complex webs of possible actions in which all actors are located’.

Integrating Rationalist and Emergent Approaches to Change

This depiction of power allows us to consider how useful or otherwise it may be to think of rationalist and emergent approaches to change as being distinct and separate. Relevant here also is the idea, espoused earlier in this article, that all visions are co-created. When change leaders choose not to engage others in the organization to co-create a purpose or vision, this does not mean that they have come up with the vision by themselves. The idea and the conviction come from engaging in dialogue with others, colleagues from previous organizations, mentors, academics etc. . . . The ECM implies that effective leaders consciously choose who to engage in dialogue taking into account power dynamics. A key component of the ‘traditional/rationalist’ story told in this study was the extent to which the storyteller depended on the support of the CEO and CFO. At the same time, he spoke about feeling uneasy at times, to the extent of travelling to the USA to seek assurance from a business school professor as to how likely it was that he would succeed. He spoke about the importance of perseverance and resilience. Dialogue shows up in his story, but the dialogue is between him and his manager, and him and people outside the organization. He appeared to make a deliberate choice not to engage the majority of employees in that dialogue because he had already formed a clear purpose as determined by the regulator, and because he judged that he could ultimately be successful without engaging in dialogue with the broader organization.

The ECM

This discussion may serve to frame the potential value of the ECM. When asked to recount the story of a successful change intervention, many said that they felt unable to demonstrate that the change intervention they were to describe was 'successful' in an objective sense. Indeed, many spoke about how different players in the scenario they described applied different criteria as to what constituted success or failure. Therefore, it cannot be said that use of the model will make it more likely that a change practitioner will be 'successful'. Nor should the model be compared and contrasted necessarily to a traditional, linear, change model. The model's value may lie instead in its use as a reflective device and as such it may be used alongside traditional change models, not instead of.

The ECM includes *reflection* as a subcategory beneath the category called *dialogue*. In this context, reflection is reflection-on-action and in-the-moment while engaging in dialogue with others. This dialogic process, including reflection, may be conceptualized differently. Rather than thinking of dialogue as a specific event, one might frame dialogue as a single process taking place over a period of time between multiple people at different times. The ECM may be then used to reflect at a meta-level on the context in which the change leader is operating and how change is unfolding in service of deciding what action to take next. It is in this sense that the ECM may be used in conjunction with traditional change models. To suggest that the prescriptive use of traditional change models is unlikely to lead to effective outcomes is not to say that such models may not be useful when used with a mindset that acknowledges the complexity of the environment and the impossibility of being able to predict what will happen at every stage of the journey. In a complex environment, different models may prove to be useful in different situations at different times. Van de Ven and Sun (2011) define reflection in these terms, as an ongoing questioning of one's mental models based on the results of actions. The ECM may be best used as such a tool, directing the practitioner's attention to aspects of change that may be relevant, for example, patterns of dialogue taking place across the organization, aspects of identity and the dynamics of power. Ultimately, the extent to which such reflections lead to change being implemented more effectively will remain impossible to quantify and practitioners are bound to make their own judgements (Stacey, 2012).

Conclusion

To ask ourselves what approach to change is most effective, rationalist or emergent, may not be a useful question. This is a line of enquiry that may lead us to reject outright models that nevertheless incorporate important insights. Lewin's work, for example, has been much criticized because it appears to imply that change is discontinuous. Burnes (2004) points out that Lewin referred to *quasi*-stationary equilibria and that his theory incorporated several aspects of complexity theory. Many traditional/rationalist theories appear to have something useful to say about the role of the leader, complexity and power. The emergent school of thought has brought to the table further useful insights as to how change happens, particularly with regard to the way that people make sense of change and how this sensemaking process may be influenced through dialogue. However, there appears to be more work to do, for example, in terms of developing a deeper understanding of (i) how power dynamics work within organization, (ii) how leaders actually go about reviewing and revising their mental models in the midst of change, (iii) how leaders' approaches to change evolve with time and experience and (iv) how leaders tackle a wider range of situations than that represented by the 50 stories studied here. The 'Emerging' in ECM reflects, therefore, not only the value that the emergent school of thought has so far brought to our thinking on change, but also to the temporal nature of our understanding of change at any given point in time and the need for us to keep researching!

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