

# *Change Leadership that Works: The Role of Positive Psychology*

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*Change and its leadership have been the focus of an ever increasing level of both academic and practitioner attention over the last twenty years. Underpinning this has been the context in which organisations have faced a relentless increase in pressures leading to a need for significant changes not only to the way in which they operate but also to their core business models. At the same time it has been widely recognised that as many as 70 percent of change initiatives are unsuccessful (e.g. Beer, 2000; Kotter, 1995). This paper explores how organisations and, in particular, leaders can work in a way which increases the likelihood of implementing change successfully. In doing this we will explore the potential role that applying the lessons from positive psychology may play.*

**KEYWORDS:** Organisation change, leadership, positive psychology.

## **Change and its Leadership**

There is a growing realisation that change is a complex process. More recent research and writing have looked to the emerging field of complexity theory and the associated development of the 'new sciences' as a source of understanding change. Building on this, Litchenstein (1996) proposes that the root of much of the failure in change is that leaders are trained to solve complicated problems rather than complex ones. Thus managers view change as a problem which can be analysed and then solved in a linear or sequential manner. However, complex problems require managers and leaders to cope with dilemmas in the system rather than to arrive at definitive solutions. Indeed there is clear, and growing, evidence that

the role of leaders in the change process does impact significantly on the success of change. The beliefs and mind-sets of leaders have been shown to influence their approach to change and its implementation. It has been asserted that the role and behaviours of leaders in a change context per se has been an area which is lacking in empirical research (Higgs & Rowland, 2000). However, the transformational leadership model developed by Bass (1985) has been one which has been the subject of much empirical investigation. This stream of research does demonstrate clear linkages between leader behaviours and a variety of 'follower' behaviours and performance measures; although this work does not link directly with the change literature. Taking these points together gives rise to the following question: What leadership behaviours

tend to be associated with effective change management?

## **Recent Research Studies**

In exploring this question we have conducted a number of studies working with organisations on a collaborative basis. The studies entailed interviewing leaders within organisations and asking them to provide stories relating to changes with which they had been working. In the course the first stage of our research, data was obtained from more than fifty leaders drawn from some 19 organisations. In all some 110 change stories were gathered. The transcripts of these stories were analysed in detail in order to identify the overall approach to change which had been adopted and the leadership behaviours which were exhibited. In analysing these data we found that:

- i Change approaches which tended to be programmatic, and were rooted in a viewpoint which saw change initiatives as linear, sequential and consequently predictable tended to fail in most contexts; and
- ii Approaches which recognised change as a complex responsive process and embedded this recognition within the change process tended to be successful across most contexts.

In exploring these findings it was evident that a significant shift which occurs when moving from the more linear approach to change to the approaches which work with complexity is that the dominant mind-set moves from 'doing change to' people to 'doing change with' people. In this respect it was notable that change stories which adopted a complexity-based approach contained far fewer references to resistance to the change as an issue or barrier than in the more programmatic stories.

Having explored change approaches we examined the behaviours of the change leaders. In doing this we found three core sets of behaviours which were:

- i **Shaping Behaviour:** the communication and actions of leaders related directly to the change; 'making others accountable'; 'thinking about change'; and 'using an individual focus';
- ii **Framing Change:** establishing starting points for change; 'designing and managing the journey'; and 'communicating guiding principles in the organisation'; and
- iii **Creating Capacity:** creating individual and organisational capabilities; and communication and making connections.

Examining the relationships between leadership behaviours and change success, we found that leader-centric behaviours (i.e. Shaping) had a negative impact on change success. On the other hand the more group and systemic focused behaviours (i.e. Framing and Creating) were positively related to success in most contexts. Furthermore, when we examined the relationship between leadership behaviours and change approaches they found that 'Shaping' behaviours tended to be more widely encountered within the more programmatic approaches; whereas 'Framing' and 'Creating' were predominant behaviour sets in approaches which were based on a recognition of change as a complex phenomenon.

In a final analysis of these studies we identified that those leaders who demonstrated a strong combination of Framing and Creating behaviours appeared to be particularly successful in most of the change contexts examined. This finding led to a further study involving nearly 60 leaders drawn from 30 organisations and over 100 change stories (Rowland and Higgs, 2008). Whilst this study was designed in the same way as their previous study, the aim

was to explore the leadership behaviours associated with change success in greater depth.

Analysing the data revealed four distinct sets of ‘changing leadership’ practises and behaviours. These were:

#### Attractor

- Connects with others at an emotional level, embodies the future intent of the organisation.
- Tunes in to day to day reality, sees themes and patterns that connect to a wider movement and from this creates a compelling story for the organisation.
- Uses this to set the context of how things fit together, working the story into the life of the organisation so that every conversation and decision ‘makes sense’.
- Visibly works beyond personal ambition to serve higher purpose, the organisation and its wider community.
- Is consciously aware of one’s own leadership and adapts this for a specific purpose.

#### Edge and Tension

- Tells it as it is—describes reality with respect yet without compromise.
- In times of turbulence, has constancy; does not withdraw from tough stuff; keeps people’s hands in the fire.
- Can spot and challenge assumptions—creates discomfort by challenging existing paradigms and disrupting habitual ways of doing things.
- Sets the bar high and keeps it there—stretches the goals and limits of what is possible.
- Does not compromise on talent—pays attention to getting and keeping ‘A’ players.

#### Container

- Sets and contracts boundaries, clear expectations and hard rules so that people know what to operate on (performance expectations) and how they need to operate (values and behaviours).

- Is self assured, confident and takes a stand for one’s beliefs—is non-anxious in challenging conditions.
- Provides affirming and encouraging signals; creates ownership, trust and confidence.
- Makes it ‘safe’ to say risky things and have the ‘hard to have conversations’ via empathy and high quality dialogue skills.
- Creates alignment at the top to ensure consistency and constancy of approach.

#### Creates movement

- Demonstrates a commitment that engenders trust, enabling the system to go to new places, learn about itself and act differently.
- Frees people to new possibilities through making oneself vulnerable and open.
- Understands what is happening in the moment and breaks established patterns and structures in ways that create movement in the ‘here and now’.
- Powerfully inquires into ripe systemic issues to enable deep change to happen.
- Creates time and space (including attending to its physical quality) for transforming encounters.

Overall we found that a combination of these four factors accounted for around a half of the variance in success of changes in all of the contexts examined. Once again they found that Shaping behaviours were negatively related to change success in all contexts. Whilst most of the four ‘changing leadership’ practices showed some relationship to change success it was very notable that in the most successful changes the leaders exhibited strong evidence of deploying all four of the practices and behaviours. This led to a more detailed analysis of the transcripts of these successful leaders. In doing this we found a number of notable behaviours which differentiated those leaders who deployed all four practices from others in the sample. These were:

**They understand and incorporate the wider context:** they lead upwards and out-

wards to create space for the organisation and catalyse energy for change

**They build their leadership teams to think and act for the whole:** requiring them to step up and back to hold a bigger space and be strategic, interdependent and systemic—thereby creating an aligned transforming energy at the top.

**They work on the underlying system that produces the performance outcomes:** they show an intense ability to ‘tune in’ to their organisation, see patterns, notice how things are said not just what’s being said, identify the few key assumptions and patterns that if shifted would transform everything, and then take creative moves to make those shifts.

**They are then patient with people to make the transition:** while still keeping the change on course (others by contrast were passive, and just stood back and waited).

**They display extremely high levels of self-awareness:** are able to sense the impact they have on others, seek feedback and exchange on this, and consciously use their presence in the organisation to create shifts (‘evidencing leadership’).

**They set tangible measures for the change:** they open up the system to share information and performance data to both ‘hold up the mirror’ and catalyse people to take personal ownership for improving things.

The overall picture, which emerges from the above studies, appears to be one in which:

- In a more complex change paradigm the role of leaders becomes significant, particularly in terms of making judgments in relation to change approaches to be adopted.
- The more effective leader behaviours identified in this study tend to be more ‘enabling’ rather than shaping the behaviour of the followers.

In broader writing on leadership this move to a more enabling approach is seen to be related to

the emotional content of leader-follower exchange (e.g, Goleman et al, 2003; Higgs, 2003). Indeed Goleman et al highlight the significant role of ‘mood contagion’ in increasingly complex and volatile leadership contexts. This particular assertion provides a clear focus for the potential role of Positive Psychology.

## ***The role of Positive Psychology in Change***

The major challenge of resistance to change was highlighted above. This arises not only in the literature on change, but also in working with practicing managers and leaders (perhaps even more notably!). All too often in implementing change we tend to forget the people. The change imperatives and related plans fail to allow for the personal transition of people. Resisters tend to be labelled as ‘bad people’ and are frequently coerced into accepting the change. As a result the required performance and contribution are rarely achieved and the levels of personal commitment of the ‘resisters’ decline. Many have suggested that working with resistance, rather than trying to overcome it, is a more effective strategy. This way of viewing resistance places greater emphasis on understanding the impact of how we approach and lead change on the ultimate effectiveness of its implementation. Furthermore it emphasises the need to do change *with* others rather than doing change *to* them.

Commonly the very way in which change is positioned in itself arouses negative emotions. For example Kotter (1995) talks about our need to ‘create a burning platform’ in order to catalyse change. This does not exactly create a positive context within which to approach change within an organisation! Furthermore, the conversations around the change all too frequently focus on the limitations of the organisation and its people and the things they

have be doing which are wrong (Higgs and Rowland, 2005).

It is against this background that insights from the field of positive psychology may be valuable in developing an understanding of how we can implement change more effectively. Much of our thinking and practice has been dominantly influenced by 'traditional' psychology which is a 'deficit' model (Linley, 2006).

Employing this 'deficit' lens, the way in which we manage and lead change may be characterised by the following:

- i Change is viewed from a problem-focus. We are not achieving what we need—what do we have to change. Change represents an unwelcome interruption to business as usual;
- ii Change is bad news. A glass is half-empty mindset;
- iii We need to critically evaluate what we have been doing wrong;
- iv If we change things we will get resistance, we have to manage this and change resistant behaviours;
- v We have recruited and developed people to behave in a certain way; change requires that as an organisation we need to direct people to behave in a different way to achieve our business goals; and
- vi Fundamentally we know what new behaviours are required and we can therefore develop people to acquire and use these new behaviours.

The alternative to the 'traditional' 'deficit' model of psychology is encompassed within the positive psychology paradigm, initially conceptualised by Martin Seligman (1999). In his view there was a need to redress this and to balance the 'traditional' focus with exploration of, and building on, positive qualities. In essence he maintained that this is not a new area of psychology but rather a change in perspective which includes the study of strengths as well as weaknesses and to promote well-being as well as

exploring the absence of 'ill-being'. Thus in the context of change this would suggest two core themes to focus on, these being:

- i An increased focus on strengths and positive individual and organisational characteristics; and
- ii An increased understanding of the role of positive emotions.

Within this frame it may be feasible to shift the paradigm within which we manage and lead change from that outlined above to:

- i Change is an integral aspect of the continuing growth and development of an organisation;
- ii Change is natural and offers new potential. A 'glass half-full' mindset;
- iii We need to learn from what is working well;
- iv People can be energised to contribute to the change;
- v People have a diverse range of strengths which can be utilised; change involves facilitating others to deploy their strengths and contribute appropriately;
- vi The behaviours required in the post change context will emerge and be learned during peoples' involvement in the process of change.

In considering this change paradigm there are two areas related to positive psychology which are useful to reflect on. These are i) the use of Appreciative Inquiry; and ii) the role of positive emotions,(the former preceded the formulation of the positive psychology paradigm). Although examined separately below they are clearly strongly interrelated and also link to the strengths-based view at both individual and organisational level.

### ***Appreciative Inquiry***

Appreciative Inquiry is a process for identifying, focusing and releasing potential within the

organisation. At its core it seeks to make positive use of the complex networks within the organisation and sees the people as having potentially valuable views, being trustworthy and having a need to be empowered. Appreciative Inquiry seeks to find the elements in the organisational system which are well and finding ways to deploy these strengths in a way which supports the goals of the change. At its simplest level it involves changing the nature of the conversations around an organisational change. In practice this entails engaging with groups and individuals in identifying and examining the intended change:

- i What is it that we are really good at which we need to take forward and will enable us to achieve the goals of the change?
- ii What capabilities and practices do we need to build in order to achieve our change goals?
- iii In achieving the change goals what do we need to leave behind or stop doing?

It is not only the nature of these questions, but the sequence in which we ask them that changes the nature of the conversations and, therefore, the course of the change.

## **The Role of Positive Emotions**

In developing an understanding of the impact of Appreciative Inquiry it is important to reflect on the role of positive emotions. Indeed it is evident that Appreciative Inquiry frames conversations in a way which is likely to arouse positive emotions.

Our understanding of the role of positive emotions is strongly informed by the work of Barbara Frederickson (2000). From her work associated with the impact of trauma on individuals she found clear evidence that the balance between positive and negative emotions had a significant impact on individual well-being and behaviour. In particular she points out that situations that promote positive emotions broaden

and individual's attention scope, allowing them to see both the forest and the trees. On the other hand a predominance of negative emotions tends to lead to a narrowing of scope in thinking and negative responses to new stimuli. However, she pointed out that *balance* is important and that totally positive emotional experiences constrain individual growth in thinking and acting. In a change context all too often negative emotions lead to fear; resistance; adherence to established behaviours and ways of working; and lack of openness and flexibility. These responses play a significant role in impairing the achievement of change goals. On the other hand, positive emotions can result in greater appreciation of the 'big picture'; willingness to experiment with new behaviours; increased flexibility and innovation; enhanced understanding of, and ability to cope with, complexity. Within change the leader's challenge is to facilitate the creation of a climate which releases such positive emotions. Frederickson has provided indications that a minimum balance to achieve movement in an individual or group is one of three positive emotions for each negative. Whilst she does not provide a precise optimum she points out that once the ratio reaches around ten to one then growth and movement tend to cease.

Although our research findings described above were not originally informed by positive psychology explicitly, it is interesting to note how the strands of this thinking explain the nature of the results which were found. Below these findings are reviewed in the light of the positive psychology perspective in the following ways:

### **I. APPROACHES TO CHANGE**

The largely programmatic approaches to change appear to be rooted in the 'traditional' 'deficit' model and are focused on communicating what is wrong and identifying the things which need to be fixed. There is little scope for inquiry and very

little attention to either organisational or individual strengths. As a consequence both approaches encounter significant levels of resistance; often based on predominantly negative emotions.

The move from 'doing change to' to 'doing change with' people encountered in a more complexity-based approach to change sees increasing use of Appreciative Inquiry and the identification and valuing of individual strengths and contributions. Overall the approaches arouse more positive emotions. However, these are balanced with a use of direct feedback, hard rules and challenging goals which may well arouse balancing negative emotions. These approaches were more successful and notably aroused lower levels of resistance and increased levels of commitment to the change.

## 2. LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS AND PRACTICES

Overall we found that Shaping leadership behaviours were a significant factor in explaining failure of change initiatives. In reviewing this set of behaviours through a positive psychology lens it is notable that they do not tend to make use of inquiry, but rather focus on the leaders' perceptions of the nature of change and approaches to its implementation. There is little scope for identifying and utilising individual strengths and the leader-centric, driven approach carries with it the potential to develop a higher level of negative emotion.

In examining our later research it is interesting to note that three of the 'changing leadership' behaviours (i.e. Attractor, Container and Transforming Space) each contain practices which employ elements of Appreciative Inquiry, explore both individual and organisational strengths and which are likely to create a climate in which positive emotions are aroused. The fourth group of behaviours (Edge and Tension) on the other hand are more focused on creation of challenge and 'hard' conversations. Thus they

are more likely to arouse negative emotions. However, this provides the necessary counter-balance to maintain movement. In taking a very simple view it is interesting to note that, in using all four areas (which the most successful leaders did) the three to one ratio mentioned by Barbara Frederickson is achieved!

What is noticeable from an examination of the research transcripts was that both the approaches and leadership behaviours which released the positive emotions were associated with observations about the speed with which engagement with the change was widely achieved. This could be a result of the 'mood contagion' referred to above.

The above description of the role of positive psychology in change is based on what is, in essence, 'post hoc' rationalisation. However, the conjecture is certainly rooted enough to warrant further research in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has considered the challenges of change and how by shifting approaches to implementing change from the more 'traditional' ones of 'doing change to' people to 'doing change with' people can result in an increased likelihood of change succeeding. Furthermore leadership behaviours play a very significant role in achieving successful change implementation. Those behaviours which are very leader-centric (i.e. Shaping behaviour) tend to be associated with unsuccessful change initiatives. On the other hand leadership practices and behaviours which focus on the group and are more 'engaging' (i.e. Attractor, Edge and Tension, Container and Transforming Space) have a strongly positive impact on change success. However, the most successful change leaders (as identified in our research effectively deploy all four of the practices.

As mentioned earlier in the paper organisational change tends to be perceived negatively and arouses negative emotions within an organ-

isation. However, the research outlined above illustrates that this does not have to be the case. In particular it appears that effective change leadership can have a significant impact on transforming the emotional climate within which change occurs and can lead to greater levels of success and create a positive climate which creates energy and releases potential within the organisation.

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Malcolm is a member of the British Psychological Society and a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and is also actively involved in consulting on leadership, change and assessment with a range of international companies both as an individual consultant and as the Chairman of the consulting firm Transend.

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