Leading Change as a Political and Behavioural Process

Philip Atkinson acknowledges the anonymous quotation, 'To understand change management, one first has to understand that change is a political process, fuelled by diverse behaviours and motivations not always committed to the greater good'. He focuses on practical solutions to ensure that political motivations are carefully managed and, when required, neutralised.

This article is focused on working more effectively as a change agent and understanding the nature and power of political and behavioural forces in the context in which they operate. Life would be much easier if we could simply follow a logical sequence of steps that guaranteed that 'change' was implemented automatically. Change is a complex process that goes way beyond a simple logic or a sequence of flow. If change were that simple, we could construct a simple cause-effect model, and the change would be implemented swiftly. We know that managing change is far more complex than current theory suggests. Change has to take account of the people factor, which includes the world of personal egos, emotions, attitudes,

motivations, drives and behaviours. It is essential to incorporate both the 'left' and 'right' brain and, thus, 'holistic' thinking into the change process. Change is a journey, not a destination and old thinking will not help anyone in the change arena to achieve success without understanding the behavioural and political aspects of change.

Gravitating to our Comfort Zones

If change is so easy, why do people resist it so frequently and not welcome it with open arms? The reason is that we all tend to gravitate to our comfort zone – that area where we can be sure that our performance can stretch to the expectations of ourselves

VUCA Analysis

Volatility	• Which elements of our business environment are most volatile? • How can we better generate the data to understand what prevents us from tackling these threats? • What strategies can we adopt to decrease the volatility?
Uncertainty	• How can we manage uncertainty in our business environment? • How can we identify the key factors hindering our performance and our future? • How do we create a plan to manage change to reduce the intensity of uncertainty in our business strategies?
Complexity	• Where are the immediate and longer-term threats to our business? • How can we develop simple strategies to counter these? • How can we innovate ourselves out of the complexity conundrum?
Ambiguity	• How to identify where ambiguity exists in our service delivery, problem-solving, culture, and behaviours? • How can we best use innovation and IT to resolve conflicts and ambiguity? • How best can we utilise our people in eradicating negativity and promoting positive change?

and others. When we extend people beyond their comfort zone, they become very unsure of themselves and question whether they can perform to meet the new demands and standards. This 'stretching' is often not pleasant. Stretching can be perceived as positive – learning new things, experimenting, being creative and playful. But the reality is that sometimes it is only the downside of 'stretching' we experience – the worry about living up to new standards, concern that we cannot learn fast enough. Sometimes, we doubt our ability to take thoughtful risks and are concerned about self-disclosure and what others think of us. Consider if this process of 'stretching' or encouraging people to 'achieve more' or 'commit to higher standards' is poorly led and facilitated. In that case, change may not happen or be severely diluted in its impact. Doubts run through people's minds. They begin to think of the negative consequences of failing to meet the new expectations, and soon we have 'passive resistance'. We need to focus more on holistic solutions where people's needs, passions, motivations and emotions are engaged to support the change rather than plan the rollout of a new programme.

Failing to Create Culture Change

Consider this: as many as 80% of significant change cultural initiatives fail[1]. Further, consider the relative success of companies that have tried to grow a joint venture, merged with or acquired other businesses. Not all of them succeed or do so only partially. In Europe and the USA, it has long been estimated that 56-80% of mergers and acquisitions fail to achieve the synergies for which they were initially designed, resulting in the inability to integrate several business cultures into one new business entity successfully[2]. The primary reason for failure in this context is the inability to shape a corporate culture that will support the objectives of the new business entity, and it is usually a toxic or less-than-helpful political hinterland that gets in the way.

What is happening? Why are change initiatives failing and with such regularity? What can we do about it? Are we looking at the problem from every angle? It makes sense to understand the problems before tasking our best people with the mission and the skills to become internal Consultants – practitioners of change.

The Political Hinterland

Let us explore why change does not work as well as it could. There is a tendency to apply the logical models for change, which I refer to as the 'rational-technical' approach, rather than incorporate holistic solutions that engage people and their motivations, address their fears and focus on involving them as active and positive players in the change process.

Historically, the technical solution needed to work if we look at change in the manufacturing environment. Consequently, based on the logical sequencing of events, many engineering approaches became the methodology for change. Here was born the 'rational technical' school of tools and techniques that worked well for them but not for today's economy. Unsurprisingly, the tools and techniques that worked in installing production technology gained credibility with their use because they did work. However, we have come to a stage of evolution when an over-reliance on the rational approach needs some balancing to the detriment of the people and behaviour perspective. Any change initiative will work better and be implemented faster if we take equal cognisance of the 'political-behavioural' perspective and develop a 'holistic' and realistic approach.

Focus on the VUCA Model[3]

Since the 2008 financial crash and the COVID-19 Pandemic, there has been a cost of living Crisis and War in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip; we live in a world that VUCA governs: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. This model originated from the US Army War College Experience as defining strategic leadership within a 'volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment'[4]. Much of this work was based on the original thinking of Bennis and Namus, cited in the book Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge'.

Using the VUCA Model, we need to ask some leading questions similar to Vulnerability Analysis and Risk Mitigation.

In his 2016 book, *Leaders Make the Future* Bob Johanson states that Leaders can change the following four factors[5]:

- • Volatility yields to Vision
- • Uncertainty yields to Understanding
- • Complexity yields to Clarity
- • Ambiguity yields to Agility

Change is About Managing Emotion, Passion, Fear, Expectations of Self and Others

Change has to be balanced. We have to focus equally on the

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tools that will guarantee success for the business.

Here are some questions that I would focus on when I identify blockages to the change rollout.

Ask Searching Questions to Identify Where Key Problems Reside

- Precisely, what did the organisation do to engage the motivations and emotions of people in the change process?
- How well were the benefits and the program's rationale communicated before rollout?
- What specific behaviours were identified as moving the business forward?
- What action could managers take to create the culture to achieve results?
- Where is resistance to the programme most likely to occur, and what action can we take to pre-empt negativity?
- What risk assessment was developed to ensure that resources are used to the best effect?
- Were the targets set consistent with the goals of the programme?

Don't be surprised to learn that most change initiatives are built around 'logical-technical' solutions and methodologies, neglecting the fact that an organisation is a complex arena where political motives and complex behaviours play their part in shaping business performance.

Reading Intentions and Personal Motivations in Others

To be effective, internal 'consultants or catalysts' must progress beyond the simple 'tools and techniques of change'. They must be able to read and diagnose the relative political forces at work within the context of the change. They must be able to read personal agendas and behaviours and, more importantly, assess their motivations. They have to work well with people who may appear, 'on the surface', to be supporting change but, in reality, are opposed to it. Effective change makers must use all their abilities to persuade, cajole, influence, negotiate, educate, reason, assert, present a case, and be sufficiently resilient to bounce back and restart the process when required.

Experienced internal change makers can handle the organisational cynics, the doubters, and those vehemently resistant to change. They can coach their project 'Clients' to take more responsibility and actively participate in the process. Equally, they will persuade and negotiate with those tasked with or targeted for working through the change, ie the 'Implementers'. They will encourage and motivate the 'Implementers' to take risks and to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone. The role is a little challenging! I trust that what follows will help with these issues.

Change is a Process Flow – Systematic and Systemic

Success happens when the change maker or agent has the knowledge and experience to realise when a change model is 'only a model' to help map out a series of 'what if' questions'. Effectiveness in using any model, 'logical-technical' and 'political-behavioural' is entirely dependent upon, and reflected in, the quality of diagnosis undertaken by the catalyst before any

logical steps to implement change and note the actions, passions and emotions of those driving, implementing and making the change a reality. We need a holistic approach to change. Many organisations are still very much caught up in the view that change can be implemented almost completely by following the old 'rational model' with a bit of 'man management' tagged at the end.

A balanced view of change introduces the 'political-behavioural' approach, which also contributes to making change work. When change does not happen, the key actors in the 'change arena' have failed to master the 'political-behavioural' dimension. In reality, few people in organisations understand the dynamics of personal and organisational change. Those who manage organisations that fail to educate their change managers and internal Consultants in both the 'rational-technical' and the 'political-behavioural' approaches are not allowing them access to the broadest range of

intervention or action: incorporating observations and 'diagnosis' of the relative political health and behavioural conditions into an approach that adds value and the reality factor to managing change. The change maker with the diagnostic skills, interpersonal skills and political insight creates a systemic process where feedback from observations and actions helps reformulate a model of reality that will work in introducing change.

Dynamic – Systemic Model vs. Sterile and Static Rational – Technical

Every business has a unique history, culture and background, founded by people with different personal value systems and beliefs, and each operates in entirely different markets. Every organisation operates in a unique political and economic context. The change model that will facilitate the ease of change for each business will also vary radically. What works for a City Institution in London, England, will not work for a manufacturer of aerospace products in Witchita, USA. Some of the principles may be similar, but the methodology, when applied, will make assumptions about the culture, politics and context of the business, and these will significantly impact the business's success.
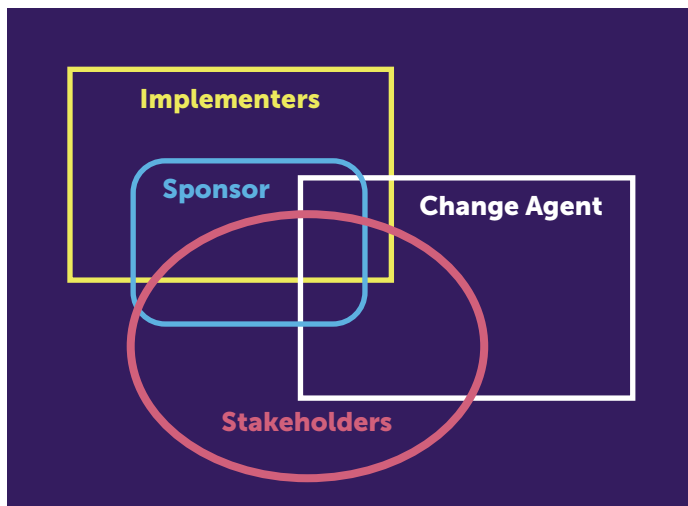
Key Actors in the Change Process

The success of a change initiative in any business is due solely to the effectiveness of the transactions and interaction between the key actors in the change process.

Clients and Sponsors – Those who own and guide the overall strategy of key projects and have overall accountability for project delivery.
Change Agents – Those who physically drive change, internal and external facilitators, trainers, consultants, presenters and business advisors.
Implementers – Those who are targeted to ensure that the changes are undertaken and delivered specific delivery of projects in localised areas.
Stakeholders – Those who are not central but peripheral actors in implementing change. They may be far removed but must communicate and facilitate change in their function or location.

A great deal of change implementation fails because of unresolved issues and problems arising in the earliest stages of a change initiative not being confronted. Investing time in risk

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management, especially regarding the four sets of actors in the 'change arena', has to pay dividends. We would suggest that many change initiatives do not accrue anything like the benefits for which they were initially designed because critical issues at the commencement of the project were not taken sufficiently seriously or were ignored.

Change is Emotional

Change, by its very nature, is emotional – most of us purposely focus towards achieving emotional equilibrium, especially in our work. However, if we have to move out of our 'comfort zone', we experience disquiet and some form of disequilibrium and anxiety. We naturally want to control our lives, and when control in any area appears to be denied to us, we start to contemplate the negative personal implications of any change. Noticeably, during this period, we probably ask ourselves questions:

- How will this change impact upon me?
- Will it give me more control of my work, aspirations and life, or take it away?
- If I have less control over the circumstances, are there potential threats to my identity, role, future and continuation in the organisation? How severe could these threats be?

Overmanaged, Ignored, Avoided and Marginalised

Note the nature of these questions. The focus is 'me orientated' and suggests that the thought processes are less, rather than more, empowering. The answers to the questions will tend to limit actions rather than expand them. In the absence of being able to manage these emotions or feelings of others in organisational change, those driving the change may be compelled to ignore their presence and impact and focus more on what they know is more comfortable. In many change initiatives, people are 'overmanaged', are ignored, avoided or even marginalised.

The depth of understanding of how people can behave and respond will be a critical factor in assessing to what degree the change will be fully implemented, accepted and welcomed. Unsurprisingly, the initial emotional response of people will be more negative than positive. This will do little to confront and diminish resistance to the change initiative. Alternatively, we need an approach to engage all parties in the change so that they feel part of it and commit to it rather than resist at every opportunity. What is needed is a change model that fully encompasses people's emotional responses and assesses how we can better shape behavioural components to ensure that change is implemented well. That approach also needs to incorporate the 'political dimension' of how conflict is managed between the four sets of actors in the process – the Clients, the Consultants or Catalysts (both internal and external), Implementers and stakeholders..

Managing Conflict

The study of conflict is an area avoided by many change theorists, yet conflict is endemic in organisations. The very nature of organisations, peopled as they are by individuals and teams with varying motivations and loyalties, suggests not only competing interests for resources – but also for attention, status and power, control of the organisation and how it achieves its objectives. Most businesses have developed a combative stance with conscious or other than-conscious competitive drives for control of resources, people and the culture itself. Conflict is a natural by-product of competing interests – healthy competition or otherwise. Yet, mostly, conflict is ignored. Conflict is perceived as a negative force, yet it can be the most creative force in any business, provided it is managed. Conflict, by definition, is endemic within any organisation competing for resources. The presence of conflict indicates that differences of opinion, approach and priorities have to be resolved. Declared disagreement, therefore, is the first step to a positive resolution. Again, the rational-technical models ignore conflict or develop methods for containing any conflicts that arise. Many organisations are so stifled by unhealthy' conflict containment' between managers, teams, functions, processes and specific locations and geographies that they expend more energy on protecting and defending their interests than they devote to expanding their business.

Political and Cultural Dynamics

A change model that fails to account for a business's political and cultural dynamics will fail to fully harness the fundamental forces behind moving from the current to a 'desired' state of functioning. Conflict is a potent positive force if managed. Because conflict, by its nature, is a cocktail of mixed emotions, many managers feel they cannot deal with it. Failure to train managers in the behavioural component of change may lead them to focus on conflict containment instead of handling it upfront. They prefer to dominate, control and contain conflict rather than perceiving and using it as a learning vehicle for improving the culture of the whole business.

Few 'change models' attempt to gauge and measure the key drivers behind the culture of the business. Failing to do this will create major problems when any specific change initiative comes up against a 'cultural roadblock.' Yet diagnosing the culture first is critical in undertaking a risk assessment of the effectiveness of any change initiative, and an area where some organisational leaders feel most out of control.
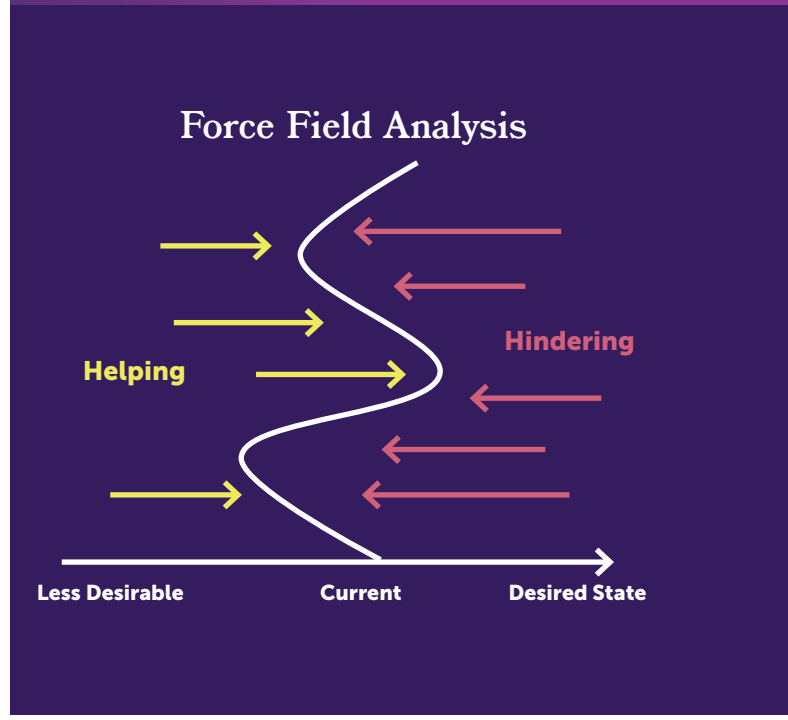
Force Field Analysis

Helping

Hindering

Less Desirable   Current   Desired State

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Typical change management practice may incorrectly suggest you identify the most potent areas in pushing you forward and increase the relative intensity of the Helping Forces. Devoting more resources to these activities and saturating the organisation with their positive influence will, it is widely believed (but wrongly so), decrease the relative power of these Hindering Forces. For instance, this could mean devoting more time to training, developing a new communication strategy for the workforce, or reformulating a leadership programme. However, this has the opposite effect on the desired goal. Let me emphasise this has the exact reverse effect of what is required to gain control of the change process. Increasing the intensity of those forces 'Helping' change triggers even stronger 'Hindering' forces against that change! So, for example, no amount of training or designing of a new leadership programme will reduce 'Resistance to Change from Senior Managers' (maybe a key identified Hindering force). Instead, the best way forward is to devise strategies for eliminating that which causes or gives strength to the Hindering forces. Therein lies the secret to change. Stop pushing with good intentions, believing that their sheer strength will diminish those things that hinder change. Instead, remove what halts progress first.

Key to any change initiative is the ability to assess where the organisation stands currently relative to its desired goal. A Failure to determine the current state and health of the organisation means that those who have to facilitate progress fail to have an accurate bearing on the readiness of the organisation to change. Without this analysis, any resource or time spent implementing change can be completely wasted.

Force Field Analysis

When developing a holistic approach to change management, it is good practice to identify those dominant factors which support the positive intention behind any change initiative and differentiate these from anything that can inhibit change. A simple model, 'Force Field' analysis, is a powerful tool for highlighting and identifying the major technical, behavioural and political 'forces' supporting change. Adherents of force field analysis would suggest that The process follows the following steps:

Clearly understand and articulate the desired state to which you are driven, and delineate where you are currently concerning the achievement of that state.

Thinking of the 'current' rather than the 'desired' state, brainstorm a list of those forces that support you in moving forward. These 'Helping Forces' are differentiated from those that stand in the way of progress – the 'Hindering Forces'. After identifying these two sets of forces, now prioritise and rank them from most to least influential in Helping change and those most to least responsible for Hindering change.

(There is an example below which focuses on Communications Effectiveness.)

Forcefield Analysis

How do we improve communication effectiveness?		
Helping factors	↔	Hindering factors
Committed to train all staff		Too busy with operational issues
People centred management		Task driven management
Personal development		Technical development only
Highflyers need feedback		Top team apathy
Retain 'highflyers'		Negative attitude
Fundamental to excellence		Not necessary
Investment in the future		No time

Politics and the Readiness for Change

Insufficient attention to detail or evaluation of the dominant political situation within the business can indicate that all is not well. Have you ever picked that up when you visited another organisation? There may be warning signs that all is not well, manifested, for example, in the failure of senior staff to attend critical meetings, which had been previously agreed upon and are central to the rollout of a programme. What message does that convey? Consider when a senior manager has decided to give an opening address to a training Workshop and either fails to turn up or is represented by someone more junior. What message does this issue to the consultant and participants?

Reading the Culture – Focus on the Dominant Belief System

To better read the culture, it may be wise to explore beneath the surface and identify the core driving forces that shape the culture. When we study at the deepest level in the culture, we discover the presence of a 'belief system', which are the hidden factors, 'the drivers' that initiate behaviour. Beliefs, often unstated, are ways of thinking about what the organisation stands for and how it should do business with its customers, staff and suppliers. These beliefs were probably enshrined but originally established by the creators or owners of the business and shaped by history, events, personalities and circumstances over the years. The 'belief systems' are passed on in stories and legends and incorporated into management styles, especially those perceived as being more charismatic or in characters that typify the ethos of the business. These 'beliefs' in 'how we do business' are often unstated. They may not be documented in any codified format, but people know the boundaries, how these values are rewarded and enforced, and the penalties for non-adherence. Although apparently not visible to outsiders and customers, these values are nonetheless genuine and manifest as corporate values. I like to delineate these values into two pure types to avoid confusion. Some are 'stated' and codified in some form, reflecting what is important to the organisation in transacting business. Values can often be documented and communicated publicly inside, and sometimes outside, the business to a wider audience. However, there are also unstated values so inherently ingrained and so strong within the culture and the style portrayed by key players in the business that people can be strongly unconsciously aware of them without articulating them with precision. These 'values' are so entrenched we don't think them – we feel them.

By working through the values, stated or otherwise, you can get a good feel for the dominant culture of the organisation and the political process which supports and feeds that culture.

Summary

What is essential is the dualism of 'rational-technical' approaches married with 'behavioural-political' approaches, creating the real emotion for effective change. In too many organisations, there is an overemphasis on problem-solving, decision-making, quality improvement, tools and techniques, as if their simple application would result in improvement. Mastering the flow and process of change is what is critical. Change is systemic, meaning that after implementing an action, we must test to answer the question, 'Are we nearer or further away from our goal?' The second question is, 'Knowing what we do, what action can we take to keep us on or get us back on course?' Adopting a systemic approach to change is more realistic when managing all key parties' conflicting motivations and aspirations. There will be greater awareness of all that is happening to us. Greater knowledge gives a broader range of options and more leverage for change.

1.   Philip Atkinson, How to Become a Change Master, Spiro Books, 2006.
2.   Genesis Consulting Group, 1990 (White Paper).
3.   Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World (Second edition, Revised and Expanded) Paperback – Bob Johanson, Berrett Koehler, Inc, 26 May 2016.
4.   The VUCA framework originated in the US Army War College – the role of the strategic leader 1992.
5.   See 3 above (also see www.sketchplanations.com 22 October 2023).

About the Author

Philip Atkinson specialises in strategic cultural and behavioural change. For the last 25 years, he has been engaged as a consultant supporting organisations in strategic development, Leadership, organisational design, post-acquisition integration, lean six-sigma, quality management and culture change. He has partnered with various blue-chip companies in industries ranging from pharmaceutical to genetics, the automotive industry to finance and banking and from NHS bodies to Local Authorities. He regularly presents at conferences and workshop sessions and has written seven books on change management. His articles and books may be accessed at www.philipatkinson.com Philip is also Director of Learning Strategies International Ltd. and Philip Atkinson & Co. Ltd. Email philip@philipatkinson.com or M: 07999 799286