Change Mastery, Simplified

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Introduction: The Need

Try an experiment. Take a deep breath and look at your watch to see how long you can hold your breath. For most people it's somewhere between 45 and 90 seconds; few can hold their breath longer than a couple of minutes.

As I tell my management students when they start gasping for air, this is how long you can survive without change.

Mysteriously, we can't live without change. Because we human beings want to understand life, we have been trying to understand change for a long time.   The oldest book on the planet (about 3,000 years old) is the Chinese *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*).   Facilitating change is also at the heart of organization development work. So we have professional reasons for wanting to master the mysteries of change.

In the early days of the OD field, we were taught that to bring about change in a social system we needed to do three things: "unfreeze" the system, make the change, and then "refreeze" the system in its new configuration (Lewin, 1951). As the field matured, we realized that this model was a bit too simplistic, that nothing is really ever "frozen" but that in fact we live in a world of "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1989). Our current understanding of change is fairly sophisticated, with models, theories, and techniques both for coping with change as an individual (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Bridges, 1980), and for leading change in organizations and other large social systems (Kotter, 1995; 1996).

As internal organizational development consultants in a Fortune 500 electric and gas utility, my colleagues and I faced the challenge of taking this sophisticated understanding of change and translating it into something that could be remembered and readily used by managers and supervisors. Working mangers realize that they need to know something about change, but they want a practical level of understanding, not an academic level.   I tried to find a way to make this complex material simpler…accurate, yet memorable and useful.

Change Mastery, Simplified

I came up with a couple of basic assumptions and five key factors that a manager should keep in mind when leading or managing a change.   What is new in the model is not the content but the conceptual structure: most of what we know about organizational change can be collapsed into the five factors: Linkages, Energy, Focus, Skills, and Anchor. I learned from one of my clients in Minnesota that the initial letters of these five factors can be arranged to spell the name of a traditional Norwegian potato pancake. A good model needs a good mnemonic acronym, so the LEFSA model it became.

In the remainder of this article I'd like to describe the basic assumptions, discuss the five factors, and show how they relate to organizational change and the change aspects of project management. The sidebar gives a set of practical questions for anyone who is managing, leading, or even just contemplating a change.

Basic Assumptions and LEFSA

We take as a given that change is happening all the time, that life is change. It may not always be as turbulent as white water. Sometimes it is the slow steady drip of water that, as the *Tao Te Ching* reminds us, can wear away the hardest stone. Slowly or swiftly life is always flowing, never frozen.

Since change is happening all the time, we have choices in two areas: (1) How to respond to it, whether more or less effectively; and (2) How we work to shape it.   This article addresses how we work to shape change.

Ideally, in shaping change the change leader has considered the ethical and sustainability aspects of the change. We would like to take this as a given, but we also try to clarify it in the contracting phase of a consulting engagement. Will the change bring about a preponderance of good? Will it meet the needs of the

present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs? At best, is it healing and restorative?

One way to think of shaping change is to think of a musical instrument…a pipe organ for example. Energy goes into all the pipes of the organ in the form of moving air. The notes that come out depend on the shape of the pipe that is activated. Long fat pipes give low notes; short skinny pipes give high notes. Each pipe resonates at a certain note because it is shaped to reinforce or amplify that note and cancel out all others. A slide trombone can play many different notes because the musician can make the resonating "pipe" shorter or longer, depending on what's needed.

Similarly, in shaping a change in an organizational system, you need a certain amount of energy and you need to set up opportunities that reinforce or amplify the output you want and dampen other behaviors. The effect of reinforcement is partly what makes Appreciative Inquiry so effective as a change approach. It reinforces, amplifies and helps focus the positive energy that is already in the system (see Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).   Energy and Focus are two of the five key factors to keep in mind when shaping change.

Here is the full list:
Linkages
Energy
Focus
Skills
Anchor

Linkages - Strength in numbers

The Linkages factor highlights John Kotter's conclusion that change efforts tend to fail unless there is a powerful guiding coalition (Kotter, 1995; 1996). We also know from Art Kleiner's work (2003) that in every social system there is a core group whose blessing can make a project and whose blessing withheld can break a project, regardless of the rational arguments for or against the project. The guiding coalition or core group is not necessarily limited to the executives of the system. What is needed are linkages among combination of people collectively representing position power, expertise, credibility, and leadership relevant to the scope of the change. When this group is enrolled in the change, the change is much more likely to occur.

Other linkages are helpful too. The more productive linkages there are in the system, the more likely the system is to self-organize around a solution to the challenges of change (Olson & Eoyand, 2001). Examples of productive linkages include linking people with relevant key skills or resources.   Effective change efforts use good communication and networking strategies to build linkages and develop a critical mass moving toward the change.

The Linkages factor also directs attention to the power that informal leaders or "sociometric stars" hold in an organization (Moreno 1934; 1953; 1960; Hoffman, et al, 1992). In any group of people, readiness or predisposition for a given change varies along a continuum, from "early adopters" to "laggards" (Rogers, 1962). We know from studies of social learning that people tend to be more influenced by those who are more like them than by those who are less like them (Bandura, 1977). When the informal leaders are enrolled in a change, regardless of where they stand along the change continuum, linkages between the informal leaders and those nearby on the change continuum help build the critical mass needed for change. The linkages among people on the change readiness continuum are like couplings on a train. Without adequate linkages, the engine of change may go merrily ahead while leaving the rest of the train standing at the station.

Energy - Motivation to get there

Just as an organ won't make music unless there is air moving through the pipes, an organization won't change unless there is some motivation to make the move. Extrinsic motivation--rewards (money, for example) or punishments--can make a difference in the short run, but over the long haul intrinsic motivation is more sustainable (Thomas, 2000). Intrinsic motivation means that a person is energized by the work itself. A related form of motivation, *identified* motivation, means that the person is energized to do something because the activity supports the person's self-identity, as for example doing a good job because it supports a self identity as a professional.   Intrinsic and identified levels of motivation are the deeper and more enduring levels. They tend to yield discretionary effort--going the extra mile--beyond simple compliance with expectations.

In shaping a change, motivation also comes from developing a clear and compelling vision of the desired future state, a vision in which people can see clear benefits to themselves. Depicting a clear discrepancy between what is and what could be also helps. As Kotter (1995; 1996) points out, change efforts tend to fail if

the majority don't share a sense of urgency. Presenting data about where the relevant markets, regulators, and competitors are headed can foster this sense of urgency. Kotter suggests that at least 75% of a company's management should be honestly convinced that business-as-usual is totally unacceptable.

A major common misconception about motivation for change is that people resist change. People do *not* resist change if they desire the change and see some advantages in accepting the change, and if the emotional costs or losses associated with the change are not too high.   Consider changes such as these: Would you resist accepting a 15% raise? Would a teenager resist getting a driver's license? Would you resist marrying the person you love? In deciding to make a change people resolve an internal decisional cost/benefit balance (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). People *do* resist change if the perceived benefits are too low and/or the perceived costs are too high. People also tend to resist change if they feel coerced. This tendency has been well documented by psychologists as "psychological reactance".

Focus - Where are we headed

Every effective change effort needs a clear and compelling vision of the desired future state. Frequently this is where change efforts begin.   Unfortunately this is where change efforts also often end, if the Energy and Linkages factors have been neglected or come as an afterthought. Generally the first three factors should be considered as a cluster, followed by the last two factors, Skills and Anchor.

The vision for the change is most effectively communicated when the leader is modeling the change or there is a visible role model or there is opportunity for hands-on experience, at least with a prototype. The boundaries or scope or "container" of the change should be clearly defined. (Think again of a musical instrument and the resonating "container" of the sound.) We have choices about where we focus our attention. A primary role of change leader is to direct the focus and shape the container.

Though the boundaries should be clearly defined, the details of the change should not be micro-managed. Human systems will tend to self-organize, given enough energy and minimum critical specifications. In fact, too much detailed management can bog down a change. A huge portion of the population has changed its behavior to conduct business over the internet in recent years without any top-down management of the overall process (though distributed instances of the transition have been closely managed). The internet itself provided the Linkages.   The benefits demonstrated by the early adopters provided the Focus for others to emulate and served to Energize people. As computer interfaces became simpler the Skills needed became easier to acquire. Now this way of doing business seems Anchored in our culture.

A clear and compelling Focus also helps build Energy. We know that it takes energy to change. When people focus on problems they tend to get depressed and lose energy. Focusing on the positive future state energizes people for change. Furthermore we tend to move towards what we focus on. When we focus on the obstacles in our path we spend time and energy dealing with those obstacles, rather than on getting where we want to go. This does not mean that we should ignore or minimize the problems with the present state.   It simply suggests that the ratio of where we devote our attention (Present & Past / Forward) should be weighted toward Forward. A good rule of thumb is 20% Present & Past focus / 80% Forward focus (Oakley & Krug, 1991).

One other key Focus question is: "What is the most efficient leverage point for influencing the system?" In a classic article several years ago Donella Meadows (1997) described nine key points in terms of increasing leverage, ranging from parameters like subsidies, taxes, and standards (relatively low leverage) to the mindset or paradigm out of which the goals, rules, and feedback structure of a system arise (high leverage). As a simple example, changing the tax structure could alter consumer behavior to some extent, but changing a belief system about what is important in life could change consumer behavior much more radically. Those who would shape change need to consider the relevant level of intervention.

Skills - Skills to do it

An organization may be trying to introduce a new customer service support system. Though it may be clear to everyone that the new system has many benefits, and though the customer service agents may be motivated to use the system because it will make their lives easier; the system change will fail unless the agents are trained on the system and have time to practice. Similarly, a widely desired change requiring new interpersonal behaviors, such as improved communication skills, will fail unless the participants are trained and have time to practice. When people feel competent at a task, it tends to support their intrinsic motivation (Thomas, 2000), which helps build Energy for change.

Change that has not been sought out tends to produce anxiety.   How that anxiety is handled will determine the degree of success or failure of the change.   Change begins with a *disconfirmation*: some fact or event that shows that things are not going as well as they could or should be. The *disconfirmation* produces anxiety related to survival or guilt, either: (1) "I will not survive in some sense unless I change"; or (2) "I will not achieve my own goals and aspirations unless I change"; or some combination of (1) and (2) (Schein, 1999).

Regardless of they type of anxiety produced by the disconfirmation, the need to change itself produces another kind of anxiety: "I may not be able to learn and master the new (changed) behavior required." This is called "learning anxiety."

The anxiety produced by the disconfirmation (and therefore the disconfirmation itself) must be big enough to get people's attention.   And it must be bigger than the learning anxiety. This tips the decisional balance so the costs of changing (overcoming the learning anxiety) are less than the costs of living with the survival/guilt anxiety.

The most effective way to tip the decisional balance in the direction of change is <u>not</u> to increase the survival/guilt anxiety, but instead to <u>decrease</u> the learning anxiety. Increasing the survival/guilt anxiety at some point immobilizes people and makes them incapable of change (or even of productive work).   Making it easy to learn the new behaviors is the smart and effective approach.

Anchor - Woven into the fabric of the system

A common error of change leaders is declaring victory too soon. The push to celebrate victory too soon can come from an unconscious collusion between the change advocates and the change opponents. The advocates want to believe that they have succeeded. The opponents are eager to find any way to call a halt to the whole process. A victory celebration serves both (Kotter, 1995; 1996).

A change can to some extent be imposed by fiat, but it will not endure beyond the tenure of the leader unless it becomes woven into the fabric of the system. Leaders need to recognize and reward the new behaviors and also to recruit and hire in a way that ensures the next generation of leaders embodies the change. Policies, procedures, and systems structures such as information systems and physical layout may need to be redesigned to facilitate the new behaviors. The easier it is to pursue the new way, the less "resistance" there will be.

Probably most important, new symbols and lore—new stories about "who we are"—will embed the changes into the culture.   For example, when new apprentices are hired, they listen for the stories to find out what their new work environment is like. If they hear legends about journeymen "being macho, brave, and taking risks to save time on a job," the apprentices will tend to develop into unsafe journeymen. If the apprentices hear the story about "Bob who took risks, was badly burned and nearly died, and how everyone has been scrupulous about safe practices ever since," they will tend to develop into safe journeymen.

Practical Application

These five LEFSA factors are like five pulses that a change leader should keep his or her fingers on when working on a change.   Although different factors are naturally salient at different phases of a project (Focus nearer the beginning, for example, and Anchor nearer the end), they all pertain throughout a project or change initiative. [See Figure 1.]

As a consultant I have found the LEFSA model helpful in keeping my clients focused on the key steps to take throughout a change effort.   I use the worksheet shown in Figure 2 to track the completed, current, and potential actions in each of the five areas. LEFSA has been a component of helping a management team as they guided a large electric power plant to its best safety record in 30 years. I'm currently using LEFSA in consulting on the corporation's drive toward environmental leadership.

Conclusion

Just as breathing is an ongoing process throughout life, change, too, is a process not an event. The recent work on the transtheoretical model of behavior change (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; DiClimente & Velasquez, 2002) describes five steps, from never having thought about a change through taking action and then maintaining the changed behavior. Especially today, with so much productive change so urgently needed, it's important to be patient, and not to be disappointed when sudden leaps don't happen. The change lights come on with a dimmer knob, not an on/off switch.

SIDEBAR: LEFSA -- Useful Questions for the Change Leader:

Linkages - Strength in numbers
- Is there a powerful guiding coalition?
- Are relationships built & maintained among the informal leaders?
- Are relationships built & maintained with key customers and other stakeholders?
- Is there a critical mass?
- Are we communicating frequently, simply, & consistently?
- Are relationships built & maintained among people with key skills & resources?
- Are key conflicts being resolved?
- Are we expressing empathy for the emotional reactions to change?

Energy - Motivation to get there
- Is there a clear and *compelling* vision of the future state / goal?
- Are people able to see themselves in this vision, and the benefit to them?
- Does the majority share a sense of urgency?
- Is there clear discrepancy between what is and what could be?
- Is intrinsic motivation being supported?
- Is extrinsic motivation being supported?
- Is there a first step and a clear path of steps?
- Are we building energy and credibility through early wins?
- Are we amplifying the positive (events, wins, stories)?
- Are we dampening the negative (removing obstacles, responding to rumors, redirecting inappropriate behavior)?
- Are we expressing empathy for the emotional reactions to change?
- Are we seeing "resistance" as useful feedback?

Focus - Where are we headed
- What is the most effective leverage point for influencing the system?
- Is there a *clear* and compelling vision of the future state / goal?
- Is there a coherent & relevant metaphor?
- Is the leader modeling the changes? / Is there a positive role model?
- If relevant, is there opportunity for hands-on experience, at least with a prototype?
- Are the boundaries / scope / "container" of the change clearly defined?
- Have we defined measures of success: what success will look like?
- Have we limited ourselves to the minimum critical specifications?
- Are we allowing the system to self-organize, without micro-managing?

Skills - Skills to do it
- Do people have the needed skills?
- Are we making the new way easy to learn?
- Are we providing training and time to practice?

Anchor - Woven into the fabric of the system
- Is positive behavior being recognized / reinforced?
- Have we considered the systems structures, power dynamics, traditions, or habitual ways of thinking that could interfere with (or support) this change?
- Have we made needed structural changes?
- Are we recruiting, hiring, promoting, and training in a way that supports the change?
- Are we developing symbols and lore...our new story of "who we are"?

Figure 1: The Change Management "Field" and The Project Management Cycle
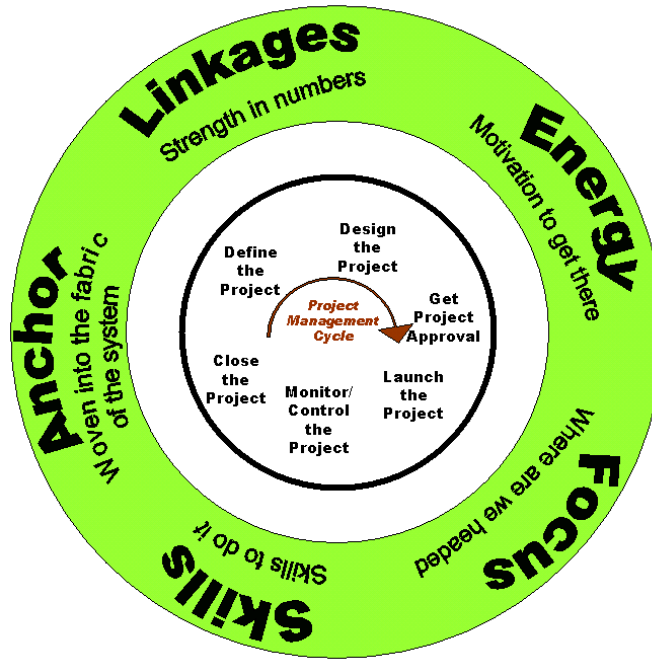

Figure 2: LEFSA Factor Consulting Worksheet

[With examples of client entries in *italics*]

Factor	Actions		
	Completed	**Current**	**Potential**
Linkages Strength in numbers	• *Joint problem-solving – maintenance and operations* • *Assess key linkages (Sociometric analysis)*	• *Leader holds meetings with yard shift personnel*	• *Build linkages with "sociometric stars"* • *Other…*
Energy Motivation to get there		• *Hold meeting to celebrate successes to date.*	• *Fair and accurate informal feedback* • *Other…*

Focus Where are we headed	• *Develop list of desired attributes of ideal plant from our point of view*
	    o *Mgt. team*
	    o *Supervisors group*
	    o *Safety*
	    o *Other?*
			• *Continue developing attribute lists throughout the organization*
			 • *Next quarterly leadership forum will discuss desired direction for this year*

Skills Skills to do it		• *Communication skill-building classes to be scheduled.*	• *Assess: What other skills are needed? (conflict resolution, etc.)* • *Other…*
Anchor Woven into the fabric of the system	• *Reflection of positive stories (embodying the attributes of a healthy organization) back to the organization.*	• *Celebration planned to recognize fewest injuries ever in the history of the plant. Distribute recognition jackets.*	• *Continue reflection of positive stories (embodying the attributes of a healthy organization) back to the organization* • *Other*

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