LEADING CHANGE

How successful leaders approach change management

PAUL LAWRENCE

KoganPage

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The emerging change model

01

The purpose of this chapter is to make transparent the qualitative research methodology on which this book is based. It also provides an initial high-level view of the emerging change model (ECM) and a more detailed guide to the rest of the book than is provided in the Introduction.

Method

The research methodology deployed is based on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). This is an approach in which data collection and data analysis are conducted in parallel, and in which the nature of the questions posed to participants changes as you proceed through the study. Accordingly my semi-structured questionnaire only had one standard question, which was along the lines of: '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.' I subsequently explored those aspects of the stories that emerged most often, checking to see which factors appeared peculiar to particular storytellers and which appeared to be more generally present. I conducted all the interviews myself, analysing the results in parallel with the interviews, testing my analysis with colleagues on a regular basis as I looked for patterns and variations.

The 'storytellers'

I interviewed 50 people, looking for people with experience of working in complex change scenarios. This raises the question – what is 'complex' change? As we will see, the safest answer to this question is probably to assume that all change is complex, yet on the other hand we may have an intuitive sense that some change scenarios are more complex than others. I didn't establish hard and fast criteria as such, but I did seek out people with experience of leading change in multinational/multicultural organizations, and/or people who led big projects with several layers of management involved. I also looked for people from a range of different backgrounds working in different markets, and from different kinds of organization, to be able to test whether the themes that emerged appeared to be general and not specific to certain contexts. To meet these criteria, I spoke to colleagues and identified an initial list of 39 people, 35 of whom agreed to participate in a 60- to 90-minute interview. I contacted the remaining 15 interviewees through the original group of 35. I conducted interviews face-to-face where possible, or else by telephone or Skype.

Although my only sampling criterion was that people had experience of working with change, out of curiosity I profiled the 50 interviewees after the research was complete. The profile that emerged was as follows:

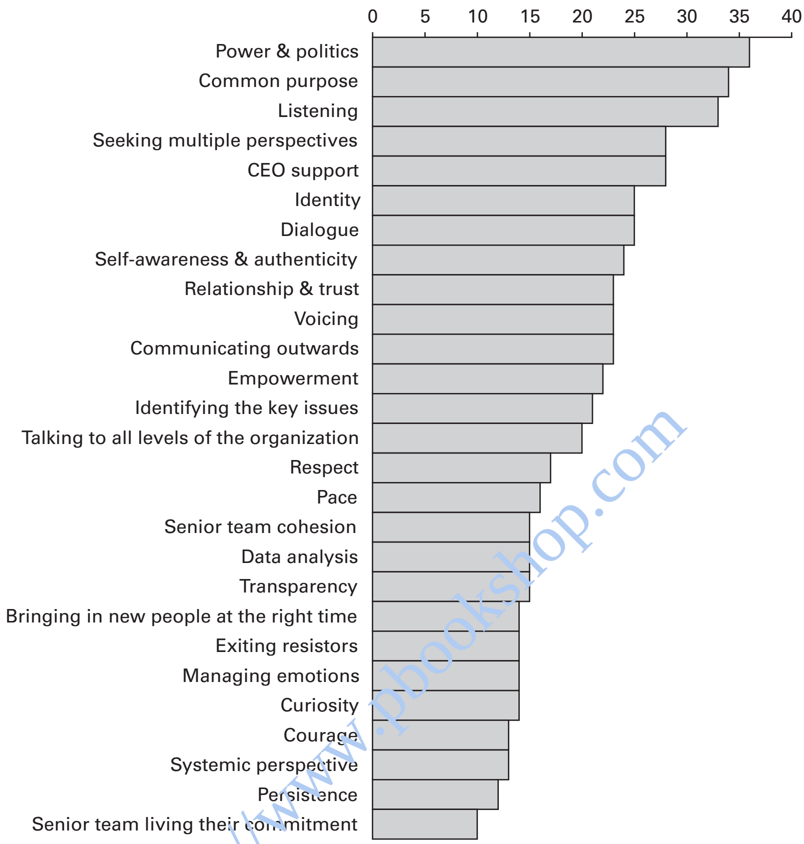
- 70 per cent were male and 30 per cent female;
- 80 per cent were business leaders, 12 per cent internal change practitioners and 8 per cent external change consultants;
- of the 80 per cent business leaders, 62.5 per cent had CEO experience and 37.5 per cent had other senior leadership experience, such as a head of function or head of business;
- 80 per cent were working at the time for publicly listed companies, 10 per cent worked in government organizations, and 10 per cent worked for not-for-profits;
- 40 per cent were Australian, 36 per cent European, 14 per cent North American, 8 per cent African and 2 per cent Asian;
- 18 per cent narrated stories of change spanning multiple countries; 38 per cent told stories of change interventions in Australia, 21 per cent in Europe, 7 per cent in Asia, 5 per cent in the United States, 5 per cent in Africa, 4 per cent in the Middle East and 2 per cent in South America.

I needed people to feel comfortable providing a full account of their stories including any feelings and uncertainties they experienced during the events described, and to share aspects of the stories that they wouldn't necessarily want to see appear in print. Therefore I haven't named any of the people I spoke to or their organizations. I've also disguised aspects of the stories when asked to do so by the storytellers.

Results

Corbin and Strauss (1990) distinguish between 'concepts' and 'categories'. A concept is the basis unit of analysis. Over time higher-level concepts emerge, which become the categories, and from the relationships between the categories emerges the overall theory, in this case the emerging change model or ECM.

FIGURE 1.1 Concepts mentioned by the 50 storytellers



Concepts

Figure 1.1 shows all the concepts mentioned by at least 10 of the story-tellers. For example, 36 storytellers mentioned some aspect of power and politics in at least one of their stories, 33 mentioned the importance of a common purpose or direction, etc. I've presented this data for interest's sake only (remember I used a qualitative research methodology).

Categories

Figure 1.2 shows how I clustered concepts into categories. As the study progressed, so some of the concepts and categories shifted and changed. For example, dialogue emerged first as a category, but then became a sort of 'uber-category' as the connections between listening, voicing and reflection

FIGURE 1.2 Emerging categories

Dialogue
Listening
Dialogue
Relationships
Voicing
Language
Talking to all levels of the organization
Reflection
Belief in people

Voicing
Voicing
Self-awareness/ authenticity
Communicating outwards
Courage
Storytelling
Giving feedback
Transparency
Naming the elephant in the room
Addressing others' concerns
Simplifying

Identity
Self-awareness/ authenticity
Identity
Pace
Resistance to change
Leveraging resistance

Listening
Listening
Respect
Curiosity
Listening for meaning
Checking for assumptions
Seeking feedback

Perspective
Talking to all levels of the organization
Curiosity
Seeking multiple perspective
Valuing outsider views

Power & politics
Power & politics
CEO support
Empowerment
Senior team cohesion
Senior team living their commitment
Role of supervisors

Reflection
Curiosity
Self-awareness/ authenticity
Managing emotions
Learning through doing

Purpose
Common purpose
Identifying the key issues
Burning platform

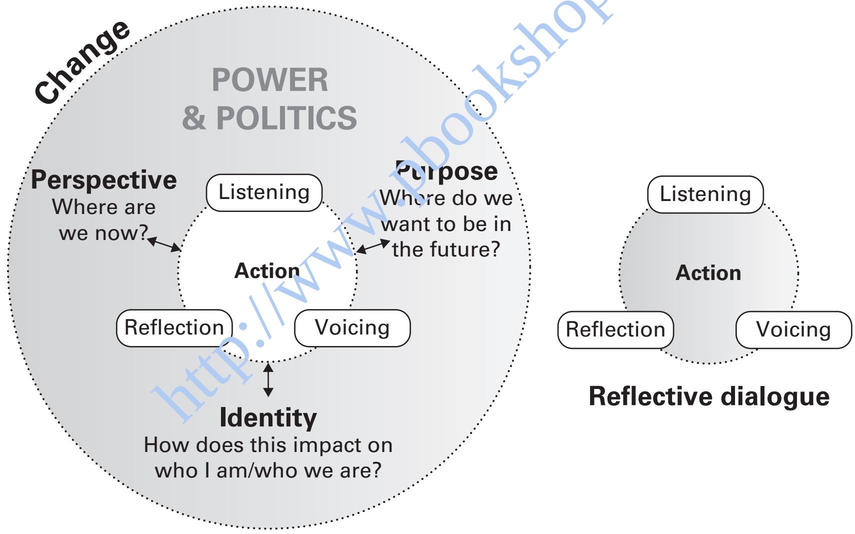
Systemic thinking
Identifying the key issues
Data analysis
Standing on the balcony
Bringing in new people at the right time
Exiting 'resisters'
Systemic perspective
Persistence

became apparent. Some concepts first emerged as unitary, only to later become more multi-hued, such that they ended up connecting to more than one category. 'Self-awareness/authenticity', for example, ended up linked to three categories: 'reflection', 'voicing' and 'identity'.

The emerging change model (ECM)

The next step of the exercise was to identify how the different categories relate to each other. From that analysis emerged the ECM depicted in Figure 1.3. The model shows all of the categories except 'systemic thinking'. The model itself represents a systemic view, with reflective dialogue sitting within a context of constant ongoing change, and power and politics

FIGURE 1.3 The emerging change model (ECM)



positioned as a backdrop. Some of the concepts listed beneath ‘systemic thinking’ are potential outcomes as a consequence of thinking systemically, for example ‘bringing in new people at the right time’ and ‘exiting resistors’.

Exploring the ECM

You have probably already begun to make sense of the ECM. You may have attached meanings to words like ‘listening’, ‘perspective’ and ‘identity’ and at least partly decided what messages the model as a whole is intended to convey. I invite you to suspend those judgements for as long as you have an appetite for reading this book, and explore the extent to which the message I am trying to convey is consistent with what you are trying to hear. The change lexicon already includes words such as ‘communication’, ‘listening’ and ‘politics’ all of which, I have discovered through this process, lend themselves to multiple interpretations.

The model comprises three components. At the heart of change sits reflective dialogue in action, the first component. The second component comprises perspective, purpose and identity, three aspects of change that emerge through dialogue and which serve as a context for dialogue. The third component is power and politics, the dynamics of which form the setting for change and which cannot be ignored in navigating a path through the messiness of change.

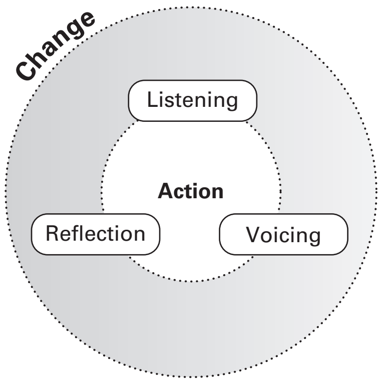
Part I: Reflective dialogue in action

At the heart of the change we have ‘reflective dialogue in action’ (see Figure 1.4). This dialogue takes place in the context of an ever-changing organizational environment – ‘change’.

Positioning dialogue at the heart of change is consistent with Stacey’s (2012) notion of ‘complex responsive processes’ and the idea that change is a function of the interactions between people in an organization. Positioning dialogue at the heart of change is not a new idea. Isaacs (1999), for example, in part inspired by the work of Bohm (1996) wrote a marvellous book called *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. Kahane (2008) wrote an inspiring account of the power of dialogue in shaping outcomes in South Africa, Spain, Paraguay, Canada, Colombia and the Caribbean.

Part I of this book considers four aspects of reflective dialogue in action, each of which has its own chapter: communication and dialogue, listening, voicing, and reflection. I start by considering what we mean by dialogue and

FIGURE 1.4 Reflective dialogue in action



how 'dialogue' is different from 'communication'. Dialogue has two components to it: listening and voicing. The word 'communication' is ambiguous. It is defined as: the imparting *or* interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In other words it can mean two-way communication, in which both parties listen and voice, or a one-way process in which one party is attempting to express as clearly as possible a particular perspective or point of view. This is a very big 'or'.

Many writings on change emphasize the importance of communication. 'You cannot over-communicate' and 'communicate-communicate-communicate' are familiar mantras. The emphasis however is usually on the one-way dissemination of information, rather than two-way exchange of perspectives. Kotter (1995) for example emphasizes how important it is for executives to 'use all existing communication channels to *broadcast* the vision'. Our findings support the idea that the clear articulation of the change message is necessary, but suggest it isn't sufficient. The focus on broadcasting or voicing hides the significance of effective listening, the importance of which is discussed in Chapter 3. To listen most effectively, the change leader enters into a dialogue deeply *curious* as to what others are thinking, and the basis for those perspectives. The change leader is willing and able to put aside her own perspectives for a moment and momentarily immerse herself in the point of view of another. The change leader who listens well is most likely to find that others respond well to her own voicing.

Chapter 4 considers effective voicing. Some people voice more effectively than others. At times of change most people in the organization want to know what's going on, but they don't just want to hear any old version of what's going on: they want to hear a version that is truthful and relevant, and that addresses their personal concerns. Through reflecting on the tales told by the storytellers in this book, I explore what differentiates an effective story from a less effective one. Why are some leaders regarded as trustworthy and credible and others are not? I differentiate between sincerity and authenticity and provide some insights as to what makes an effective change leader in this domain.

Effective dialogue is by its nature reflective. If I enter into a conversation genuinely curious as to what others are thinking and feeling, it means I am curious as to my own point of view as well, where that perspective comes from, and the extent to which it can adequately cater for any new insights I may gain from my interactions with others. Dialogue therefore implies reflection, a process by which I integrate what I've heard with my current reality, such that a new reality emerges. Reflective dialogue takes place around action. Change is an ongoing and dynamic process, and success cannot be assured solely through planning. The effective change leader *does* things, engages in reflective dialogue to make meaning of what happens as a consequence, and then *does* something else.

Part II: Perspective, purpose and identity

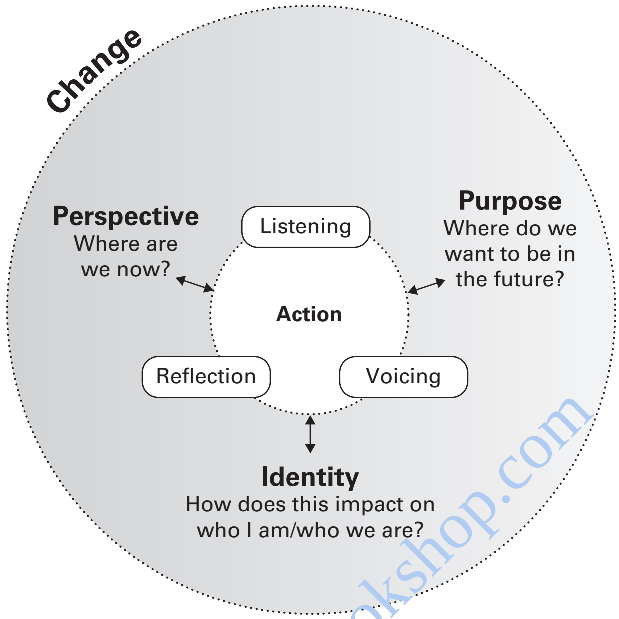
The second component of the model frames dialogue in the context of perspectives, purpose and identity. These are not just outcomes of dialogue; they also form the context for dialogue such that the relationship between dialogue and these other aspects of the model are best shown as two-way.

Perspective and purpose

Through effective dialogue we expand each other's perspectives. As an employee within an organization I only see bits of what goes on. I may feel passionately about my experience and may have come to some deep-rooted conclusions as to what my experiences signify. I can only engage in effective dialogue if I'm prepared to consider the possibility that my perspective is incomplete, and that I might think differently were I to gain access to a broader perspective.

Those who engage in effective dialogue are not only more likely to cultivate broader perspectives individually, but are also more likely to facilitate a broader shared perspective. Based on this common understanding of how things are *now*, people are more likely to form a common view as to how they'd like things to be in the *future* – a purpose.

FIGURE 1.5 The ECM expanded



Identity

A common perspective on the present isn't sufficient to enable agreement on a common purpose. This is why all the data in the world aren't always going to persuade the organization to move in a particular direction. Through dialogue I also form and review my identity. This is a slightly more difficult concept to grasp, and is fully expounded in Chapter 8.

Essentially the point is that I have a sense of who I am in the world. I tell a story about myself, the kind of person I am, and how this shows up in how I behave in particular situations. For example, in my time working at a retail bank I came to understand how committed many branch staff were to their work. They saw a value in what they did, and derived satisfaction from helping other people manage their money more effectively, of being able to serve. These people had a work identity along the lines of: 'I am a person who helps others to succeed.' They worked in teams that had collective identities. For example, branches staffed by like-minded employees had a team identity something like: 'Our collective purpose is to help others to succeed through better management of their money.'

In this scenario staff may have felt truly threatened to be told they must now seize every opportunity to sell things to their customers – loans, insurance, pensions etc. This may have felt like being asked to inhabit a new identity along the lines of, 'I am a person who tries to sell as many products as possible to the customer in order to profit the bank.' This doesn't mean that there's anything inappropriate about the bank's intention. The person sending the message may feel as passionately as the branch staff, and may fundamentally believe that by anticipating the customer's needs and proactively meeting those needs unbidden, this may be in the best interest of the customer. As the recipient of the message however, this may not be clear, or else I may not fully trust the person who sent the message; he may just be a name to me, or a job title. So I will respond to the message by engaging in dialogue with the people around me to see what they think. Between us we will decide what the message means. Whether we decide that it means the bank is becoming more customer focused, as opposed to becoming an upmarket version of a fast food hamburger chain, will depend on who I engage in the dialogue and the meaning we co-create. If I decide I don't like the new directive, but will comply with it anyway, this in turn will cause me to wonder who I really am at work. Again I will engage in dialogue with others and so aspects of my identity will change. This may happen at an individual level, team level or at the level of the organization as a whole.

Many change leaders voice frustration about how resistant others appear to be and label them as being 'resistant to change'. In fact resistance is entirely natural when considered in the context of identity. If I am asked to change my behaviour in a way that holds some significance for me, then I want to know how this new behaviour makes sense in the context of who I perceive myself to be, who I perceive my team to be, and who I perceive my organization to be. I seek to understand. It is the articulation of this questioning that is often labelled 'resistance' by change leaders anticipating unquestioning compliance. It's important to acknowledge the process through which people define themselves because identity is relevant to purpose. If the organization succeeds in achieving a common perspective on the present, it's likely there are multiple versions of future purpose. Identity is like a filter, a decision-making mechanism through which future options will be screened, but a filter that in itself may evolve and change through dialogue.

Part III: Power and politics

Some texts emphasize the importance of positional, or disciplinary power. This is the worldview in which the CEO's agenda and behaviours are most important. If the CEO is behind a change then the change will happen; if not, it won't. The importance of the CEO's support was affirmed by the stories. However, we also heard that just because the CEO supports the change, is even actively committed to change, that doesn't mean the change will happen; the story of power and politics is more complex than that. We also heard that the CEO can be one of the biggest potential blockers to change, one of the most powerful sources of resistance to change.

Some of the texts that emphasize the importance of dialogue and the primacy of co-creation seem to ignore power. This is the worldview that passionately ascribes to the famous Margaret Mead quote: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.' We did indeed find that dialogue sits at the heart of change, but that doesn't mean that engaging in effective dialogue alone is sufficient. As one of the storytellers said: 'Some people say all that matters is the conversation. No it's not.'

I attended a workshop recently that taught participants about collaboration. On one page of the workbook it said: 'For collaboration to work effectively, power games and politics need to be extinguished. Collaboration has nothing to do with power.' The ECM represents a view that says power and politics cannot be ignored or extinguished. The stories support the notion that there are many different sources of power available to people within an organization besides positional power. We have all heard of expert power, for example, or referent power. We go so far to say that there is a power imbalance in any relationship; indeed there may be several different types of power imbalance inherent in the same relationship, and these imbalances shift and change over time. Dialogue and power are related. I may enhance my power in a relationship through effective listening or powerful voicing. If I focus on discerning the nature of the power relationship between you and me during the course of a dialogue, then I am better able to craft my voicing as I go. So we have the whole model as depicted in Figure 1.3.

Part IV: Themes

Parts I–III of the book detail the ECM, with reference to stories and the writings of other authors. Some of the key themes of the model are discussed in Part IV of the book, namely:

- the significance of authenticity;
- what 'resistance to change' means; and
- systemic thinking.

Part V: Application

In the last part of the book we tackle the 'so what?' If the ECM isn't a linear process, how might we use it? In Chapter 13 I have written up a short case study to illustrate how the ECM may be useful as a reflective framework in practice. Chapter 14 is about getting started, with particular reference to getting clear on the purpose of change.

Chapter 15 considers the implications of the model for how we think about leadership. It is argued that leadership may be most usefully regarded as a mindset rather than a set of skills, a mindset that we may call 'fearless curiosity'. The fearlessly curious leader recognizes the world is complex, and that she will never have all the answers. She also recognizes that most other people regard the world as merely complicated and expect her to have all the answers. The fearlessly curious leader not only accepts that this as a dilemma, but relishes the ambiguity in all its mystery and sets out to navigate that complexity with relentless curiosity and fascination.

Chapter 16 provides some guidelines on how to go about building organizational capability from a systemic perspective. The traditional approach focuses on the development of the individual leader and her skills. I discuss some of the shortcomings of this approach and provide some general guidance on how to approach the task more systemically. In many organizations, adopting a systemic approach may prove challenging; the change manager may find herself therefore inhabiting a paradox (Shaw, 1997), trying on the one hand to fulfil a designated role within a culture that privileges accountability, control and certainty, while at the same time recognizing she is not actually in 'control' of anything.

Finally, in Chapter 17, I write specifically about the potential role of coaching as a particularly effective component of any systemic approach to building capability. I distinguish what I call 'systemic coaching' from other more conventional coaching philosophies. Systemic coaching is essentially the practice of reflective dialogue conducted with an awareness of the system outside of the individual coaching relationship.

The ECM as a reflective framework

Some models are built to be linear and causal, based on a premise that says people are generally resistant to change and cling to the status quo like limpets. The task of the change leader is to stir up the seas to such a degree that the limpets are shaken loose, before being moved swiftly on to a new location where they have the opportunity to reattach themselves to a new status quo. These models are inevitably linear, invoking some form of diagnostic early in the process, after which the emphasis turns to enrolment, implementation and a process of bedding down, of making change stick. This assumption is evident in some of the language used. Lewin's 'freeze – change – refreeze' model (1951), for example, appears to imply change as a discrete event taking place against a backdrop of stability and predictability. The task of the change leader is to establish the need for change and to put in place a plan by which everyone involved in the plan is informed of this need, and of the role they must play to make the change happen. These models imply that people at the top of an organization are ultimately responsible for identifying the need for change, the nature of the change, and for making sure that the desired change is implemented. The role of people further down the organization is to comply with the wishes of those further up the organization, or else to resist. Such models are alluring to those seeking certainty and control, but this isn't one of those models.

Other models are built to represent more complicated systems. In this case the relationships between variables may be less linear and outcomes less predictable. Nevertheless, it is implied that all variables are included and that the model may be expected to function reasonably well in helping the user predict outcomes. This isn't really one of those models either. This model assumes the world is complex rather than complicated. The essence of complexity is the multitude of variables that impact on our environment both in isolation and in combination with other variables in ways that are unpredictable and uncontrollable. The interaction of these variables creates a 'mess' through which the effective change leader must successfully navigate. The change leader is the surfer, reflecting on the consequences of her last action, continually adjusting to circumstance.

I don't claim that my analysis of the stories depicts every aspect of change. We bring our own experiences and beliefs to a study such as this, which heighten our awareness of some factors and may blind us to others. Given that I'm not attempting to represent every aspect of a complicated process, this doesn't matter. The potential value of the model lies in serving as a reflective framework to which the change leader can refer in the moment when making choices in navigating her own 'mess'. The model is an attempt to represent the combined reflections of 50 experienced change leaders, and through them the wisdom of the thousands of other people with whom those people have interacted over time. In that sense this model is a co-created hypothesis as to what some of the most important aspects of change might be.

The linear, sequential approach to change represents the old paradigm. Leaders who believe in the primacy of positional power and hierarchies often see their role as being to issue an edict to the wider organization through the filter of their direct reports. According to this model the leader's role is to tell the essentially passive organization, engaged in 'business as usual', what to do. Upon hearing the instruction the organization then embarks upon a quick flurry of activity whereby it changes what it's doing in accordance with the leader's wishes. Contrast this to the new paradigm which depicts the organization as being actively involved in change all the time, in which the organization is constantly assessing and re-assessing its actions with reference to everything going on around it. It isn't the role of leadership to instigate change *per se,* for change is ongoing. Rather it is the role of leaders to notice how change is already happening, and to pay attention and be mindful of the way in which they choose to attempt to influence the direction of that change.

The ECM is therefore best used as a reflective framework. As more people engage with the model, talk about the model, ask questions of it and offer their insights, so the model will continue to emerge; indeed it will never stop emerging. The emerging change model is not intended to generate a methodology that will lead to specific outcomes. Rather it is intended to provide useful insight to others reflecting on their practice: change leaders and change practitioners.

The reluctant practitioner

Working with a step-by-step process sounds much easier! Can't we just keep doing things the way we always have done? Well, we sort of can and we sort of can't. From the standpoint of the reluctant practitioner there's bad news and there's good news.

First the bad news. Stacey (2012) came up with a model that distinguished between different types of change, the idea being that the practitioner could tailor her approach to different change scenarios and use all the old models in many of those scenarios. Unfortunately he lived to regret it. The problem with such a model is that it assumes we can successfully diagnose in advance the extent to which a challenge is simple or complex. It implies that levels of complexity can be somehow gradated and represented on a spectrum, as if they were not complex at all but merely complicated. The best approach may be to treat every scenario as if it were complex. Higgs and Rowland (2005) compared multiple approaches to managing change and concluded 'complex' approaches tend to be the most effective regardless. Tsoukas and

Hatch (2001) suggest we simply assume that all change is complex. Complexity from this perspective is just a metaphor. If we treat all organizations as complex systems and view them accordingly, then we begin to see things we would otherwise miss or that we would attempt to frame within simple linear systems of cause and effect. The sense we got from the people we interviewed was that the behaviours they engage in, in managing complex change, appear to be based on a more general conviction as to how they can most effectively behave as change leaders. So that's the bad news; you can't ignore the principles that underpin the ECM.

The good news is that the ECM isn't a model for designing and implementing change; it's a model that attempts to depict how change happens anyway. In this sense it's an overlay to how the change practitioner goes about getting things done. So long as the practitioner doesn't expect that adherence to a linear model will get the job done without the need for further review, then I can see no harm in using whatever tool, model or process that feels useful. The ECM may be regarded as a framework or lens through which to review events as they unfold. This presumes the change leader is a reflective practitioner, and I think the reflective practitioner will enjoy experimenting with the ECM.

"Paul Lawrence has used his unique background as businessman, author, coach and consultant to provide a practical approach to a new way of understanding how successful change really works."

Andreas Priestland, formerly Senior Organizational Development Consultant, BP

"This is a practical book packed with real life examples, constructive advice and challenge. The content will make you think, smile and occasionally wince! I commend it to everyone fascinated by the real drivers of change in organizations – big, small, start-up, mature and across sectors."

Ann Ewing, formerly Vice-President Organisational Capability, BP

"**Leading Change** treats change management very differently from the many other books I have come across on the subject. It builds up the Emerging Change Model step by step, chapter by chapter, showing how all the elements in the model are subject to change and how they influence each other. The most insightful yet down-to-earth book on change I have read in a long while."

Karin Bax, Change Manager, Heineken International

"What sets **Leading Change** apart is that it approaches change management using business leaders' first-hand accounts. These leaders were all confronted by extraordinary situations, across a variety of cultures and business sectors. The book offers the reader a real look into the dynamic juxtaposition of insight and reflection, action and reaction, listening and learning."

Graham Kwan, Chief Executive Officer, Character Capital Inc

It's still claimed that 70 per cent of attempts at organizational change fail, despite the widespread use of a multitude of change management models. Many of these models are linear, based on an underlying assumption that the world is simple and predictable. In fact, the environment for most organizations today is complex and dynamic.

Leading Change provides a practical framework that enables leaders to actively engage with the complexity of their organizations to bring about successful change. Supported by academic research and grounded in a range of examples and cases, the book offers a genuine, viable alternative to existing approaches to change management.

Organizational development expert and executive coach **Paul Lawrence** is Co-Director of the Centre for Systemic Change, a change management company based in Sydney. Paul was previously a Global Programme Director for OD and Learning at BP.

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