

# FOSTER A CULTURE OF OPENNESS AND CREATIVITY WILL THRIVE



*Nothing in this world is constant except change*, wrote Heraclitus of Ephesus (530–470 BC), an ancient philosopher and one of the most prominent thinkers in history. His view of life is captured in his famous maxim *panta rhei*, meaning everything flows and nothing stands still. This is the fundamental essence of the universe: everything is continuously changing and becoming something different than it was before.

Taking this into account, why do we still spend so much time controlling the outcome when planning for change? In these disruptive times, shouldn't we adopt a more postmodern perspective where change is seen as continuously arising and not as an event in time?

A lot of change agents and managers spend a lot of time creating and planning for change, devising and expecting a predetermined outcome. Yet, the vast majority of change programmes fail. Are employees to blame because they show resistance? Or is it rather the change agent wanting to manage an outcome that is by its very nature unpredictable and subject to too many uncontrollable variables? Does change happen through a step-by-step process or is it rather the result of natural emergence influenced by contextual drivers?

The traditional, modern perspective looks at change as a linear process that originates from one person and is cascaded

downward in the organisation. Practitioners of this perspective believe that change needs to go through a set of logical pre-defined steps to ensure that the specific objectives are accomplished.

Over the last couple of decades many theories and models based on the modern change perspective have been developed and applied in many organisations. One of the best known is the planned change approach of Kurt Lewin – a pioneer in group dynamics and organisational development.

The theory consists of a three-step model: unfreezing, changing and refreezing. Unfreezing is preparing for change. It's about recognising a problem and creating a sense for change in the organisation. Once that is accomplished, the change phase can be implemented. This phase is where the actual modification takes place to reach the predefined organisational objectives. According to Lewin, many managers make the mistake of not



preparing the organisation adequately in the first phase and end up experiencing resistance to change, in the end failing to meet their targets. The last phase in the planned change process, refreezing, is aimed at cementing the changes and solidifying the new way of working.

There is a growing number of people who think that there is an imminent need to revisit the way we look and deal with change. For transformational change to be successful, advocates of emergent change – a postmodern perspective – argue that the contingency approach is more appropriate in this fast-paced world. This perspective believes that there is no universal set of management tools applicable to organise a company. Every situation is different and requires therefore a different approach.

Hope-Haley and Balogun (2002) argue in that sense for a more context sensitive approach to change. In order to be successful, managers need to devise approaches adapted to the relevant context. They designed a framework called the 'change kaleidoscope', a tool that helps managers diagnose and implement the right context-sensitive organisational transformation. This tool also reinforces the view of change as a "process in itself rather than a controllable sequence of transition events between present and future states" (Hope-Haley and Balogun, 2002).

Change managers need to be aware of the unpredictable and complex process of change and how it affects every part of an organisation. Burnes (2004) characterises change as an unpredictable process of aligning and realigning organisations to the continuously changing environment. Even the most carefully crafted

change programme will have emergent elements impacting its course.

The postmodern paradigm on change allows managers to see emergent change in a different perspective. It requires a change in mindset where "chaos and unpredictability present opportunities and threats" (Hinson and Osborne, 2014). The change agent becomes in this case a facilitator instead of a 'manager of change', which at this point we can say that it is a contradiction in terms following the postmodern view on change management. Instead of implementing change top-down and following a one size fits all strategy, the postmodern perspective argues that change arises from the collective intelligence emerging from ongoing collaboration, collective efforts and competition – and thus not from one person only – as described by Hinson and Osborne (2014).

Change is part of life and inevitably also a part of organisational management, whether working in a corporate or a smaller organisation. From experience, I would say that it's even more true in the latter as smaller organisations need to be agile and flexible enough to keep their competitive edge.

It's not about choosing one perspective above the other, but rather fostering a culture of openness and creativity where innovation can thrive. In environments which are too stable people tend to lose their creativity and surrender to a routine. Organisations tend to become less agile and disruptive. Creativity is, expectedly, the key driving force of successful innovation, which in turn is needed to respond to the complex and continuously changing business environment of today's world.

So, if one day you find yourself heading a change project – and in fact life is a constant change – don't fall into the trap of imposing your view upon others. It's about sharing and creating meaningful conversations and creating a common future, not just pushing a singular view. I've seen many change programmes becoming a struggle or being stopped because of low involvement.

As a change agent or manager, you need to build bridges, connect people with different ideas and create the right conditions for self-organisation, being it internal or external with customers. It's during those collaborative discussions that impactful ideas emerge. It is your role to pay attention to emergent patterns, discover commonalities and guide the organisations towards transformational change.

Don't underestimate the power of the collective brain and how it can propel your organisation! Nor underestimate the power of self-organisation resulting out of those local conversations between individuals. Let go of control – as prescribed by the postmodern perspective – and watch how creativity, passion, involvement and responsibility subsequently arise.♦

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