

Engaging People

Routes to change

How do you make change happen where you are? How can you make it faster, deeper, wider? Five different ways of changing organisations are explored here by Penny Walker – find out which one is right for your situation.

Machines or conversations

Organisational change management theory and text books (yes, there are such things) are divided broadly into those which see organisations as machines and those which see organisations as conversations.

Machines have component parts which move in predictable ways – pull a lever or turn a cog and you'll get a particular result. Adjust the lever, remove the cog, link up different parts and you'll get a different – but predictable – outcome.

Conversations take place between people who may at different times be more or less rational, more or less open, more or less intuitive, interested, cynical, inspired... Conversations have unwritten

rules – but not everyone thinks the rules are the same, and we can spiral away from them very easily.

If you think an organisation is like a machine, your approach to changing it will be very different to the one you'd use if you think an organisation is like a conversation. The critical differences are to do with the extent that you prioritise engaging people, influencing what they talk about and listening to what they are saying; or whether you emphasise a detailed analysis of the systems, processes and structures and then come up with a solution which is then implemented by experts.

Is one view right and the other wrong? Ultimately, they are both metaphors that help you to see a recognisable pattern in what may be a chaotic reality. The important thing is to be aware that they are metaphors – maps rather than territory – and to notice when the metaphor is helping you to be effective, and when it is getting in the way.

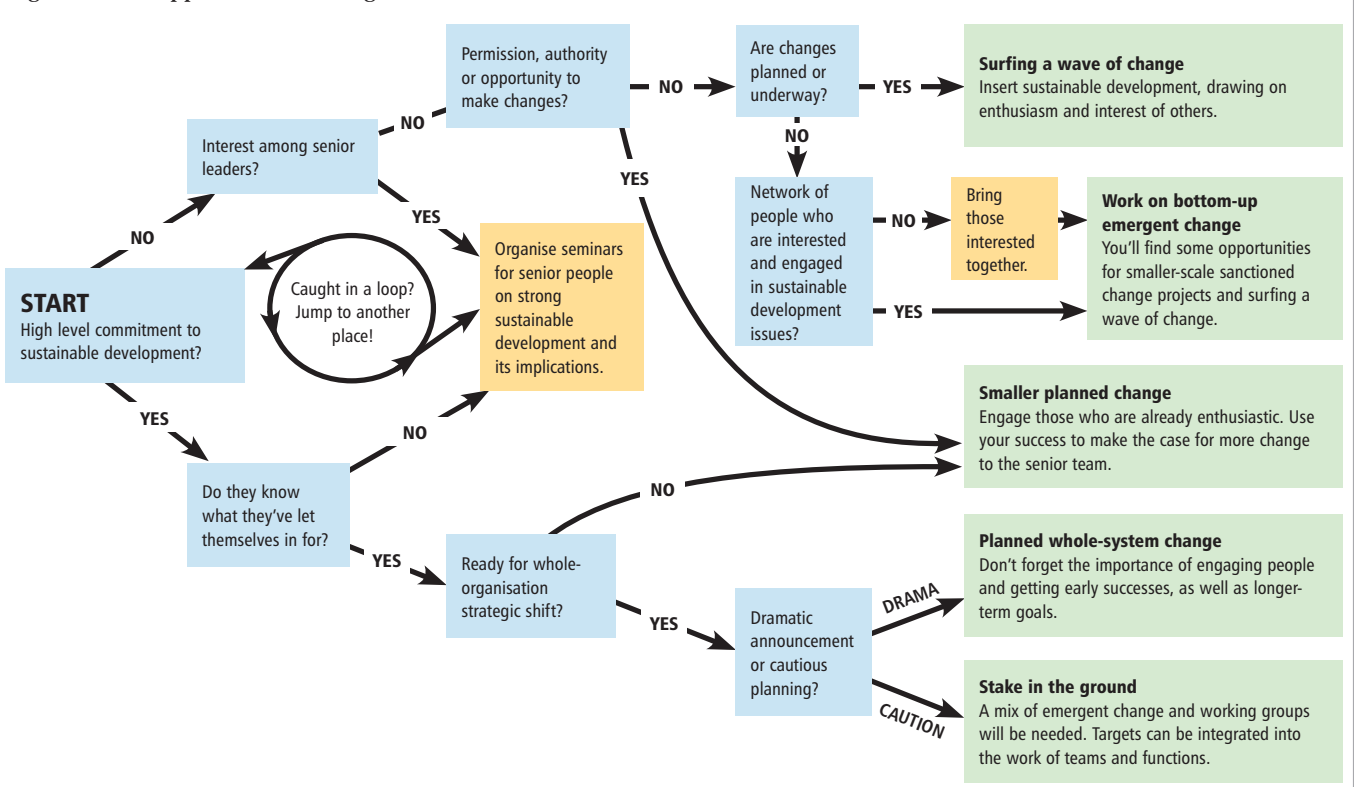
Now that little bit of theoretical underpinning is clear, here are the five different approaches to change (see figure 1) that I have seen being used and heard being talked about in my experience of helping people change their organisations towards sustainable development.

1. Planned whole-system change
2. Smaller planned change
3. Stake in the ground
4. Surfing a wave of change
5. Emergent change

1 Planned whole-system change

This is the kind of situation most often described in text books. Maybe it's a merger, or wholesale restructuring. Maybe a new IT system is being introduced. This kind of approach includes careful attention to detail and strong project management. The new system needs designing and the change-over is planned carefully to happen in the right order. People talk about this kind of change as 'unfreeze, change, refreeze' – there is a

Figure 1: Five approaches to change



very detailed idea of what things need to be like following the change, and engaging people is in order to win them over, not in order to design the future.

2 Smaller planned change

There are still similarities with project management, but the stakes are lower and therefore more freedom may be given to experiment and take risks. Involving people in understanding the drivers for change and designing the future is more manageable, because the reach of the change is not so large. It might be launching a 'green' product line, introducing a recycling system into an office, or deciding to cut water use by five per cent year-on-year.

3 Stake in the ground¹

Someone very senior makes a public commitment to a very stretching target, without worrying that it's not clear how (or even if) the organisation will achieve it. Think of President Kennedy's commitment to put a man on the moon, or the UK's aspiration to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent by 2050. In organisational sustainability, Wal-Mart's self-imposed target that within five years all its North American stores will only sell wild-caught fish if it is MSC certified.

4 Surfing a wave of change

Or trimming your sails to take advantage of the wind, even if it isn't blowing in exactly the direction you want to head. Proposals for energy efficiency measures may be judged on their return on investment – a rise in the price of energy may mean that something which was rejected six months ago is suddenly back on the agenda. When organisations

are merging, having a common new initiative like an eco-champions' network or a volunteering scheme may be a very helpful way of building a new sense of organisational pride and team work, as well as having environmental or social benefits. When the mergers team are looking for something to gel people together, the sustainability change maker can offer them a solution.

5 Emergent change

Organisational culture – the conversations people have when the boss isn't listening, the topics which are considered out of bounds, 'the way we do things round here', the values that people actually live, rather than those which are written in the organisational handbook – emerges from the thousands of conversations that happen between people. It is the soil which supports and nourishes new initiatives, and it can be very effective at poisoning them too! The paradox for the change maker is that you can't force emergence in a particular direction – but you can put in place the conditions for a positive sustainability culture to emerge, through networks, experiences and information.

Mix and match

These five approaches don't have to be used in isolation. Each one can support and benefit from a judicious use of the others.

Having successfully surfed a wave of change, you may find you have catalysed some emergent change, which then makes it easier to recruit enthusiastic people for a smaller change project. If the boss drives a stake into the ground, setting up a series of working groups to understand the why and come up with the how may mean that you end up with a lot of small projects, which then need to be managed as work streams within a large organisation-wide change programme.

Which approach is right?

If there is a strong and authentic commitment to sustainable development at the highest levels in your organisation, then whole-organisation change is possible. The preferred style may be the 'stake in the ground', or the senior

team may prefer to get a small group to develop detailed plans before making a public commitment.

If the commitment isn't there, or if you're sure they don't really know what they'd be letting themselves in for, an early step would be to organise a high-level seminar or other catalytic experience, to shake and wake them.

If there's no budging the senior team, perhaps there is someone at a senior level who will sanction a smaller project.

If even this is not possible, then look out for coincidental changes which are happening anyway, that you can surf. And with all of the approaches, cultivate the soil – recruit and trust your colleagues to change things from the bottom up, through emergent change. Useful ideas include champions' networks, volunteer groups, and introducing the topic into formal and informal conversations like meetings, social events and training.

Emergent change is not just for situations where planned change isn't permitted – it should be an integral part of any change. So do it too, anyway.

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¹ *This approach was suggested at the London 'change management' workshop in March – thanks to the participants.*

These ideas are explored further in IEMA's Practitioner workbook 'Change Management for Sustainable Development', and you can develop your own change plan with guidance from Penny Walker if you go along to one of the workshops which IEMA is holding this year.

'Change Management for Sustainable Development: a workbook' was published by IEMA in September 2006 and can be bought through the on-line shop at www.iema.net

Call for articles

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