

Learning to Change: A Guide for Organization Change Agents

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591

When a consultant or manager needs to help her organization change a process, how should this "change agent" approach this task? What models should be utilized? For both professionals involved in change management and students wanting to gain insight into the field, *Learning to Change* is an excellent resource. The authors, Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak, take a theoretical and practical approach to the subject and narrow their focus to planned change in professional organizations. Students of organizational learning and organizational development may recognize several of the theorists referenced such as Karl Weick for sense making, Chris Argyris for double loop learning, and Gareth Morgan for metaphors. A major contribution of the authors is their creation of a five-color model presenting different ways to think about change. Thus, the change agent can look at how an organization may respond best to each approach and which works best for her style in order to develop a change strategy.

The organization of the book is critical. The reader should start with the introduction to gain an overview of the book's structure. At the beginning of each chapter, the authors again state what the reader will expect to learn and how the chapter ties in with the previous ones. The change management specific material starts with the second chapter. Apart from the introduction and epilogue, the seven chapters of *Learning to Change* include:

- (1) "Why change is complicated";
- (2) "Thinking about change in five different colors";
- (3) "The main elements of planned change";
- (4) "From idea to outcome";
- (5) "Examples of diagnostic models";
- (6) "Examples of intervention"; and
- (7) "The change agent: from expertise to authenticity".

The second chapter "Why change is complicated" discusses the obstacles change agents face and their implications. This chapter sets the stage for what

change agents must do to help organizations reach their desired outcomes. The sub-sections include: loosely coupled system, management, chaos thinking and sociopolitical mechanisms. Noted management theorist Karl Weick was the influence for the loosely coupled system. He reasons that organizational objectives and processes are ambiguous, which differs from the classic metaphor of an organization as a well-designed machine. Organizations have many parts that do not operate in sync with the overall goals, which is a fact to be considered by change agents. The next section is valuable because the authors discuss the conflicts between managers and their employees and remind the reader that consultants are not the only people serving as change agents. Just as organizations have parts with different goals, managers work with autonomous employees. Hanson (1996), author of the book *Educational Administration and Organizational Behavior*, is referenced for this section and his idea of the pocket veto being used by teachers (p. 17). If professionals agree with what management asks of them, then they are probably exercising their pocket veto by agreeing verbally to the management but behaving according to their own plans. Although I understand professionals often disagree openly with their management, I do not think this behavior is as one-sided as the authors depict. In my own organization, I see many professionals proactively seeking feedback on their behavior from management. I wish the authors would examine both perspectives. The third section involving chaos thinking delves into how an organization's past and environment influence its future. The final section of this chapter compares the informal organization to the formal one. Both should be considered for change management. With this knowledge about change, the authors move onto the next chapter.

In the third chapter, "Thinking about change in five different colors", Caluwé and Vermaak introduce their color model. They start this chapter by stating the word "change" has five different meanings. The five ways of thinking addressed by the model include different views on what the authors say, "why and how people or things change" (p. 42). The different colors include:

- *Yellow-print thinking*. People change their standpoints only if their own interests are taken into account.
- *Blue-print thinking*. People or things change if a clearly specified result is laid down beforehand.
- *Red-print thinking*. People change if things are appealing and inspiring to them.
- *Green-print thinking*. People change if they learn. They are motivated to discover their limits.
- *White-print thinking*. Everything changes autonomously, of its own accord.

After providing an overview of these thinking methods, the authors include examples of the type of change process appropriate for each. These details are summarized in color-coded tables for easy reference. I think an important part of the chapter is where the authors note the ideals and pitfalls of each thinking method. If the change agent takes one way of thinking too far, it will not serve its purpose. To keep within a useful boundary, the change agent should consider the ideal. Finally, the chapter ends with a case study of two health care organizations planning a merger. Five different change strategies for this situation then illustrate each color's perspective and provide the reader an opportunity to see with which strategy she relates most, which I think is a valuable tool. One word of caution to the reader – the authors label this section the Joseph and Johanna Case, which does not coincide with the material they present. The names Joseph and Johanna never appear in the case examples. Instead, the authors provide the views of five change agents and not just two to showcase each color from their model. The reader should not let this minor confusion distract her from the content of the case study.

The fourth chapter, "The main elements of planned change", discusses six elements that apply to all of the color thinking methods. Ultimately, this chapter clarifies what planned change is. The elements are: outcome, history, actors, phases, communication, and steering. Often change agents neglect one of these elements, but they all are important to address with a change strategy. The first element is outcome. Even though the desired results may not be defined thoroughly or they may change during the change process, the initiators tend to know what they wish to achieve. History is the second element to play a role in planned change and what the authors call the "starting point". Because of an event from the past, an organization will seek change. The change agent should determine this cause by examining the context, triggers, and philosophy around the organizations' history. All of these factors influence the change idea. The third element is actor. The role of the actor may entail being an initiator, sponsor, supporter, champion, implementer, or change object/change victim. Following the actor, the authors discuss the change phases. The phases play a useful role in breaking a long-term change process into manageable parts. The phases start with diagnosis to development of a change strategy and then continue to the intervention planning followed by various interventions. The intervention plan defines the number and order of the interventions. To carry out these change phases, the change agent needs to utilize the fifth element, communication and sense making. To provide examples of communication about and within a change process, Caluwé and Vermaak provide a checklist of different channels and resources. After communication, the authors discuss steering as the final element. Steering keeps the change process on track by having someone monitor the results and progress of the interventions. Feedback is a critical aspect of steering. To demonstrate how these elements work together for planned change, the authors

provide an example involving textile factories that need to reduce their environmentally harmful output. The chapter also includes models for a few of the elements, which a change agent might use. References to the different colors and how they fit into the planned change elements are mentioned. However, I think the chapter would fit into the beginning of the book more logically. When the authors describe that the book is to focus on planned change with professional organizations, I would have liked to know more about what planned change is. Another benefit for moving this chapter to the beginning of the book is to have the "Idea to outcome" chapter immediately follow the color model. After learning about the color model, I was ready to learn more about how these work with achieving results.

The fifth chapter, "From idea to outcome", provides a deeper understanding of the color model and the four change phases. For the diagnostic process, the authors describe both the scientific and the action approach. By carrying out either approach, the change agent performs an intervention herself. Thus, the authors recommend change agents conduct the diagnosis with people in the organization. This diagnosis then is the basis for the change strategy. Caluwé and Vermaak provide six questions to consider when developing this strategy. The questions remind the change agent to think about: how valuable it is to understand the diagnosis, what possible resistance could arise, what changes are realistic for the organization, and how well the change agent can work with the developed strategy. After all of this reflection, the change agent begins an action plan called the intervention plan. According to the authors, an intervention is defined as, "one or a series of planned change activities intended to help an organization increase its effectiveness" (p. 141). For the plan, interventions need to be developed as well as arranged in an order, which works best for the organization. Some interventions may run in sequence and others may occur simultaneously. The planned change elements (outcome, history, actors, etc.) even apply to how an intervention should be handled. Similar to the previous chapters, the authors provide an example illustrating how these phases work for a real organization.

After learning about these phases, a change agent might want to learn more about carrying out diagnosis and determining appropriate interventions. Chapters six and seven provide examples for both of these phases. For diagnostic models, the authors look at them from two dimensions – level versus approach. Level includes: individual, group, organization, or environment. Approach entails: business aspects, organization aspects, and change aspects. The dimensions covered for interventions are target audience and color approach. Target includes: individual, group or organization. The authors do not recommend reading these chapters from beginning to end but using them as a reference. By using the grid at the beginning of each chapter, the reader can find models that fit a characteristic from each dimension and then locate the model in the chapter. Because many more examples exist than

those stated, the authors provide additional authors to research even though no one author has a "complete" list.

Following all of the insight and models regarding the change process, the reader learns the importance of the change agent in the eighth chapter, "The change agent: from expertise to authenticity". Because various people can perform the change agent role, the authors state that they did not include it as an actor in the change process. The agent can come from various disciplines and be an external consultant or even a management or professional inside an organization. If a change agent is to lead a change effort such as those categorized by the color model, then she must possess certain skills or competencies. Most likely, every agent will not know every type of strategy available, so it is up to the agent to identify her shortcomings and thus, additional resources to assist her. One tool referenced for a change agent to learn more about her style is Kolb's Learning Cycle. Starting with concrete experiences, the cycle continues with observation and reflection followed by abstract conceptualization and lastly experimentation. By learning about oneself, the change agent will understand better how to help an organization. Caluwé and Vermaak conclude their discussion by stating the book initially talked about change and ends with a focus on learning, which ties back to the book's title, *Learning to Change*. The book concludes with a color model glossary and color test for change agents to learn more about with which color they associate most.

Because approaches to the change process change, the authors mention this book is a "product of its time". Overall, it proves to be a comprehensive resource including examples a change agent may try with organizations. Because of its textbook structure, a change agent will need to spend time reading the material to understand it versus flipping through the pages casually. One area of improvement needed is the depiction of the models. Even after reading the book, I found the diagrams challenging to understand because they are not intuitive. For example, the way the authors depict the History piece on the diagram's far left looks as if it is an inset to another piece; however, it is its own component. The graphics chosen do not always represent the component's function, but if the graphics were more in sync with their purpose, then I would comprehend the diagram more easily. The authors themselves state the downfall of the full change process diagram is that it is linear where the change process is not. I recommend that they look at a new way to visualize the process to make it more memorable. Because Caluwé and Vermaak struggle to portray the whole process in a simple way, they may want to keep the components separate instead of combining them into one diagram.

The inclusion of many theories may be a challenge for a typical reader as well. Theories provide a thorough background to the process these authors provide and supply credibility; however, the background information can be

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overwhelming. I think the authors' information is lost at times within all of the external sources.

Despite these areas for improvement, I would recommend this book for a practicing change agent or a student interested in the field. Caluwé and Vermaak provide a forward-thinking approach to the subject matter by reminding the reader that every organizational situation is different, but there are overall guidelines and factors to consider when conducting planned change.

596

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Reference

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