

Planning Deep Change Through a Series of Small Wins

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on six years of action research on change dynamics in the Dutch diplomatic arena concerned with tough issues such as dispensing foreign aid to reduce poverty. The persistence of such issues calls for change that is not ‘more of the same’ while the complexity of such issues calls for more than standardized recipes. It requires deep change where new ideas and new repertoire are actively sought and change processes are made to measure for each unique case. The planning of such change is not straightforward as clarity on what works comes from addressing them individually, not by studying their generalities beforehand. This paper focuses on how such emergent change can be shaped through a process of small wins and explains how this may even use adversity to fuel the change. It discusses how deep change seems to be at odds with large-scale change and how this tension may be resolved. The research shows how planning is anything but an innocuous support activity for change efforts and describes how it can either frustrate or enable deep change.

Keywords

Planning of change, complexity, action research

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INTRODUCTION

As a change agent I have become interested in complex issues that seem resistant to change efforts. I have observed that the complexity and persistence of such issues creates a longing for a 'best practice' to be discovered somewhere and to be rolled out everywhere else. I have come to realize that such preset plans are part of the problem as they do little justice to the unique complexity of each case that can only be partially understood before addressing it. This realization is often at odds with the popular literature on change management that is willing to supply standardized change models that promise universal success. In an effort to develop both my abilities as a practitioner to organize deep change and my understanding as an academic of what enables and frustrates it, I embarked on a six-year action research process with Dutch Embassies in developing countries. Their staff addressed issues like poverty reduction and peace processes, the success of which were always ambiguous. My role was to assist them to have more impact, to build their capacity to do so sustainably, and to create knowledge about what works. In this paper I focus exclusively on the planning process of such organizational change.

THEORY

Tough Issues

I here define tough issues as complex challenges that those involved perceive as essential but often persist in organizations despite repeated efforts to fix them. Their complexity is multifaceted: not only is their content ambiguous and multidimensional, but they require the involvement of many actors with different interest, viewpoints and affiliations. This is reflected in contrasting labels like Mitroff & Sagasti's (1971) 'ill structured problems' versus Ritchey's (2011) 'social messes'. The history of failed efforts refers to a 'competency trap' (Levitt & March, 1988) of habitual ways of acting and thinking that are unable to tackle the issue effectively and reinforce a sense of powerlessness amongst those involved. This is reflected in Rittel & Webber labeling them 'wicked problems'. Such a change history also points to institutional mechanisms that keep such dysfunctional practices in place and the impossibility to ground the 'revolutionary' exploration needed in any routine or convention (e.g. Wexler, 2009). For this reason Wexler problematizes the widespread tendency to assume such issues can somehow be tamed and to offer false assurance by selling new solutions that claim to do so. In fact, tough issues cannot be eliminated, not should they be. Complexity is often greatest at the heart of primary processes where organizations add real value to the outside world (for instance, doctors, nurses and families working together with a patient to heal him or her). In such cases, being faced with complexity triggers professionals' passion and gives rise to 'fertile questions' (Harpaz, 2005) that enable deep learning. Kunneman (2005) even refers to tough issues as 'slow questions' because taking the time to get it right on issues that matter is a reward in and of itself that should be savored as it adds meaning to life.

Intervention depth

Interventions are required that help break with tradition and lead to more effective ways to address tough issues: a ‘deep’ change. Different typologies can be found in the literature on change and learning to define such depth, often distinguishing two or three levels. Argyris & Schön (1996) relate their distinction between single-loop learning, double-loop learning and deuterio-learning to if and how cognitive frames change. So do Watzlawick et al (1974) in their distinction between first and second-order change to which Bartunek & Moch (1987) added a third-order. Engeström (2004) bases his distinction of assimilation, accommodation and expansive learning to progressive metalevels of learning as do Harré et al (1985) when they contrast shifts in routines, awareness and the deep structure of the mind. Though all these authors put emphasis on different aspects, their resulting typologies have much in common. I have summarized this common ground in table 1. To put it in words, first-order change perfects what is already there. It uses rules and procedures to deal with well-understood issues without questioning mental frames. Its approach is easily understood by those involved as it meets their expectations. Second-order change is required when problems exist due to dominant rationalities. This calls for exploring unknown terrain, gathering new insights and broadening one’s repertoire. As this confronts people, some pressure is generally needed from third parties to take the leap. In contrast, third-order change can be regarded as self-propelled learning. Intrinsic alertness to new possibilities drives the change rather than outside pressure or confrontation. Those involved try to organize their own exploration and get better at this along the way. They recognize contrasting realities as fuelling innovation and seek playfulness in the face of complexity.

First-order change ‘More of the same’	Second-order change ‘Following a new idea’	Third-order change ‘Generating new ideas’
Improving rules	Changing insights	Developing new principles
Fitting dominant rationality (mono-paradigmatic)	Introducing other rationalities (multi-paradigmatic)	Dealing with contrasting rationalities (meta-paradigmatic)
Driven by desire for optimization /synergy	Driven by lagging adaptation	Driven by alertness to development /creation
Known approaches for known issues	Unknown approaches for known issues	Dealing with intrinsic contradictions
Very context specific but well codified	Contingent use in different situations	Widely applicable but hard to make explicit
Learning best practices, new instruments, new routines	Learning from other viewpoints, broadening repertoire	Learning to learn, to initiate and to facilitate own learning
Tools: plans, approaches and procedures	Tools: ideas, springboards and microcosms	Tools: dialectics, multiple voices and humor

Table 1. Key characteristics of the orders of change

Planning of complex change

Planning is generally associated with an engineering mindset: a blue-print that is designed once before embarking on a change and is adhered to during implementation; a plan created by a few affecting the many. This association is widespread, even in the practice and theory of organization development starting with Lewin. Marshak (1993) emphasizes how Lewin assumed change to be linear, episodic and goal oriented endeavors in which the subject and the object of change are generally separated. Typically, the top of the organization asks a few experts to design the change after which others – lower in the organization – take care of implementation which affects many more on the shop floor and beyond the organization's walls. If possible, the plan is copied to many parts of the organization. For this the plan needs to be uniform and refrain from too much complexity in its design. It is argued that such typical plans do little good when dealing with complex issues where outcomes cannot be predefined, where design and implementation needs to be an ongoing iterative process to figure out things along the way, where the object and the subject of change cannot be separated and where the change needs to be made to measure as each case is essentially unique (De Grace & Stahl, 1990, Verma, 1998). Thus the planning of change seems an area worthy to shed light on as it can clearly frustrate the depth of change required. The key question I explore in this paper is what change dynamics explain the impact planning of change can have on dealing with tough issues.

METHOD

Research Setting

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been the channel through which the Dutch Government communicates with other governments and international organizations. The headquarters are located in The Hague where most of the staff works. The rest works abroad in one of the 155 embassies, consulates, and permanent representations. The organization employs 3000 people and has a well-developed 'esprit de corps': a sense of prestige associated with diplomatic service. At the turn of the century the Dutch government shifted its policies with regard to foreign aid. It wanted to move away from supporting a multitude of small projects in a multitude of countries with Dutch funds and Dutch agencies. The government concluded that such projects were more viable when executed by local agencies with active involvement of the civil society, when embedded in the policies and programs of the recipient country and when the donor countries pooled their funds to support this rather than cling to their own separate programs. This would make efforts more sustainable and cut down transaction costs, hopefully bringing closer the fulfillment of the Millennium Development goals. In 2000 I was invited in as an external consultant to join discussions on the implementation of this policy. It implied a shift in how Embassy staff needed to think and act, moving away from being experts in terms of project management or content (as in AIDS) to being process experts getting multi-actor arenas to collaborate and local agencies to take the lead. The dominant approaches towards change at the Ministry could be characterized as 'policies and procedures' directed from the top and the

experiences so far led us to conclude that these change strategies would not be effective. An organization development strategy seemed a more congruent choice. We started a new change initiative labeled 'Learning & Development' (L&D) that grew into a six-year effort than can be characterized as 'action research'.

Overview of activities

To make headway in addressing tough issues implied an action orientation, but it also warranted a research orientation as both the issues and the change dynamics puzzled people. Over time, an internal network of 'organizational change agents' within the Ministry wanted to learn to facilitate their own changes, which also implied a developmental orientation. In short, change efforts, academic research and professionalizing were all needed (as well as managing the organizational context). All three were highly participative processes that were coupled throughout the six-year period. This was action research being done within, about and for social systems. Some have pointed out these three types of activities cannot be integrated well as they represent very different orientations, creating contrasting loyalties to e.g. academic rigor versus practical relevance (Schein, 2010). Others plead that action research can and should combine contrasting orientations but in line with dialectic theory, not by balancing them but by utilizing the tensions between them (Vermeulen, 2005). Instead of integrating the three types of activities into one monolithic endeavor, this can be achieved by loosely coupling divergent types of action research of which there are many available (e.g. Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Some people (like myself) would participate intensely across these several arenas, others more selectively. Experiences and expertise from one arena would feed activities in another. I regard such an interrelated tapestry of activities as a purposeful way of doing action research, co-creating with participants how to serve contrasting aims best.

Four types of activities were undertaken in the six-year period:

- I) Change efforts consisted of fourteen L&D projects focused on tough issues, generally taking place at Dutch Embassies in developing countries and lasting 1-2 years. In these projects, embassy staff would self-select and self-manage changes they felt had real relevance. Local 'champions' would emerge to play a key role and where assisted by. Such action research took on characteristics of 'action learning' (Revans, 1998) and 'clinical enquiry' (Schein, 2001).
- II) Two research projects took place. First, academic research, labeled 'Enjoying tough issues', focusing on the change dynamics around tough issues throughout the six years (Vermaak, 2009). Second, a two-year research project, labeled 'How steering works at the ministry', studied the administrative practice and its effectiveness (Stoppelenburg & Vermaak, 2009). Both projects were aimed at theory development and carried out with participation of people in the Ministry and academic peers. These action research studies used a multiple case study framework (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
- III) Professionalization consisted of a range of activities involving people in the Ministry who came to regard themselves as change agents, often the champions and facilitators of L&D projects. Only three outside consultants were involved. The facilitators convened regularly to

reflect on their experiences, exchange lessons, create materials and so on. People from this group were frequently asked to assist reflection on other change efforts and offer new perspectives. This action research used the ideas of community of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991) and co-operative enquiry (Heron, 1996).

IV) Lastly, there were activities to manage the organizational context. This involved formally embedding the activities within the Ministry in terms of political backing, funding, monitoring, evaluation, etc. It also involved active participation in informal networks where news, opportunities and contacts were exchanged. Here, diffusion of the activities took place and new L&D projects were conceived. Both formal and informal opposition would arise and was handled. These activities anchored the change in the organization and allowed learning on an organizational level (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). It was coordinated by an inner group of two ‘orchestrators’ (of which I was one), the formal sponsor, and key facilitators and champions.

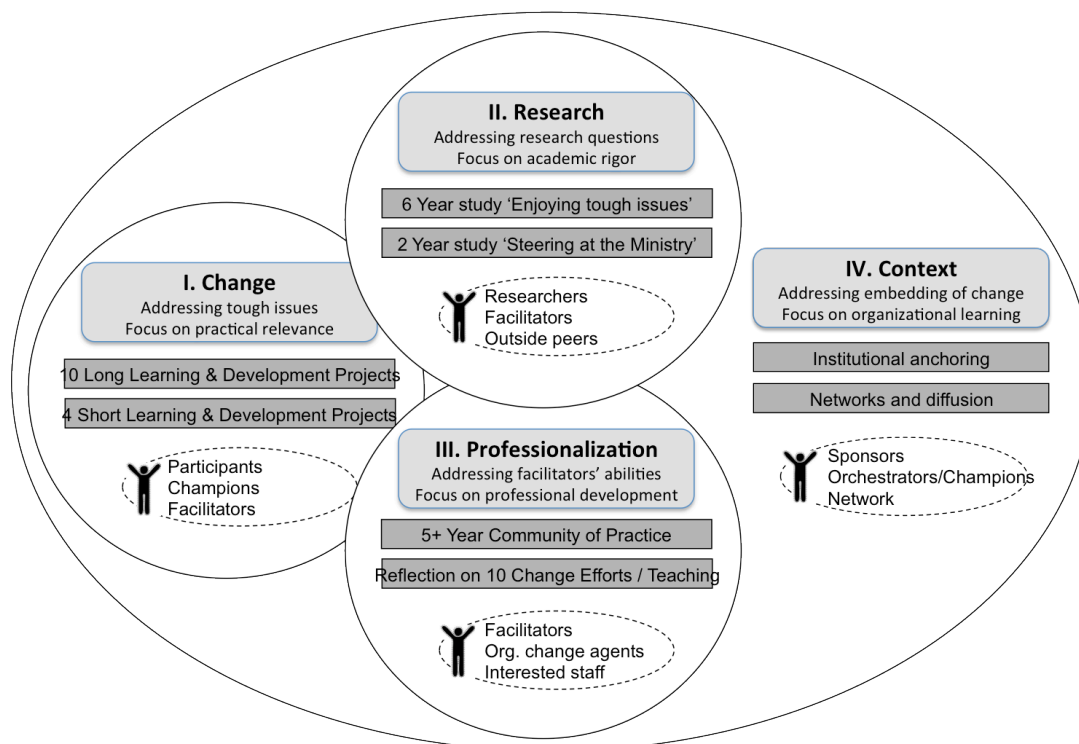


Figure 1 – Overview of arenas and activities

Research steps

During the six-year research project on change dynamics we collected extensive data, ranging from transcriptions, participative observations and reflective notes, to a paper trail of evaluations, mission reports, emails, surveys, etc. After the first two years the data collected was more selective, focusing on ‘rich descriptions’ of ‘meaningful events’: events pinpointing repetitive dynamics in addressing tough issues. A few hundred of such descriptions formed the core of the data. Each meaningful event was coded and contrasting interpretations were sought and written down in reflection documents. Out of these documents emerged elaborated sensitizing concepts.

In the end it added up to 13.000 coded passages, 250 reflection documents and 40 key concepts grounded in data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We looked for the interconnections between these concepts and went back to the data to test them. A literature review allowed us to connect the concepts to theory and sharpen our reasoning. Throughout this process triangulation was sought (Eden & Huxham, 1996). Different people collected data, selected meaningful events, made rich descriptions, interpreted the data and conceptualized findings. We contrasted and discussed their input at each stage. Preliminary findings would find their way back to change settings where their resonance and actionability could be tested. We moved the research forward when we felt saturation was achieved and change dynamics could be explained sufficiently. Each step of the research was discussed, shaped and documented with those involved, but not with everybody to the same degree. Researchers and facilitators were however involved in all the research steps throughout the whole period from framing the research question, collecting and interpreting data to gaining insight and ability to deal with complex change. Academic peers were only consulted to challenge our interpretations. Participants and champions helped collect and interpret data to further their own insight and ability within the 1-2 year duration of their own change process. They engaged the research question primarily to figure out which specific actions would help their situation. The facilitators and especially the researchers engaged the research questions more to uncover out generalized change dynamics.

FINDINGS ON HOW PLANNING FRUSTRATES DEEP CHANGE

Parochial issues and paralysis by analysis

We found that the ambiguous traits of tough issues make it hard to pin them down. Different actors generally defined them differently. A classic linear approach to change requires a clear agreed upon definition of the change issue and - outcome beforehand, but such definitions invariably gives rise to heated debates that stall any action to be taken. A pragmatic solution to limit such debates is to restrict access to those people who are in a position of considerable power. However, once these key players have agreed on a definition they are reticent to revisit it. This brings with it the risk of reductionism where arbitrary aspects of a tough issue are singled out at the expense of others. It is a way to tame complex issues by splitting them up in neat packages that can be fixed individually. It results in 'parochial issues' (Morgan, 1986) for which no innovative change is needed at all. This process obscures the multifaceted and systemic nature of tough issues and stands in the way of exploring new understanding and new interventions that such issue require (Conklin, 2006). People who are excluded in defining the issue are bound to point out what has been mistakenly overlooked. Sometimes studies are commissioned to assist a better and broader definition or understanding of the issue, but this runs into problems as further study rarely reduces possible definitions; it increases them due to the issue's complexity. "Pure study amounts to procrastination because little is learned about a wicked problem by objective data gathering and analysis. Wicked problems demand an opportunity-driven approach; they require making decisions, doing experiments, launching pilot programs, testing prototypes, and so on. Study alone leads to more study, and results in the condition known as 'analysis paralysis',

a Catch 22 in which we can't take action until we have more information, but we can't get more information until someone takes action" (Conklin, 2006). Studying tough issues makes them grow in the perception of those involved: with each layer peeled back addressing them effectively appears even more insurmountable. Brunsson (2007) argues that such 'decision rationality' is guaranteed to produce depression in all those who use it to deal with complexity. Luckily, the resulting negative experiences legitimate resistance against such analytic problem solving.

The work processes at embassies were often interconnected. The Dutch Embassy in Nairobi was a prime example. At the time of this research they had made it a priority to further the economic climate in the region. However, this did not only involve the economic department who assisted investments of the Dutch private sector in Kenyan horticulture and aviation. Issues such as corruption, infrastructure problems or inefficient tax policies also affected economic development, which brought in the political department. Health issues such as the AIDS epidemic were also putting a strain on the economy, which brought other embassy staff in the picture. It did not end there. Economic growth had proven to bring environmental degradation with it hampering future economic growth. It could also directly affect tourism to Kenyan beaches and wildlife reserves. As did the threat of political unrest during election periods and the terrorist bombing of beach resorts and the US Embassy. The stability in the region (Soudan, Somalia) played an important role in this respect too. Just this brief overview illustrates how many departments within the Embassy addressed economic growth in some way or other and how their activities needed alignment. This does not even take into account the international arenas that the Ministry participates in and affect Kenya, such as WTO deliberations, peace negotiations, UNEP's environmental programs, etcetera. Social complexity is clearly part and parcel of the issues the embassy tries to address.

During the first two missions to the embassy the staff came up with fuzzy problem such as 'policy cross fertilization' or 'control & policy coordination'. Nobody really knew what these labels meant, but they struck a cord and proved sufficient to call people to action. We supported the staff to take on four concrete but persistent topics the next half year and to figure out what cross-fertilization/coordination seemed appropriate and practical in each specific case. They did this by involving those people most needed to address each situation regardless their formal position and created temporary point persons per topic to facilitating cooperation. We modeled how to facilitate the process and helped them get better at it. This approach worked in the sense that they made headway on the four topics and got better at cooperation. After half a year the progress seemed to stall. When we came back for a third mission we found that somehow the four temporary working groups had given rise to four clearly defined organizational clusters on top off the existing embassy structures. Who participated in each cluster had become fixed and walls between the clusters had gone up. Typical silo problems and mandate discussions flourished as before. Pinning down the topics had briefly allowed them to create some quick wins, but addressing the ambiguous web like nature of the issues across all disciplines had now moved to the background. As a result both the commitment to - and the expectations of the change had

reached a low point. In trying to remedy this pitfall we, however, landed into another. We scrapped the cluster structure, brought everybody together and urged them to look beyond quick wins. We brainstormed collectively on all the interrelated aspects of 'policy - and control cross fertilization' resulting in a giant mindmap taking up the whole wall of their main meeting-space, illuminating many problems and dynamics. The discussions were lively, but the result left people overwhelmed and stunned. The key word in the middle of the mind map – 'interconnectivity' – seemed appropriate but was also abstract. What we had gained in insight and relevance, we had lost in concreteness and actionability. This quickly led to debates on what to focus on? Some staff asked for clear directions and quick fixes. The management team expressed an urgency to formulate a concise action plan. We seemed to have moved in record time from complex analysis without action to instrumental actions without analysis.

Initiative-itis and replication

The case illustrates how analysis paralysis makes people lose their patience and start longing for concrete plans and forceful action. It implies a switch to an opposing strategy that is just as unfit to deal with complexity. Hendry (1996) refers to it as 'initiative-itis: the more ambiguous and persistent an issue is, the more people look for approaches that seem to offer control and promise success. It explains the popularity of the many 'N-step guides' (Collins, 1998) in the management literature. In its most extreme form, this action orientation ignores problem definition and – analysis altogether. In the consultancy sector this is jokingly referred to as the 'our product is your problem' approach, where consultants offer fashionable solutions to clients who do not want to stay behind. 'Our consensus is your corvée' is the 'in house' version where the top of the organization translates its vision into implementation plans without assessing the underlying causes of persistent issues or the feasibility of their vision. Neither version is uncommon in organizations. Their attraction is based on the uncertainty reduction they offer to those who experience performance pressure to tackle complexity. I remember an embassy staff member in Kampala who would say to us that if he did not have a solution, he also did not have a problem. In other words, he did not want to be stuck with issues he was not sure he could fix, as he feared the blame he might incur. Hirschhorn (1988) talks about the lure of 'magical solutions' which increases when solutions are presented as standardized 'state of the art', when they are backed by opinion leaders and when they are accompanied by technocratic bells and whistles such as benchmarks, reference lists or flashy presentations.

The risk of this action orientation is that interventions can easily be off target: the approach may be powerful but is not geared to the situation at hand. Forfeiting analysis for expedience means you don't know how well things work till much later. Many of these standardized solutions do have quite an impact; so ill suited ones are bound to do considerable harm. Their power is partially derived from the promise of successful replication: the (false) notion that uniform solutions exist and can be copied from one situation to another. This may be true for 'stuff' that allows itself to be engineered such as basic systems or facilities, even for 'hard' organizational aspects such as strategies, structures or procedures. With a tough issue, however the intricacies of

its content, the people involved and its shifting context have to be taken into account. Poverty reduction of conflict resolution in Yemen turns out to be a quite different challenge than in Kenya. Specifics count more than generalities when addressing such issues (Conklin, 2006) and uniformity inevitably implies simplification of the approach, which is counter to unraveling the complexity of an issue. Rivkin (2000) refers to this as an imitation barrier to complex change strategies. It helps explain why 'best practices' once public never seem to match their original performance high. There is no algorithm for complex change, no blue print for exploration, no institutionalized form for expansive learning: such a way of thinking is not only irrelevant, but even destructive (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). A tough issue is tackled best by matching its complexity in the subtlety of the change approach.

Linear and episodic

Analysis paralysis breeds initiative-itis and vice versa. It is a vicious circle that points to a problem with linear change. Separating activities such as analysis and action, thinking and acting, diagnosis and implementation stands in the way of learning about an issue by addressing it and using those insights to fine-tune the change approach (e.g. Revans, 1998). Separating actors such as policy makers, change designers and implementers in different arenas similarly impedes learning as policy makers are insufficiently confronted with the real life ramifications of their policies and implementers run into problems revising policies based on progressive insights (Checkland & Scholes, 1999). The linear models of change seem to imply a funneling approach where options diminish, rigidity grows and seniority decreases as time goes on. This mistakenly presumes not only that a tough issue can be clearly defined, but also that its remedy can be prescribed beforehand. Also, seniority and capacity matters probably as much if not more for those that are involved in implementation as they will face the full complexity of the issues rather than those who think up untested solutions beforehand. But even if activities and actors are not artificially separated in time and space, too strict adherence to any change plan is bound to be detrimental.

The first mission to the Dutch Embassy in Ethiopia started off on the wrong foot. Management had communicated to its staff that we were flown in to develop a Learning & Development program for the staff, that all were required to participate and that the embassy's way of working would shift to a more participative model. This paradoxical message – a plea for participation delivered hierarchically – made people wary of what was to come. They responded by assuming we would follow the expert model prescribing how learning needed to take place. We failed to challenge those expectations sufficiently at first. We set up a sequential three-day schedule of first diagnosing the issues, then prioritizing them, next translating them into learning objectives and finally agreeing on a development plan. We meant for the resulting plan to guide them through a change process for the next two years during which we would periodically fly in to assist. On the first day people did warm to discussions of their issues, sensing that their professional struggles were taken seriously. Mapping out their issues collectively showed the interconnectedness of their challenges, which sparked fruitful debates about underlying dynamics. However, when we

turned to prioritizing issues, the energy shifted. Cutting up their work in neat separate topics did not do justice to the complexity of their work. And translating these topics into learning objectives felt both forced and abstract. As facilitators we felt the pressure was on to recapture the energy and we pieced together an impressive development plan in the evening. It consisted of a mix of interventions: first the formation of teams around Ethiopian development issues, then raising facilitation skills with gaming, feedback sessions and some training, followed by action learning within each team and occasional coaching of team captains and consultancy by us. We also spelled out all the roles and responsibilities and formulated conditions for this to work like their commitment and ownership. In the morning we presented it all to the embassy staff. They listened for a while, then looked at each other and slowly stepped away from it all. One of the staff members enquired if we had ever seen any of this work as it looked a bit 'academic' to him. Others raised additional questions and concerns. After half an hour management got impatient and forced a conclusion: 'we either go for this or we don't'. The room fell quiet.

The experience showed us how a neat linear mission program had done us little favors. Though we tried taking these steps collectively and welcomed further debate, the stepwise model served to shut down discussions as we moved from analysis to planning. In not wanting to present a sketchy temporary plan, we produced something that did look good on paper but with which the participants were too unfamiliar and felt little ownership. To be honest, we could not really predict if it would work either with our limited knowledge of the embassy and its context. Though we found out years later that quite a few of the activities we thought off at this stage did happen at the embassy later on and bore fruit, others did not and new ones were added. Even if we had been able to predict all that at the time, putting such a design in front of the group would have done little good. It would only have looked as a more comprehensive straightjacket that they had not asked for: a hard sell indeed. The main reason why this was not the end and we were able to restart the program a few months later, was that there were already moments during that first mission that did spark enthusiasm, furthered inquiry and proved generative. These happened during the issues debate on the first day, but even more so in unplanned moments. What had no place in the formal program seemed to bubble up in informal settings like breaks and evenings. Here real questions and concerns surfaced, help was requested, and coaching took place. Also, by walking in on everyday meetings, we could often play an unanticipated helpful role to figure out issues and assist better cooperation. In the beginning this led us as facilitators to burn the candle at two ends: we worked round the clock as we added informal settings to the formal ones. As time went on we started to recognize an important common thread: the most important interventions were improvisational rather than preprogrammed. This made us wonder about a more open planning process that would allow for such emergence.

The case not only points to the drawback of a linear change approach, it also illustrates how 'masterplans' for any deep innovation are rarely convincing to those involved. Plans, procedures, and protocols are the typical language for first-order change (see table 1). Such language works well when known approaches are used to tackle known issues. In such cases people are already

familiar the reasoning behind such blue prints, these fit their expectations and is in line with dominant routines. However, the language of ‘planning’ does not work at all to sell innovative approaches for ill understood issues: whenever we tried, people would perceive our proposition as a black box. In such instances any plan looks unfamiliar and will not be trusted without people first grasping some of the deviant ideas behind the plan. Introducing such new perspectives is language typical of second-order change (see table 1). Higher-order change does not make planning superfluous: there is still a need to make explicit choices and to structure activities. The point is that plans alone do little to convince people of something they have no experience with. This is even more so if the plan is not set in stone which it cannot be given the unpredictable nature of deep change. Another characteristic of linear change is that it is supposed to have a beginning and an end. You start out with a problem, you follow a plan and you end up with a solution. Such an episodic view builds on Lewin’s (1951) original notion of change as ‘unfreeze-transition-refreeze’ where the organization is implicitly equated with an inert ice cube with change as an occasional interruption and resistance as inevitable byproduct. This view does not suit tough issues very well: they cannot be eliminated and can indeed be the most meaningful part of work life (e.g. Kunneman, 2005). Whether it is development cooperation at the embassies or educating students in a school: it is not the eradication of complexity that creates excellence but the embracing of complexity. This is not a one shot operation, but an enduring effort. It problematizes the episodic view of change: temporary efforts in a relatively stable environment will not do (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

FINDINGS ON HOW PLANNING ENABLES DEEP CHANGE

Emergent planning and small wins

If tough issues can only really be understood by addressing them, than a different way of planning change is called for. If ‘decision rationality’ paralyses people, ‘action rationality’ stands to reason. Brunsson (2007) describes this as opportunistically taking any ideas, experiences, contributions and sponsoring into account in as much as they assist participants right there and then to address a complex problem. This suggests planning is not an one-off exercise and a plan is not something to be strictly adhered to. Analyzing, design and implementation form an iterative process instead. Neither the issues nor the plan needs to be clearcut at the start as the change is no longer sold, copied or rolled out by experts. Instead, the plans are co-created with those involved. There might not even be one central plan, but multiple smaller ones each thought up and executed by small groups closely working together. This allows for leadership to be distributed and shared, which makes the change more robust (Hosking, 2006). Subject and object are no longer separated which takes care of transfer- and feedback problems inherent to traditional change approaches. Each local plan takes the specifics of the issue, its context and people into account. Where blueprints work from macro to micro, it is more the other way around here. Those involved might think global, but act local: only specific activities within the decentered context are planned in detail, longer term planning is only contextual and sketchy

(Knight & Pye, 2004). Planning thus becomes an emergent process: as time goes on the approach is added to, altered, refined (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Key in such a change process is to work with 'small wins': 'continuous changes in the form of situated micro-level changes that actors enact as they make sense of and act in the world' (Orlikowski, 1996). Small wins allow people to entertain large questions in small incremental steps. Each of these steps is a controllable opportunity that produces visible results. These steps are a mix of exploitation, exploration and learning: a process of figuring out a concrete issue experimentally without reducing its complexity (Weick & Westley, 1996). In this respect they contrast with 'quick wins' which are first-order changes where people take fast and easy steps to solve simple issues. Quick wins are possible when issues can be successfully broken up in small projects that utilize well-known repertoire. In the case of tough issues, however, interconnectedness is key and innovation warranted, so the approach needs to match the issues' complexity rather than simplify them and this can be achieved only by way of incremental improvements (Cartwright, 1987). Wins are small rather than quick: it is in micro conversations that complexity and turbulence are effectively met. An additional explanation for the effectiveness of 'small wins' is that it reduces non-functional complexity (Staw, 1991). This refers to contextual complications such as organizational restructuring, the need to manage large programs, the risk of political infighting, the pressure to give in to a sense of urgency rather than a sense of relevance, etcetera. Think of anything that detracts from the time and energy devoted to dealing with the complexity of the tough issue itself.

Working with microcosms: small x deep x many

Gathering small wins works best when complexity and concreteness go hand in hand. It is hard to experiment with a tough issue when it remains abstract and massive. We observed that concrete obstacles encountered in individual embassies that at first do not stand out as significant, later turn out to represent one 'face' of a tough issue that pops up again and again at many embassies. What seems somewhat unimportant and unrelated can prove to be a systemic manifestation of an issue's underlying complexity and present a door to investigate it further. Engeström (2004) refers to such situations as 'microcosms'. They allow for a small arena where issues can be unraveled, new ways of thinking can be tried out and new ways of acting can be brought to life.

Each Dutch embassy has to deal with cultural differences and misunderstandings. It is an intrinsic aspect of diplomacy. The expatriate staff tries to make sense of what happens in such a 'foreign' environment, to be aware of their own implicit belief systems, to be sensitive to what gets lost in translation and to learn how modes of interaction may differ culturally. In countries where Dutch embassies are involved in development cooperation other sensitivities often play an important role as well, such as colonial history, differences in wealth and power, etcetera. The stated objective of an equal partnership in development can be seriously hampered by such complications. In the embassy in Pretoria some of the expatriate leadership shared these challenges with me. I pointed out that such challenges do not only play externally, but within the

embassy as well given the presence of both local and expatriate staff. Local staff was paid less, had a lower status and less influence in the organization, was more embedded in the local culture, had problems with Dutch as a required common language in the Embassy given the resemblance to Afrikaans, etcetera. Not surprisingly these problems mirrored the ones outside. I suggested not strategizing about the problems with expat management only, but rather seeing the internal arena as a microcosm for learning to deal with them. This could be done in and on the job where local and expat staff needed each other's input anyway. The problems would and did surface automatically in these settings anyway. Rather than labeling them as a distraction from their work, they could regard them as part and parcel of their work. If they could not deal with these problems there on a small-scale, it would be unlikely they could be more successful outside on a larger scale. The internal organization was a good place to practice cross-cultural communication and figure out the dynamics of equal partnership. Lessons learned here would benefit the organization and their work externally alike. It is an approach that proved to have a much more direct impact than – for instance - periodically sending management to some course on cultural communication in The Hague.

Another common microcosm had to do with tension between policy - and control departments within embassies. Such tensions were always there, regardless the country or composition of the staff. It thus pointed to something more systemic, such as the need throughout the Ministry to deal with contrasting rationalities. A political rationality was that the Minister has to show parliament that his policies make sense and are implemented as promised. A control-rationality was that the Ministry needs to account for the way the organization spends their money to the National Auditor. The first rationality was often felt strongly by the policy departments, whereas the control departments often internalized the second one. A professional rationality is a third rationality that looks at foreign aid and development cooperation as something that requires very skillful practitioners who share certain capabilities, ideas, methods, norms, practices. This rationality was often felt strongly by the development community. Here, again, there are contradictions between all three legitimate rationalities. This led to eternal tensions, for instance when politicians and the development community alike plead for less bureaucracy and less overhead whereas auditors insist on transparency about how each euro is spent. These contradictions and tensions are not an obstacle standing in the way of good work; dealing with multiple rationalities is at the heart of the complexity of working at the Ministry. Reframing it this way puts dealing with such complexity back on the agenda as meaningful.

A microcosm turns out to be a very powerful instrument for higher-order change as it allows the complexity to be directly experienced and addressed. In a way it is comparably to interventions such as gaming, simulation or internships where people get acquainted with real life situations under the radar and without all the risks. In contrast, microcosms do not need to be designed as separate interventions: they are available everywhere, all the time and to everyone. Large questions such as safe neighborhoods, good education or mindful care: they are within everybody's reach by way of microcosms. Microcosms can be spotted by looking for meaningful moments or critical incidents: events that do not seem coincidental. Looking into the rich details

of such events will bring underlying patterns to the surface: such insights can then also be applied elsewhere (Brookfield, 1990). The small-scale of microcosms prevents a lack of experience to block further innovation. People can experiment in them in step with their change capacity: to stretch themselves enough to learn but not too much to fail. Vermunt & Verloop (1999) refer to this as constructive friction.

Continuous and organic

One counterargument against working with small incremental steps is that it does not look or sound very dramatic. It made people in the Ministry wonder whether working in such a way is able to create lasting change. Can it be a sufficient answer to the hyper-turbulence and complexity of our times? What is gained in depth of change seems to be lost in terms of the grandeur of change. There is some truth to this: whereas small wins are experienced as meaningful by those involved, they may not look impressive to outsiders. However, small changes can and do aggregate to something larger. One small win will spark others, such wins can be created at the same time in many parallel experiments and likeminded colleagues will be inspired to start their own similar change (like in this research at many embassies). In all three ways small wins become the building blocks for substantial change: the wins may be small, but they are deep and many. Such an infectious approach to change makes it robust: there is no easy way to stop it (e.g. Reay et al, 2006). It is also not a logical progression that can be foreseen and thus takes place rather opportunistically. “A series of small wins can be gathered into a retrospective summary that imputes a consistent line of development, but this post hoc construction should not be mistaken for orderly implementation. Small wins have a fragmentary character driven by opportunism and dynamically changing situations. Small wins stir up settings, which means that each subsequent attempt at another win occurs in a different context. Careful plotting of a series of wins to achieve a major change is impossible because conditions do not remain constant. Much of the artfulness of working with small wins lies in identifying, gathering, and labeling several small changes that are present but unnoticed, changes that in actuality could be gathered under a variety of labels” (Weick, 1984). In the change processes the outcome was rarely predictable, but the tough issues did function as a powerful ‘magnet’ for creating small wins. It allowed for a common focus for new initiatives to be tested and lessons to be learned. The ambiguity of tough issues made this magnetism all the more powerful as it did not put strong restrictions to what may new ideas and new actions may be considered.

Earlier, I referred to a problematic first mission to Addis Ababa where a tightly scheduled linear approach neither helped to address the issues nor motivated participants to step up. When we got a second chance some months later we reserved a full week – doubling the length of the first mission – without a full preset program. Our starting point was their concern that cooperation between policy fields and between policy and control departments needed to improve but had proved persistent to change efforts. These tough issues rather than our change approach were put center stage. At the start of the week our calendar as change agents was empty except for meeting the staff on the first morning. That morning tested our flexibility right away. The meeting

'exploded' with emotional outbursts. Three people were fervently opposed to any big 'learning' endeavor whereas management showed itself a strong advocate. The majority of the staff remained silent at first but then joined the fray. Some still had to vent their criticism of the first mission, others had to share their concerns, hopes and convictions about embarking on another change effort. Planned or not, these exchanges proved necessary before any new initiative could be considered. The next day – with a clean slate - we made ourselves available to start designing the change together with those participants that stepped forward. First only one of the sector-teams (on Food Security in the Region) did. Now that they felt in the driver seat, the team was willing to explore better ways of working together. When other teams found out about this later that day, they were surprised and somewhat envious of the ideas and opportunities that emerged. So they followed suit and by the end of the second day all sector-teams had started rethinking how their team might improve and what activities could enable this. In contrast to the first mission, it did not end there. The next few days these activities were kick-started already. 'Why wait?' they said. All planning remained short term this time. In the run up to mission detailed scripts were discussed on how the mission days could be used: activities, roles, tools, goals, etcetera. But none of these scripts were actually followed: their purpose was to think through together how to shape the change process rather than to predict it. It created a reservoir of options and considerations to be drawn from during and after the mission week. Even within the week the program evolved one day at the time: first people's attention was on how to compose the teams, next they felt a need to look at procedures and responsibilities, then there were concerns about how self steering teams deal with management and vice versa. Each of these topics was addressed as they emerged. This time, there was no masterplan for the coming months at the end of the week either. Instead, each team had designed and took their own next steps. There was also no deal with us as external facilitators about when to return, but within a few weeks there was contact about new issues that popped up, like new management that would be coming in and how they might feel about the experiments with 'self steering teams'. In response we helped set up a 'hand over' mission during the last week of the 'old management' and invited 'new management' in to give it a say and get it up to speed.

A common thread was the action learning cycle: each team would plan their next steps, experiment with it, evaluate what worked and why and decide on the next steps. We would assist as facilitators whenever possible, and organized coaching for team captains and intervention between them. We optimized any learning that is already 'built into' any good teamwork: using multiple perspectives in the team to get a better grip on complex issues, using contrasting abilities and styles to complement each other, copying the art of others by working alongside, etcetera. In the beginning the teams focused a lot on lowering obstacles to teamwork like existing procedures, structures or personnel evaluations. To assist this, we gave small lectures about how to structure teams, how to set up planning and monitoring and how to deal with roles & responsibilities in teams. And we helped them translate these to their practice. Next they got interested in more vital, but less tangible aspects: how to organize learning, how the psychology of groups works and how to deal with conflicts. As these emerged we did some training of

facilitation skills and made them familiar with formats and models that can be of help, such as 'feedback rules', 'de Bono's hats', 'Balint-intervision' and so on. Some formats were tried out in our presence; others were experimented with later on. For instance they would invigorate their annual planning meeting by participative activities such as 'our world on the wall in newspaper clippings', seeing a way forward with 'futuring' and 'scenarios', and creating a space for what is left unspoken in a 'mindmap of complaints and joys'. Much of the learning activities focused on emerging issues like the change in management mentioned earlier, but especially on cross cutting issues such as how to deal with cultural sensitivities, how to organize your knowledge base or how to write a 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper' in a dialogic way with external partners.

The case illustrates how a multitude of learning activities seem to tumble over each other. Half the time we would make ad hoc choices together on what seemed best to deal with what emerged. This may read as a case of playing catch up due to a lack of prep work, but it is rather an effort to create a rich tapestry of related and reinforcing activities. It is created through an iterative process of planning and experimentation that in itself already constitutes a form of learning (e.g. Revans, 1998). It is done at as many places as possible at the same time regarding their own work systems of related activities and ambitions. Such parallel micro-planning allows for the flexibility to deal with the unpredictable nature of tough issues: problems shift, people are transferred, new insights emerge, blind spots become visible, motivations change, etcetera. Micro-planning also allows for the finesse to combine a great diversity of activities, relations and ideas that do justice to the complexity of tough issues (Dodgson, 1993). Such diversity of inputs can easily compete with each other. Interferences due to intense combinations can however be dealt with, but only locally through many small and interconnected decisions. The diversity of inputs then creates a snowballing effect where interventions feed on one other and amplify each other (Plowman et al., 2007). The change design is thus done with an eye for detail, just in time. It is tailored to each individual case by those involved so they have a sense of ownership and can pace it in step with their ability. It underscores that complex change does not imply less planning, it implies continuous planning. It does not mean plans are taken lightly, it means the issues at stake always take precedent. And it does not mean planners have less influence, it means that this influence is decentered to those who are involved locally.

Planning –just as the change itself– thus no longer has a beginning or an end: partly because you want to stay involved in them, partly because there is no easy way to agree where one came from or is going to. Such change initiatives are more like jumping on a riding train. Engeström (2001) labels this as 'non directionality' and Thietart & Forgues (1995) as 'unintended radical change': you know the issue you work on, but not the outcomes. Levitt & March (1988) argue that "learning that is somewhat slow and imprecise often provides an advantage". They conclude that experience can simplify reality and get in the way of looking at issues with fresh eyes. It may produce both a redundancy of experience with habitual approaches that disappoint and a paucity of experience with approaches that one might need. They argue it thus makes more sense to put the wholeness of an issue center stage, hypothesize about possibilities and search one's way

forward incrementally. Hoverstadt (2004) refers to this more subtle planning process as ‘planned organic change’. This term points not only to what is absent, but also that there is a different kind of interconnectedness between activities that emerges over time.

DISCUSSION

Tension between size and depth of change

The findings shed some light on a recurring confusion in both the practice of and theory on organizational change. When people refer to ambitious change this sometimes gets equated with the size of change (‘the whole organization changes’) and sometimes to the depth of change (‘we are doing things fundamentally different now’). The findings suggest that these two contrasting meanings do not go together (figure 2). Argyris & Schön (1996) once remarked that they found many organizations that could deal with first-order change and to some extent with second-order change but none that practiced third-order change. The reason for this may well be that organizations do not learn deeply: organizational learning is an oxymoron (Weick & Westley, 1996). This implies that when, for instance, a CEO announces a company wide cultural shift, he or she is either camouflaging what is really going on or is ignorant about what is actually feasible. I suggest there is no such thing as large-scale deep change, nor has there ever been, nor does there need to be.

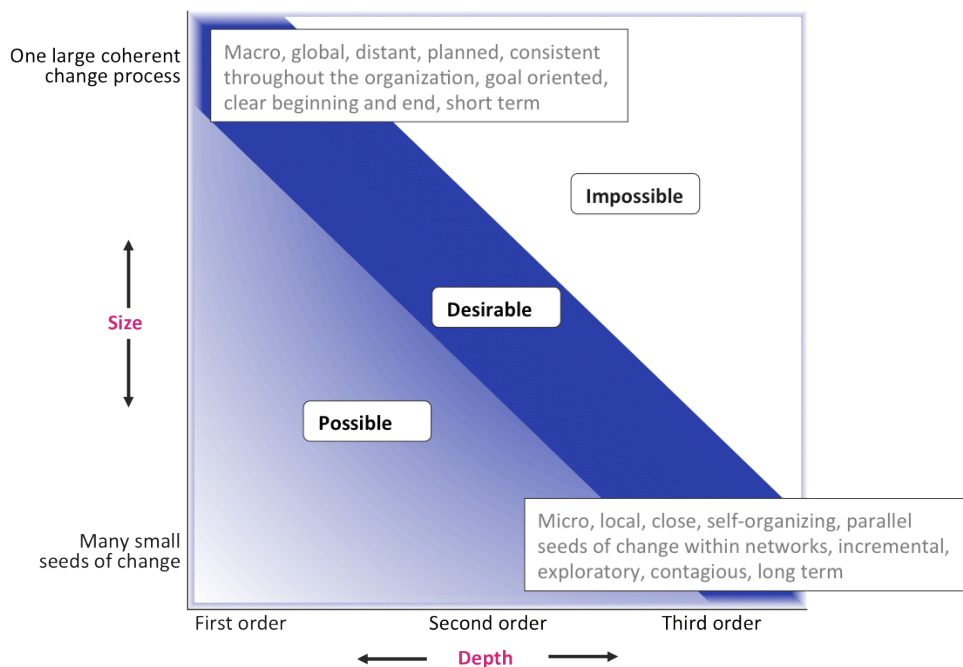


Figure 2. Size and depth of change are at odds with each other

Let me elaborate. It seems change can be ambitious in two contrasting ways. One way is to go for size: to organize a large-scale first-order change. When a change objective can be addressed effectively with approaches that people are familiar with (a first-order change) there is no reason

to keep it slow or small. Everybody knows from experience how things need to be done and thus the ideas behind an intervention plan are implicitly commonplace. The restructuring of organizations is a good example. Many have gone through more than one during their worklife and the process is generally predictable and has proven sufficiently effective. It often consists of striking a deal at the top, a working group who makes a blue print, some contact with unions or other employee representations about the process, extensive communication to personnel to manage expectations, procedures to apply for jobs and an exit procedure for those who will not last. It often takes a bit longer than expected and generally demotivates people. Everybody knows all this in advance and senses the unwritten rules of the game. First-order changes are also viable for parallel small-scale initiatives, but it seems a bit of a waste when it is also possible to role it out over the whole organization in a standardized way. In contrast, ambitious change can also refer to the depth of change: to organize a small-scale third-order change. This makes sense when addressing tough issues requires challenging the existing culture, dominant rationalities and habitual practices, as has been the subject of this paper. The findings emphasize the desirability of doing this through small wins: local, micro and close. On top of what has already been stated here, a good reason to do it in such small compositions is that the more visible such a change is, the more time and energy has to spend on dealing with institutional pressures to conform rather than on exploring more effective but controversial approaches (e.g. Letiche & Statler, 2005; Reay et al, 2006). It thus makes more sense to decenter such innovation away from prying eyes. I have found that in most organizations there are always 'positive deviants' (Warren, 2003) already active under the radar intuitively trying to do just that.

Handling the tension

A constructive way to handle the tension between size and depth of change is by making use of the contagiousness of successful small-scale change (e.g. Strang & Soule, 1998) as was the case at the Ministry. The positive deviants would share their successes with like-minded colleagues: new ideas would spread (as second-order interventions) to those who might be ready to initiate their own decentered initiative. Within a few years the change experiences of the three first embassies had given rise to many more embassies following suit. This way the size of the change can organically grow as experience aggregates, more proof is gathered and ideas become less controversial. As long as the spreading of innovation is not too fast as to create erosion of quality and a backlash of non-adopters, small-scale change can be a prelude to larger changes (McGrath & Krackhard, 2003). At some point, when the ideas and practices are no longer controversial, the change can be formally adopted and become institutionalized: it then becomes a first-order change that even late adopters will have to abide by (Reay et al., 2006). In contrast a destructive way of handling the tension between size and depth of change is to falsify change history. Such falsification can easily happen because organizational memory is biased towards formal changes such as management rubber-stamping an innovation after it has been successfully developed under the radar and spread organically to like-minded actors. In the history books this may then read like management created a deep cultural shift in one big swoop. This misinterpretation is destructive because when the need for deep change arises in the future, people not only

mistakenly assume this is possible by way of a large-scale effort directed by a charismatic leader, but they may also have lost sight of what change dynamics actually created the previous successes (Weick & Quinn, 1999). For this reason I believe it has great value for organizations to learn from and about their own change history (e.g. Engeström, 2004). In my experience there are only few organizations that have done this sufficiently to escape this pitfall.

I would like to make two final remarks on the subject. First, the distinction between the orders of change makes sense conceptually, but in practice third-order change does not preclude the use of less deep interventions by the same group of innovators when this is more effective for parts of their work. This makes sense as third-order change embraces diversity of perspectives and paradoxical combinations: it implies that third-order processes are inclusive towards first and second-order processes, though these will also remain small-scale and self initiated (Weick & Westley, 1996). The ‘seeds of change’ combine them in a balancing act. This is another constructive way of dealing with the tension. This is, however, not an option the other way around: first-order change is exclusive and not able to include dialectic third-order change within its large-scale mono-paradigmatic approach. A second remark is that the starting point at the embassies often had characteristics of a second-order situation: people wanted and needed something different, but were not capable to organize that for themselves successfully enough. This is an awkward start: a change initiative can only be self-propelled in either first-order or third-order change. In first-order change this is so because people are familiar with what they need to do, in third-order change because they have the ability to organize their own learning so they can figure it out. Second-order change, however, is dependent on external facilitation to get it off the ground and on external confrontation to accept this guidance. We tried as much and as soon as possible to help create a third-order environment but the transition to get there is quite a paradoxical endeavor on which I have reported elsewhere (Vermaak, 2012).

Dealing with obstacles

Reflecting on the findings, the attitude towards obstacles seems almost opposite between a linear approach to change versus a continuous approach to change – at least when it comes to the functional complexity of dealing with tough issues (rather than the non-functional complexity related to contextual complications). I argued that addressing tough issues requires deep change. The findings show that intrinsic to such change is that people become conscious of the limitations of present practices and ideas, that they explore alternatives and that they gain competence in making these succeed. Such change invariably involves ‘learning-dips’ in the perception of those involved (e.g. de Caluwé, 2007). One explanation is that a learning-dip is felt when consciousness of present repertoire is high, but competence in an alternative repertoire is still limited (see figure 3). It does not mean people actually become less competent, just that they become aware of their incompetence (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). This is not all bad news: it also presents participants with the first real sense of what a new repertoire entails and what it would take to become versatile in it. It is only at that point that participants can consciously

choose to commit to such change and take responsibility for organizing their own learning allowing the learning curve to move upward (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). In that sense, the dip is a gateway to self-propelled action befitting third-order change.

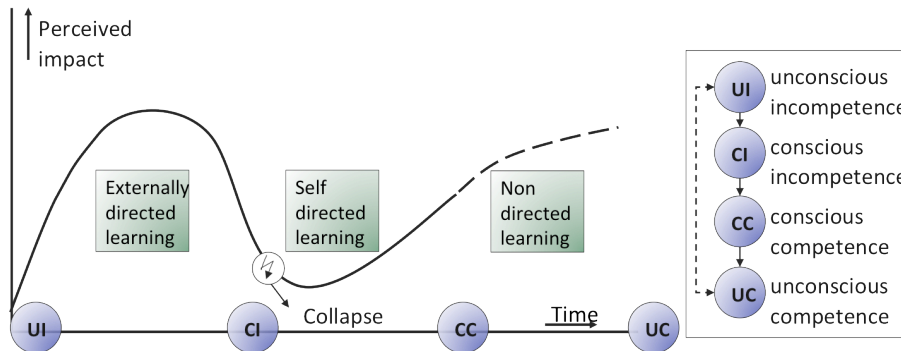


Figure 3. Learning curve

This helps explain why learning-dips are no reason to panic in an emergent third-order approach. Those involved know that effectively addressing a tough issue requires finding out about obstacles that they (and the rest of the organization) were previously unaware of. In that sense they not only expect to run into trouble but they welcome finding out about it sooner rather than later. They search for obstacles knowing they are part of the process, not a disruption of it. Addressing a tough issue acts like a snowplough for bringing such obstacles to the surface after they remained hidden from sight in previous attempts to address the issue. Working with small wins also allows for the improvisation to deal with the unexpected. The good news is that progress is always made in such an approach: either activities work well enough to tackle a tough problem, or obstacles are uncovered that allow for learning (Fritz, 1999). This is all very different in a linear model of change where problem definition and analysis precedes planning and implementation and is often done by different people as well. When obstacles emerge during implementation this is not welcomed because it points to where the plan falls short and analysis needs to be redone. In that sense the learning dip is not perceived as a gateway to learning but as a disruption of an efficient linear process. From this perspective it seems counter-intuitive that effective change creates learning dips rather than prevents them. This can lead to a reflex to trivialize emerging obstacles, which then thwarts handling the issue's complexity effectively. Another reflex can be to organize 'booster sessions' where external parties are asked to resuscitate the change effort. However, this frustrates a transition to self-directed learning and thus slows also down the upward move of the learning curve (e.g. Whisman, 1990). A last reflex can be to quit the change effort altogether when those involved regard the dip as neither temporary nor functional. This has the downside that the organization starts leaving tough issues alone which then fall of the agenda but persist in daily operations. It also may cause the organization to lose faith in the change dynamics inherent in deep change, which increases resistance towards future efforts to try it again.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that planning is clearly not just an innocuous support activity for change efforts, but also an object of the change efforts themselves as prevailing ideas about planning need to be revisited. The findings further suggest that complexity of issues needs to be matched by a similar complexity of change: when tough issues are at stake, the planning of change needs to be a subtle and even playful affair. Tailoring small wins to the issues at hand and aggregating them opportunistically in a continuous emergent process allows for this. The findings underscore that the way change is planned can both enable and frustrate deep change. Knowledge about both types of dynamics can further deep change. The first allows change agents to understand, support and initiate more effective ways to plan change; the second allows change agents to understand, abstain and problematize dysfunctional routines. As negative experiences can easily overshadow positive ones, deep change requires both problematizing what hinders change as much as reinforcing what helps it along (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). There are reasons to assume the findings are applicable to a wider range of contexts. First, the contrasts between the research sites in this study were substantial in terms of the issues, the activities, the scale, the duration and so on. Second, the findings are conceptualized as change dynamics that help understand why actions do or do not work rather than prescriptive algorithms on what situated steps to take. A final comment is that I have found it deeply encouraging as a practitioner and as a researcher to deconstruct my own lingering beliefs that small incremental steps might not suffice to bring about deep change. I have learned to see and appreciate how small sustained efforts can create miracles and how microcosms turn into places of transformation: situations where right there and then tough issues give rise to fertile questions and more value is added to the outside world. Situations where learning and working goes hand in hand, where cooperation is fueled by differences, where a different work culture can be experienced for a little while, and where playfulness exists not at the expense of rigor but because of it. All this is transient, not permanent: such is the nature of third-order change. But this does not make it less real, less inspiring or less powerful.

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