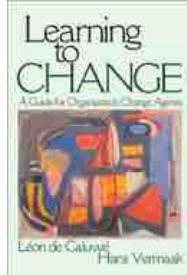# Creating a colorful model of change

A case study of theory development

hans vermaak, 2015

Case study

Query: - 20 Year history of a meta-theory of change

- Blessed with developmental sprawl, widely used as 'common language'

- Wondering: What made it productive? How should theory be developed?

- Reconstructing history: opening archives, recollections, collaborators

Yellowprint : a power game
Something changes when you:
- Form coalitions between key people
- Search for common interests
- Negotiate a consensus

Redprint : a social process
Something changes when you motivate people
- Use the right incentives to reward and punish
- Make it interesting for people, create a team spirit
- Attention, support and recognition

Whiteprint : evolutionary process
Something changes when you catalyze movement
- Discern underlying patterns, make meaning
- Create space for entrepreneurs, new heroes & rituals
- Remove obstacles and optimize conflicts

Blueprint : a rational process
Something changes when you work analytically
- Think first and take planned action next
- Do research to find objective solutions & clear goals
- Design and implement a step by step action plan

| **Greenprint** : learning endeavor |
|---|
| **Something changes when you enable development** |
| - Make people aware of their incompetence |
| - Experiment and explore with new abilities |
| - In an iterative, collective process |

Runkel and Runkel's (1984) admonishment to theory developers: "we plead only that they do not save theory to label their ultimate triumph, but use it as well to label their interim struggles."

Impression of the 'sprawl' of the color theory

| Basis of the theory	Elaboration of the colors and the interactions between them	Applications and extentions	Aids for teaching and consulting
Overview of paradigms – Assumptions – Change strategy /mechanism – Resulting type of change behavior **Connection with the literature** – Schools of thought/traditions within the colors – Other metamodels of change – Using metalanguage and metaphors **Key traits (linked to main elements of planned change)** – Diagnostic focus – Type of interventions – Profile of change agent – Key actors involved – Nature of communication – Nature of monitoring and safeguarding outcome – Typical language – Ideals and "dark side," pitfalls and challenges (shallow/deep variations) **Key applications incl. rules of thumb** – Strategy: situational choice of a change approach with the most leverage – Diagnosis: using multiple viewpoints to deepen understanding of change phenomena – Change agent: awareness of people's preferences, competence, limitations – Communication: common language amongst those involved enabling collective understanding and acting	**Elaboration of key traits** – Overview of colored diagnostic models – Overview of colored interventions – Roles, competences, intentions and development of change agents – Role divisions between actors and type of collaboration – Change communication (goal, means, extent, style) – Success criteria – Color glossaries: typical words, phrases, idioms – Different depths of color/self-fulfilling prophesies **Extrapolation to other aspects** – Ideas about nature of reality and knowledge – Meaning of resistance and conflict – Ideas about teams and collaboration – Typical issues and situations – Contra-indications – Motivators/demotivators – Order of change & colors – Norms and values/ morality – Personality traits – Organizational identity – Role of (middle) management – Color and culture **Interaction between the colors** – Contradictions and tensions between the colors – Power balance between the colors, competency traps – Persuasive language and magical solutions – Incongruence of intentions, language and behavior – Combining colors: types (intensity) and conditions – Contracting a color change, textual agency, managing contexts – Paradoxical interventions in terms of the colors	**Case/sectoral application and translation** – Care, cure, pharma – Education – Utilities – Ebusiness – Consultancy – Financial sector – Diplomacy – Sustainable Development – Food sector – Construction – Churches **Application and translation to other management areas an methods:** Facility management, quality management, mergers, public private partnerships, mediation, systems thinking, roles of staff departments, ICT, institutional change, sustainable development, innovation, strategy, project management, facilation, other color theories in management **Connection with other disciplines/fields** – Marketing & communication – Learning & teaching – Art & design – Therapy & coaching	**Examples of color** – Case descriptions – Typical situations – Rich descriptions & narratives – Anecdotes, jokes, cartoons – Imagery (icons, photos, videos) – Typical books/music/food/art – Reflections from the field **Teaching formats** – Games, puzzles, core quadrants – Exercises, instructions, cases – Presentations, syllabi, – Lectures & interviews (audio/video/text) – Microcosms ("rooms of color") – Accompanying workbook – Support sites **Instruments** – Color test for change agents – Quick Scan – Groupware facilitated dialogue

Frames to reflect on theory development
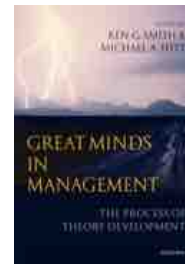
- Composite & multi-criteria view of theory

- Smith & Hitt's (2005) reflection with 30 'great minds in management' on theory development

  - Winding-multi-year journeys full of barriers and serendipitous events

  - Only logical in hindsight, nevertheless four common stages

Tension ⟶	Search ⟶	Elaboration ⟶	Proclamation
– Dissonance between own viewpoint and other (dominant) theories – Resolving conflict amongst existing theories – Contradictions between own theory and research findings	– Suspending beliefs and allowing creative thinking – Exploration and discovery to develop a framework – Influence of own background, affiliation, peer networks and partnerships – Role of serendipity and chance	– Sprawling collection of ongoing interpretative actions – Working trough the logic with incremental modeling – Series of qualitative and/or quantitative research projects to ground or test ideas and failures – Getting others interested in co-developing, integrating ideas from other theories, responding to criticism	– Presentation of aspects in incremental articles – Writing a book to represent the full gestalt – Dealing with criticism and misconstruction – Fixating the theory so it can be used as "common language" – Getting the word out, creating teaching aids – Supporting application, creating consultancy aids – Establishing communities of practice, formation of a "school"

Three periods

Tension → Search → Elaboration → Proclamation
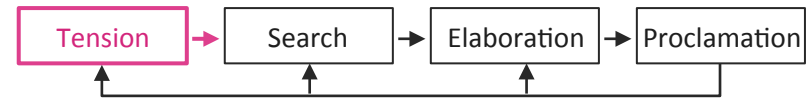
Inception (1997-1999):

– Disconnect between prevalence of change in the firm's practice and absence of common know how

– Contrast between easy acceptance of aggregated ideas about change and persistent heated discussions about concrete cases

Storming and norming (1999-2006)

– Difficulty of talking 'colorless' about the colors (social constructionism)

– Being misread: academic critique about objectivism versus practitioners' appreciation for making life easier

Maturity (2007-2015)

– Dealing with complexity under pressure: need for combinations paired with the risk of loosing distinctive qualities

– Diversity of use: constant influx in the field versus experienced scholars/practitioners

Some reflections & conclusions

- **Smith & Hitt's four stage model** very useful
  - Increasing our understanding, including the power of generative tensions and the influence of context and serendipity in a journey type endeavor.
  - Two expansions: 1) the possibility of consecutive periods each sparked by different generative tensions. 2) more emphasis on proclamation

> In the original model, proclamation relates to publishing findings and responding to critiques, which makes sense for academics. As academic practitioners we supplement this, e.g. by going on the road to get the word out, establishing a community of practice, and producing teaching and consultancy aids.

- **Composite and multi-criteria view** fits the theory as it is now
  - Collection of concepts, underlying paradigms. Interrelationships within the colors (congruency of traits) and between the colors (in its key applications)
  - Vexing choices in terms of criteria. Then: focus on practice made it original, practical, resonant there. Academic visibility and validity came later when originality had decreased. Ongoing: e.g. in teaching.

- **Food for thought**
  - Bridging the gap. Since most ideas come for the world of practice (Bartunek, 2008; Corley & Gioia, 2011) academics might be better of researching theories that have already "made it" in practice.
  - Downside of the emphasis on originality – both in academic and practice publications. It can be at the expense of a repository of robust ideas that is valid and versatile. From OD basics to color thinking.

> We place a high premium on classics: a traditional pot roast, classic Coke, a perfect apple pie. Why not do the same with "management classics"? Just as a meal tastes delicious when crafted with know-how, concepts stay powerful when they are alive in practice, teaching, and research.

Reading more

About change management and the colors of change:

- H. Vermaak & L. de Caluwé. Creating a colorful model of change. A case study of theory development. Paper Academy of Management Conference, 2015

About the colors of change:

- L. de Caluwé & H. Vermaak. Knowing yourself as a change agent: A validated test based on a colorful theory of change. In D. W. Jamieson & A Buono (Eds.) Consultation for Organizational Change Revisited. Research in Management Consulting (vol. 21) Information Age Publishing, 2015.
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- L. de Caluwé & H. Vermaak. Learning to Change: A guide for organization change agents. Sage, 2003
- L. de Caluwé, F, Que & H. Vermaak. Comparing psychotherapists' and change agents' approaches to change. In A. Buono (Ed.), Creative Consulting. Information Age Publishing, 2004
- L. de Caluwé & H. Vermaak. Thinking about change: Complexity and multiplicity in change processes. In J. Boonstra (Ed), Dynamics in Organizational Change and Learning. Wiley, 2004
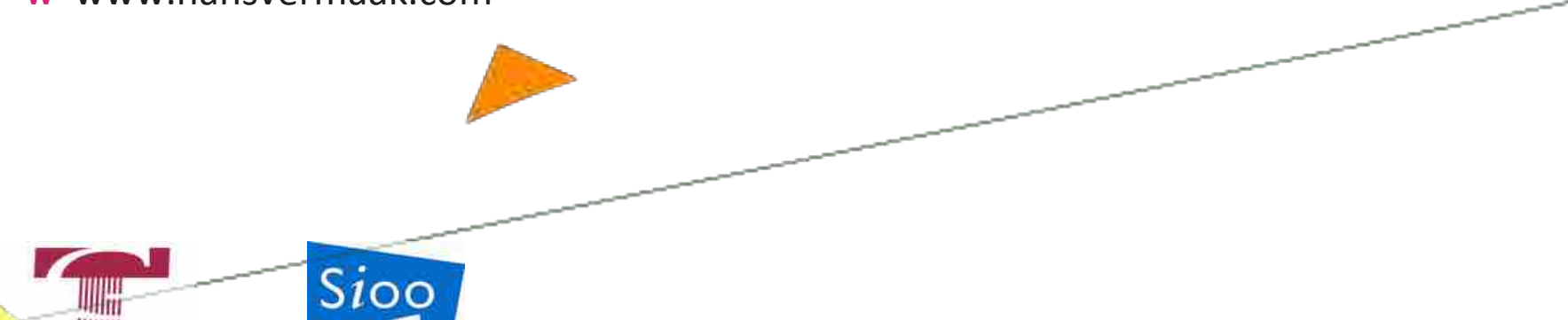- Online Color test for change agents

See website for these & more (also Dutch) publications: www.hansvermaak.com

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