

Change Paradigms: An Overview

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Abstract

The authors present five fundamentally different ways of thinking about change, each representing different beliefs systems and convictions about how change works, the kind of interventions that are effective, how to change people, etc. They are labeled by color: yellow, blue, red, green, and white print thinking. Each is based upon a family of theories about change. These five models function as communication and diagnostic tools and provide a map of possible change strategies.



Introduction

A search for the underlying values of the word *change* results in a whole range of meanings and different rationalities. There is often a world of difference between them. As a result, the practical applications of change strategies or approaches vary widely. Conceptual clarity is desired to better express the various meanings of the word *change* for several reasons:

1. It facilitates clearer communication between the people involved, for example, communication between and among managers, consultants, and academics. Misunderstandings and conflicts can and do arise, for instance, when change strategies are discussed in a management team between people who believe change is essentially a power game versus people who believe it is a rational endeavor. A new shorthand language for this complex subject matter creates the possibility for shared interpretations and meanings.
2. It can be used to characterize dominant paradigms in groups or organizations, serving as a diagnostic tool for characterizing different actors involved in a change effort. Moreover, the paradigms themselves represent different views of the organization and its

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problems. Such different viewpoints help paint a more complete and complex picture of organizational life.

3. It provides a map of possible strategies to deal with organizational issues. The idea is that not that “anything goes.” It is relevant to know what kind of approaches are available as well as to have some sense of indicators that facilitate a choice of what approach is more fitting given one certain situation rather than others.
4. It offers change agents a tool for reflective questioning: “What are your own assumptions? What is your (key) competence for bringing about change, and what are your limitations?” It can assist change agents in delineating their area of expertise and their professional development.

In this article we touch on a meta-theoretical concept—the *colors*—that has been developed in the last five years and has been extensively applied in both in management education and change practice in the Netherlands. More recently it is being applied in English-speaking arenas. It has proven to be both robust and versatile. The choice for “colors” as labels is based on the need for some type of shorthand that would not stress any specific order.

Yellow-Print Thinking

Yellow-print thinking is based on socio-political concepts about organizations in which interests, conflicts, and power play important roles (e.g., Greiner & Schein, 1988; Hanson, 1996; Pfeffer, 1981). Yellow-print thinking assumes that people change their standpoints only if their own interests are taken into account, or if compelled to accept certain ideas. Combining ideas or points of view and forming coalitions or power blocks are favored methods in this type of change

process. Change is seen as a negotiation exercise aimed at feasible solutions. Yellow-print thinkers believe that getting everyone on the same wavelength is a change in itself. In this view, enabling change requires getting the powers-that-be behind it, whether power based on formal position or informal influence. It is thought that resistance is built in if key players are not brought on board. Facilitating communication, lobbying, negotiating, and third-party conflict resolution are much-used interventions. Stakeholder analysis is crucial. Sticking to and realizing the outcome of these processes—goals, policies, or programs—is a huge task because the socio-political context is and stays dynamic. Consequently, the result of change is difficult to predict because it depends on the distribution and shifts in standpoints and influence of the most important players. Moreover, for a change agent, the process is difficult to plan and predict.

The change agent is a facilitator who has an independent position. Such facilitators guard their power base carefully. It is based on their experience, reputation and connections but can be augmented by specific mandates. They have a good sense for power structures and balances. Self-control, diplomacy, stability and flexibility are important attributes of such a change agent. The foremost consideration of the yellow-print change agent is to always bear in mind the conglomeration of interests, parties, and players and strive for agreements and policies. We call this way of thinking “yellow-print thinking”: Yellow is the color of power (e.g., symbols like the sun, fire) and the type of process (brooding and coalition formation around a fire).

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Blue-Print Thinking

Blue-print thinking is based on the rational design and implementation of change (e.g., Hammer & Champy, 1993). Scientific management (Taylor, 1913) is a classic example. Project management one its strongest tools (e.g., Wijnen & Kor, 2000). In blue-print thinking, it is assumed that people or things will change if a clearly specified result is laid down beforehand. Controlling the change by managing, planning, and monitoring the progress is considered feasible. The process and the result are deemed, more or less, independent of people. Management is able to compel and effect the change. Both outcome and process are planned down to the last detail. Change is considered to be a rational process aimed at the best possible solution. There is continuous monitoring based on pre-determined indicators to check whether the activities are leading to the desired result as planned. If not, adjustments are made to achieve that which has been agreed upon within the frameworks of time, money, quality, information, and organization. Other interventions are analytical endeavors such as SWOT analyses, benchmarking, business process redesign, total quality management, restructuring and so on. There is a wide array of well-defined methods. The subject of the change (the project leader) and its object (the target group) are often different

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people or entities. The approach is rational (planning) and empirical (indicators). Think first (define and design) and then do (implement) is the maxim. Naturally this approach lends itself best to *hard* aspects of organizations: structures, systems, and strategies. Change agents are experts on the content of the change effort. They take full responsibility for implementation and monitoring when mandated to do so. Result orientation, decisiveness, accuracy, and dedication are necessary attributes for such a change agent. The foremost considerations of the blue-print changer are these: Plan and organize first; use all possible expertise and do not let people's individual ideas and preferences interfere; and never lose sight of the intended result. We call this way of thinking "blue-print thinking": A blueprint is the (architectural) design or plan that is drawn up beforehand and guarantees the actual outcome.

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Red-Print Thinking

Red-print thinking has its roots in the classic Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger, 1941). McGregor (1960) developed the tradition further. In more recent times, Human Resources Management (HRM) has been an expression of this approach (e.g., Schoemaker, 1994). Change in this way of thinking equates with people changing their behavior. This approach to change is accom-

plished by stimulating people, by making it appealing to adjust behavior. Thus a key concept is barter: the organization hands out rewards and facilities in exchange for personnel taking on responsibilities and trying their best. On top of this, however, management's care and attention are also important. Red-print thinking strives to develop competencies and making the most of people's talents. The aim is a good "fit" between what individuals want and what the organization needs. Red-print thinking makes abundant use of HRM tools. People are rewarded (salary, promotion, bonus, a good evaluation) for desired behavior or penalized (demotion, poor evaluation) for undesired behavior. Career paths, assessments, recruitments, out-placements, work design (task enrichment and enlargement) and employee wellness programs are all relevant interventions. Management gets up on a soapbox, gives speeches, and induces people into embarking on a change. Social activities and team building are used to create a positive atmosphere and social cohesion. The outcome of the change (the result) can, according to red-print thinking, be thought out beforehand, but it cannot be fully guaranteed because it depends on employees' response; the desired outcome might change somewhat as a result. Monitoring takes place, but for both ethical and political reasons, there is a limit to how forcefully the process can be adjusted along the way. Change agents are good at motivating people and at devising systems and procedures that facilitate this adjustment. They are "people managers" who manage by walking. They can also be HRM experts who supply people managers with HRM tools. Carefulness, steadfastness, and loyalty are relevant attributes of the change agent. The foremost consideration of the red-print change agent is that the

human factor plays a vital role. People make changes happen if guided in the right direction. The color chosen here refers to the color of human blood. The human being must be influenced, attracted, compelled, and stimulated.

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Green-Print Thinking

Green-print thinking has its roots in action-learning theories (e.g., Kolb, Rubbin, & Osland, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1978). It has been expanded enormously in the more recent thinking on *learning organizations* (e.g., Senge, 1990). Changing and learning are conceptually closely linked: the terms *change* and *learning* have very similar meanings. People are motivated to discover the limits of their competencies and to involve themselves in learning situations. They are provided with means for learning more effective ways of acting. The aim is to strengthen the learning abilities of the individual and the learning within the organization. If people learn collectively, the organization learns and as a result, different organizational behavior results and change is a fact. The process is characterized by setting up learning situations—preferably collective ones as these allows people to give and receive feedback as well as to experiment with more effective ways of acting. Monitoring is not meant to adjust the change in the direction of some predetermined outcome, but just for planning a follow-up that is in line with what the people involved regard as

the most relevant learning goals. Green-print thinking is concerned with allowing and supporting people to take ownership of their learning. Typical interventions are coaching, simulations, survey feedback, open-systems planning, action learning, feedback, and leadership training. The change process takes time: Learning is not forced. It is a fluctuating process of learning and unlearning, trial and error. The change agents play a facilitating role, not a controlling one. They design learning situations, give feedback, support experimenting with new behavior, structure communication and are learning themselves in the process. Thinking and doing are tightly coupled, not sequential (as it is in blue-print thinking): All involved are frequently reflecting on their actions. Empathy, creativity, and openness are important attributes of the change agent. The foremost consideration of the change agent is to motivate and support people to learn with each other and from each other in order to establish continuous learning in collective settings. The color green is chosen because the objective is to get people's ideas to work (with their motivation and learning capacity), giving them the "green light." But it also refers to "growth," as in nature.

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White-Print Thinking

White-print thinking arose as a reaction to the deterministic, mechanistic, and linear

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worldview derived from Newton and Descartes. It is nourished by chaos thinking, network theory, and complexity theory, all of which are based on living and complex systems with limited predictability (e.g., Capra, 1996; Prigogine & Stengers, 1986; Bateson, 1972). Self-organization is a core concept. Stacey (1996) defines it as a process in which people interact according to their own norms without a map of what to do or how to get there. The self-organization process encompasses the emergence of new structures and behavioral patterns through developmental, learning, and evolutionary processes. The system finds its own optimal dynamic balance. In white-print thinking, the dominant image is that everything is changing autonomously, of its own accord. Where there is energy, things change. When this is the case, the time is ripe. Complexity is regarded as the enriching nature of things, not as disruptive chaos. Influencing the underlying dynamics is a favorite approach. White print thinkers try to understand where opportunities lie and search for the seeds of renewal and creativity. Sense-making plays an important role in this, as does the removing of obstacles and explicitly relying on the strength and soul of people. In a way white-print change agents catalyze the emergence of more white-print change agents. They call on people's strengths, self-confidence, inspiration, and energy. Whereas interventions that take away obstacles can seem to be of a very different color (e.g., delayering the organization), interventions that tap people's energy are more easily identified: e.g., open space meetings, appreciative enquiry, dialogue, search conferences, self-steering teams. The inner desires and strengths of people, both individually and as groups, are the deci-

sive factors. Outside influence, whether from a change agent or a manager, can be of only limited effect and then only if this influence is welcomed by the ones who are changing. The above does NOT equal doing nothing or *laissez faire*. On the contrary, it demands in-depth observation, analysis of underlying drivers, and often confronting interventions. Change agents must be capable of making sense out of complexity, often looking at historical patterns and psychological mechanisms. Honesty, authenticity and self-confidence are relevant attributes of such change agents. The foremost consideration of the white-print change agent is to observe what is making things happen and change, supply meanings and perspectives, remove obstacles, get initiatives and explorations going, and empower people while giving them sufficient free rein. The belief that "crisis provides opportunity" applies here. The color white reflects all colors. But more important, white denotes openness; it allows room for self-organization and evolution. The outcome remains somewhat of a surprise.

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Expansion of the Model and Search for a Meta-paradigm

Is this a complete overview? The colors do seem to cover most of the steady stream of experience, research, and publications of which we are aware. Nevertheless, the overview is probably never fully complete. Since we put forward the concept of *colors of change*, we have found that people easily attribute many other characteristics

to the colors in addition to the ones mentioned here and summarized in Table 1. These are characteristics like output criteria, diagnostic models, glossaries and typical sayings, bodies of literature, styles of communications, norms and values of change agents, ways to deal with contracting or with resistance, typical pitfalls, and ideals. We are addressing these in separate publications (e.g., de Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003).

Table 1. The Five Colors at Glance

	Yellow-print	Blue-print	Red-print	Green-print	White-print
Something changes when you...	bring common interests together	think first and then act according to a plan	stimulate people in the right way	create settings for collective learning	create space for spontaneous evolution
in a/an....	power game	rational process	exchange exercise	learning process	dynamic process
and create....	a feasible solution, a win-win situation	the best solution, a brave new world	a motivating solution, the best 'fit'	a solution that people develop themselves	a solution that releases energy
Interventions such as...	forming coalitions, changing top structures, policy making	project management, strategic analysis, auditing	assessment & reward, social gatherings, situational leadership	training and coaching, open systems planning, gaming	open space meetings, self-steering teams, appreciative inquiry
By...	facilitators who use their own power base	experts in the field	procedure experts who elicits involvement	facilitators who create settings for learning	personalities who use their being as instrument
Who have...	a good sense for power balances and mediation	analytical and planning skills	HRM knowledge and motivational skills	OD knowledge and feedback skills	an ability to discern and create new meanings
And focus on...	positions and context	knowledge and results	procedures and working climate	the setting and communication	patterns and persons
Result is...	partly unknown and shifting	described and guaranteed	outlined but not guaranteed	envisioned but not guaranteed	unpredictable on a practical level
Safeguarded by...	decision documents and power balances	benchmarking and ISO systems	HRM systems	a learning organization	self-management
The pitfalls lie in...	dreaming and lose-lose	ignoring external and irrational aspects	ignoring power and smothering brilliance	excluding no-one and lack of action	superficial understanding and laissez faire

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There is also a meta-paradigm behind the five-color classification described here. The description of five ways of thinking emerges from a meta-paradigm that posits a need for distinctions in diversity and a search for professional insights and values based on these (de Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003b):

In order to survive in the long run, organizations seem to need qualities of each and any one of the colors.

1. We start to suspect that any strong color dominance in organizations is unwanted. In order to survive in the long run, organizations seem to need qualities of each and any one of the colors. Organizations need to deal properly with power and different interests (yellow), must effectively and dependably get results and maintain organizational hygiene (blue), must take the irrational human being into account and insert care and perspective in organizational life (red), have to create spaces to learn and cooperate (green) and need to align themselves with the times they live in and the people they live with and innovate accordingly (white). The different colors have conflicting principles, meaning that a balanced or sound organization has to cope with the paradoxes that result from these conflicting principles. This realization reinforces the need to diagnose organizations from the different colored viewpoints in order to be aware of imbalances.
2. A foundational (color) focus on the change strategy is needed, especially when problems are deeply rooted as different colored approaches, can interfere considerably with one another. For instance, trying to create a learning environment (green) while not keeping power games at bay (yellow) or downplaying the predictability of outcomes (blue) means that the learning is bound to be superficial. Each color has its strong and weak points. The kind of organization, the issue at hand, the kind of resistance, the style of the change agents, the time pressure and other circumstances, all are factors that influence what change strategy, or color print, can best make a difference. This is not to say that a change strategy has to be restricted to one color, but does imply that one should take interferences between colored actions into account when intervening in organizations. A relatively easy way of dealing with interferences is to space different color interventions in time or have different people involved. More challenging is to maintain one constant underlying color tenet while allowing for more superficial, other-colored contributions.
3. The color of the change agent should match the change effort: incongruence frustrates change. It makes little sense to embark on a yellow endeavor with an analytical expert who strives for the best solutions (blue) rather than what is feasible given the balance of power. While change agents might be able to at least intellectually grasp that all colors are equal, when it comes down to it, most change agents have

more narrowly defined beliefs/intentions and these should match their role in order for them to be believable. This is not to say that change agents can be branded in single colors and remain as they are over the years. Change agents may be able to handle different approaches to change but not to their full potential. They may change colors but take many years to do so as each color brings with it a whole body of knowledge with many interventions, competencies, and diagnostic viewpoints.

4. Lastly, we posit that dialogues in organizations based on a multi-paradigm perspective (such as the colors) enhance organizational vitality. "The difficulty for change is not in the development of new ideas, but in escaping the old ideas, that determine our thinking" (Wierdsma, 2001, p. 3). Seeing too many things through green glasses and applying green interventions will give a lot of reflection but a lack of action, results, and consensus. Moreover, organizational change is a collective effort and, more often than not, involves people with multiple perspectives on organizational life and multiple definitions of reality. Instead of narrowing participation to reach easy consensus on issues, the inclusion of multiple perspectives not only can create the kind of richness that does justice to the complexities of the social systems but also the kind of ownership that is instrumental in addressing such complexities. When problems are simple, single-minded viewpoints might suffice (e.g., building a house with a blue paradigm only). But for ambiguous problems involving people with many different backgrounds, understanding and intervening in

organizations is best based on collectively taking multiple realities and corresponding paradoxes into account.

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