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Learning the steps of the dance of change: improving change capabilities by integrating futures studies and positive organisational scholarship

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Keywords

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Abstract

As the pendulum swings back towards growth in business, organisational change is again on the top of the corporate agenda. Change management in recent years has not had a very successful record, and organisations must improve their change capabilities – they must better learn the dance of change. The success of change initiatives more than ever depends on the people in organisations. This article presents a people-oriented approach to change by integrating the latest developments in “inside-out” positive organisational scholarship with “outside-in” thinking of future issues. The methodology facilitates better organisational learning as well as boosting people’s commitment to change, and is a practical, simple and effective way of structuring and facilitating large-scale, complex organisational change initiatives.

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The dance of change – not for beginners . . . ?

According to a recent survey by IBM Business Consulting Services among 456 CEOs worldwide, the overwhelming percentage believe that growth will be the number one priority in global business over the next several years (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2004). As the pendulum swings back towards growth, change is again on the top of the corporate agenda. Top leaders recognize that their people’s skills and their capacity for change are the key factors for growth rates, but according to the same survey, less than ten percent of CEOs rate their company’s record of change management as having been very successful. The survey concludes that most executives are keen to transform their organisations but they have reached a difficult crossroad – where there is a strong desire (and need) to change but a limited capability to manage it effectively. It is time to learn the dance of change again. The term “dance of change” has been borrowed from the great book *The Dance of Change – The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* by Peter Senge *et al.* (1999).

To improve such organisational change capabilities, we have researched and tested different change approaches for the last decade when working on change efforts with a number of Scandinavian organisations. We have found that integrating recent developments in “inside-out” positive organisational scholarship techniques with an “outside-in” future issues, provides one of the best large-scale “dance courses” available, and increases an organisation’s capability to change. The combined approach boosts people’s joint commitment and individual motivation to change. The method builds on cognitive and learning theory and facilitates organisational learning and common organisational language; about the future, about the organisation’s business environment, about the present, about its previous success stories, and about the organisation’s positive core competencies, culture, relationships and assets.

We have put the change approach together, acknowledging some of the following important learning points from unsuccessful change initiatives we have witnessed in the past decade:

- In today’s complex organisational environment, the responsibility for change must be taken out of the hands of a few and given to a broader range of internal and external stakeholders. The myth of the heroic and visionary leader championing all organisational change initiatives should be buried once and for all. It is enormously difficult to conduct successful change initiatives “top-down”, but even today amazingly, many corporate leaders still find the idea of giving up control novel and frightening. This surprises us. The evolution of thought on

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organisational change has moved in the last two decades from an “experts improve whole systems” to “everyone improves whole systems” approach. Today, we are moving towards an era that calls for methods of organising change programmes that allow “everybody” to innovate and change to prepare a company to compete successfully in a changing and competitive global business environment.

- Change initiatives need to move away from the default “problem fixing” mode, to focus more on the positive strengths of the organisation. Much of the conventional managerial problem solving and organisational psychology seeks to identify and remove gaps or deficits, and to solve organisational problems rationally, but our brains are not the rational calculating machines we sometimes imagine them to be. Social scientists and behavioural economists have for some time argued that the basic assumption of modern economics and management – rationality – does not always stack up against the evidence (Roxburgh, 2003; *The Economist*, 2003; Wagner, 2003). We are beginning to realize that human beings are emotionally as well as rationally wired. What is sad is that management, in practice and in theory, has pretty much been based on an underlying belief in the rational man. Neoclassical economics is not up to speed, but nor are most current management tools and techniques companies employ to develop their organisations. It is no big surprise that people change best when they are excited about where they are going and what they are doing. If the positive organisational core is added to the change agenda, changes never thought possible occur.
- The need to see organisational learning as a prerequisite for successful change. One of the few sustainable competitive advantages a company may develop today is its ability to learn faster than its competitors. The scarcest resource for many companies today is not capital but imagination and human talent. The ability to compete and prosper in the global economy therefore goes beyond trade in goods and services, and flows of capital and investment – it increasingly turns on the ability to learn collectively and use this acquired knowledge to change faster than competitors.
- In a competence-based economy, dialogue is the basic unit of work. No dialogue – no change. Organisational dialogue is a process for building common understanding – in that it allows one to see the hidden meanings in communications. In change processes, one should be less focused on convincing opponents and more focused on building common experiences that allow people to

learn collectively. The more a group has achieved such collective understanding, by building a shared language, the easier it becomes to change organisationally.

- Any change process must take account of the organisation’s social capital – the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by individuals or organisations. The failure of some change initiatives to meet expectations in the past decade has largely been due to cultural difficulties and “people issues” (Roxburgh, 2003). Organisational social capital in different forms is a premise for developing change capabilities – a capability that is “owned” jointly by the parties to a relationship. Social capital will also provide the people in the organisation with much needed meaning and purpose that foster the basic collaboration and trust needed to develop relationships and knowledge sharing, thereby building change capabilities.
- A change initiative must start with a proactive and positive approach towards the future. Such pro-activity has nothing to do with trying to predict what will happen in the future, but is a way of thinking. Problem solving depresses people, whereas imaging futures creates hopes and energy (Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt, 1980). There is certainly no “future” just waiting to happen. The future is created by millions of independent rational and irrational actors with various agenda. Certain aspects of the future are predictable; others are bound with a lot of uncertainties. The goal is not to see and understand all aspects of the future in a change process, but to create energy for forward movement and to understand what is changing in the business environment.

The dance of change in 2004 = learning + motivation

The question of how societies, organisations, and human beings transform themselves has perplexed people from the very beginning of recorded thought. Most business organisations today have accepted that they need to cope with the reality of change somehow – and academics, practitioners and leaders have produced a steady flow of more or less novel theories to improve the way organisations change. We have learned from Kotter (1995), Senge *et al.* (1999), and others great academics how to perform change management (at least in theory). We know we need to form powerful coalitions, create and communicate visions, get rid of obstacles, plan for short-term wins, “walk the talk”, coach and support, assess and measure, and so on. But still many organisations struggle with the practicalities of

change and poor track records of change are the net result.

In a business context, change refers to aspects of the business environment: business models, technology, customers, competitors, market, social or political issues. But change also refers to internal changes; how the organisation adapts to changes in the business environment. Successful change in business organisations embraces both paradigms – combining the inner shift in people’s values, aspirations, and behaviours with “outer” shifts in process, strategy, practices, and systems. But the organisation does not just do something new; it builds its ability to do things in a new way. The emphasis on inner and outer changes is important. It is not enough to spot new opportunities in the business environment, to change strategies, structures, products, and systems; the thinking that produced those opportunities, strategies, structures, products, and systems must also change (Senge *et al.*, 1999). “The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas, but to make them forget their old ideas”, the super-economist John Maynard Keynes once said (Kets de Vries, 2001).

Successful organisational change in 2004 does, more than ever, involve “people issues” as motivation and inspiration. Philosopher Bertrand Russell argued that the resistance to a new idea increases as the square of its importance. Discoveries have been made in the field of transpersonal psychology to explain why people in organisations tend to think and behave as they do (Lawson and Price, 2003; Strohl, 1998). People will change their individual behaviour more easily if they believe in the organisation’s overall purpose, and understand the wider implications of their actions in the organisation’s development towards the future. Ideas and ideals matter. Paul Evans, from the French business school Insead, said that people do not dislike change, but being changed by somebody. In 2004 we must therefore stop changing somebody and pay more attention to the individual; let’s forget about the “organisational man”, and find out how we should motivate the “opportunistic man and women” in our organisations.

Changing from “inside-out”: accentuating the positive

Positive organisational scholarship is a new movement in organisational studies and development that focuses on that which is positive, flourishing, and energy giving in organisations. It investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which the people in organisations change in extraordinary ways. One practical application of this thinking is appreciative inquiry (AI). As an approach to organisational change, AI involves the cooperative

search for the best in people, systems, structures, cultures, assets, as well as in the environment around them. This may seem naïve, but research and practical results have demonstrated the power of a positive approach to organisational change (Cameron, 2003). This is different from conventional managerial problems solving, where the process usually involves identifying problems, analyzing causes, searching for rational solutions, and developing a logical action plan.

Social constructionism is a fundamental philosophy underpinning AI – which suggests that we as human beings have considerable influence over the environment of what we perceive and experience, and that to a great extent we create our realities through shared symbolic and mental processes, because:

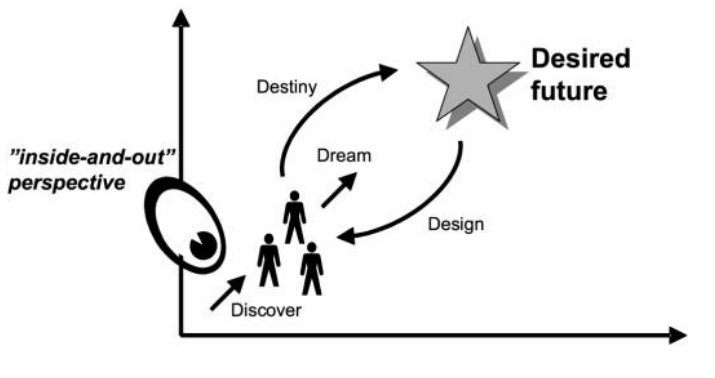
- Human knowledge and organisational destiny are intricately interwoven. Organisations must be understood as living, human constructions, and the way we learn in organisation stands at the centre of any attempt to change an organisation.
- Since organisations are living constructions, the questions we ask set the stage for the governing organisational dialogue – in the form of the things that we think and talk about, discover and learn together, which are the seeds of change.
- An organisation learns and develops at its best by telling and retelling its success stories. An organisation’s story is constantly being co-authored – pasts, presents and futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration and interpretation.
- Building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive and social bonding – social capital such as hope, excitement, caring, beliefs, spirit, purpose, and the sheer joy of creating something together.

AI thus involves a shift away from traditional change management approaches that put the responsibility for organisational change in the hands of just a few (the leaders). It is based on the premise that organisations change best when their members are excited about where they are going, have a common plan for moving forward, and feel confident about their ability to reach their goals. A wide range of internal and external stakeholders is involved in the change process through AI – aiming to have the “whole system” aligned around its positive core, strengths, and future ideas that generate energy for action.

The basic AI process usually goes through the following steps (see Figure 1):

- (1) *A discovery phase: appreciate “the best of what has been and what is”.* Discover people’s experiences of their group, organisation, or community at its most vital and alive, and what made those experiences possible.

Figure 1 The AI process



- (2) *A dream phase: imaging "what could be".*
Envision a better future in which those exceptional experiences and positive core of the organisation form the basis for creating that future.
- (3) *A design phase: determining "what should be".*
Design architecture in the form of structures, systems, relationships, etc., which should form the bases for organising the future.
- (4) *A destiny phase: create "what is not (yet)".* Plan and implement the organisational architecture created by stakeholders in a positive-feedback loop of learning.

Since the 1980s, the use of AI has grown extensively around the world. It has been used in a variety of applications – by corporations, by governmental bodies, by healthcare institutions, by institutions of education, by social service organisations, and by local communities.

Changing from "outside-in": memories of the future

Futures thinking in the form of scenario thinking is today recognized as a proven method for imaging possible future states, and has been used by many corporations, institutions, governmental bodies, etc. Scenario thinking aims to simplify the avalanche of environmental data, signals and uncertainty in the business environment into a limited number of possible future states relevant to the organisation in question. Each scenario tells a story about the future and how various elements might interact under certain conditions – a memory of the future.

As for AI, scenario thinking also has its roots in social constructionism, as well as in some of the following disciplines:

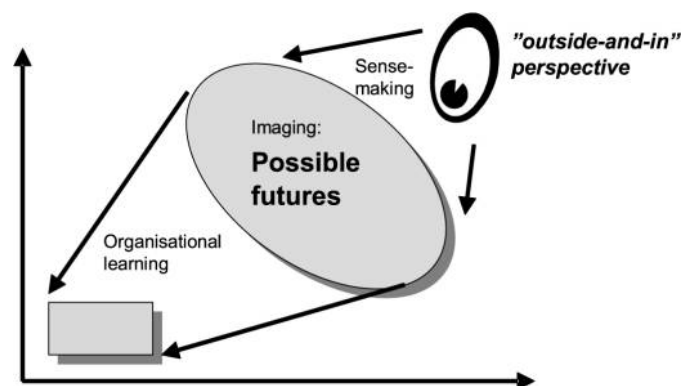
- Future studies where scenarios have proved it to be an effective futures study method (possibly the most widely used in business), as well as a powerful way of presenting and communicating future issues.

- Strategy analysis, planning and development, as strategists, organisational developers, and managers since the 1970s have searched for new and more relevant tools to deal with an increasingly complex and uncertain business environment, as well as the increased complexity within the organisation itself. Scenario thinking in this context has been seen by many as the link between future and strategy, and has gained a wide popularity as a tool for enhancing divergent strategic thinking, as well as facilitating long term strategic planning.
- In organisational learning and change processes, scenario thinking has proved to be one of several effective techniques that enhance collective learning, shared organisational language, and building common organisational mental models of the future market, customers, competitors, the organisation, its competencies, its culture, etc.

Scenarios are useful planning and decision instruments for several reasons: scenario thinking matches the way the brain functions – human beings are wired to think in alternative futures, and the narrative format of scenarios makes them easily remembered by the human brain. Scenario thinking today comes in a wide range of different applications and several different scenario schools exist. Most of them, however, go through some of the following meta-phases (see Figure 2):

- *A "sense-making of the business environment" phase.* This phase is usually concerned with tracking changes, events, discovering patterns, trends, threats and opportunities in the external business environment. The knowledge that is gathered may be divided into two areas: things we believe we know something about; and elements we consider uncertain or unknowable. This knowledge base is used as building blocks in the later process.
- *An "imaging possible futures" (scenarios) phase.* Based on a relevant set of knowledge from the previous phase (in the form of trends and

Figure 2 The scenario process



uncertainties), the aim is to produce (creatively and/or analytically) a set of plausible, consistent, different and challenging alternative views of the future which are strategically relevant to the organisation undertaking the scenario exercise. Hence, the scenarios are constructed according to a certain context.

- *A final phase where the strategic implications are examined.* The scenarios produced include a number of strategic implications for the organisation. What do the alternative views of the future mean to our organisation: typical questions in this phase are “what should we do today if we knew that the future will develop as presented in the scenarios?” In many cases, the scenario development is coupled with other organisational processes, such as some sort of planning, strategy development, change initiatives, or learning exercises.

Improving our dance of change steps

AI and scenario thinking have proven themselves as powerful stand-alone change tools. In our experience, organisational change capabilities are boosted if the two methods are combined into one integrated approach as a way of facilitating and structuring large-scale change processes.

The methodological interface is the future aspect. While AI assumes that the future is unknown and unknowable (Ludema *et al.*, 2003), scenario thinking assumes that some elements of the future are knowable and that it is possible to envision a limited set of possible and relevant futures. Apart from being a methodological debate, this is also an ideological question. We have found that the two philosophies can easily co-exist in a change process, in fact, co-existence strengthens the organisational learning. This is therefore not an either/or issue – and methodologically it proves useful to see this question as a function of uncertainty in the business environment. The perceived complexity in the business environment and the rate of change in a business environment play important roles in determining uncertainty levels.

Uncertainty has to do with our knowledge about the future, and it is useful to consider three types of such knowledge: things we know we know; things we know we do not know; and things we do not know we do not know. Rather than seeing uncertainty as something that can be analysed, most people tend to accept a binary view of uncertainty (Courtney, 2001). That is, they believe that uncertainty is nonexistent in far too many situations. For other situations, they understand that uncertainty exists; and when it does, they tend to become paralyzed.

Uncertainty is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. When you look at what we know we know about the future, and what we know we do not know, most companies will find themselves in situations with a range of possible future outcomes. In such situations, combining “inside-out” and “outside-in” perspectives through the use of AI and scenarios will prove useful. Various biases obviously plague all studies about the future, as well as studies of organisational behaviour. Although there are no fail proof techniques, in our experience focusing attention on envisioning possible futures improves change capabilities, as it includes a deeper appreciation for the myriad of factors shaping the future, as well as being essentially a study of our collective ignorance.

When we combine AI and scenario thinking, the following sequence applies and provides good results when it comes to organisational change processes (although the approach has to be tailor-made in each context).

Dancing the dance of change: the positive core of the organisation

- (1) A discovery phase including the AI interview phase dedicated to “the best of what is”. In this phase we learn about positive experiences, success stories, strengths, tangible and intangible assets, best practices, and other factors contributing to some kind of competitive advantage and positive core of the organisation. One local community we worked with discovered through this part of the process that its positive core had nothing to do with its local industry and competencies as it used to believe when it planned forward – but all to do with its ability to build its future on its cultural and historical heritage, their nature, as well as its ability to let talented people flourish.

Dancing the dance of change: the future of the organisation

- (2) A dream phase where “the best of what is” is prolonged into the future. We focus on envisioning the desired future we want to work toward when we maximize our strategic advantages and positive core of the organisation, often detailed in visions, target statements, goals, or ambitions. A construction company found, through extending “the best of what is” into their future, that their vision of the future (and value added towards customers) was not to provide construction services, but to function as a

- knowledge network seamlessly integrating customers, suppliers, architects, partners, and so on, into the value creation process.
- (3) A second discovery phase where we turn our focus to the external business environment. We want to find out “what we know we know” about the future, “what we know we do not know”, and “what we do not know we do not know” in the form of factors, trends, driving forces, actors, events, and other parameters influencing the future development in our business environment.
 - (4) In the envisioning the future phase based on the findings in the external discovery phase, we construct scenarios as alternative possible images of the future. The scenarios are then used for robust testing of our dream and visions of the future, or they may be prepared in advance of the dream phase in order to add some knowledge about the future business environment to the change process before conducting the dream phase. Another construction company we facilitated through the envisioning phase had projected “the best of what is” into its vision of the future. When testing the vision against various scenarios, the company found that one scenario challenged its vision with respect to the overall reputation of the industry. In order for the company to change towards its desired future, the management team therefore had to turn their attention to the construction industry, and they launched a series of change initiatives to improve safety and working regulations, get rid of fraud, ban illegal workers, etc., in the industry as a whole.
 - (5) A design phase where we detail and align the organisational elements that will help us grow our strategic competitive advantage towards our desired future. This normally has to do with organisational culture, people practices, structures, processes, policies, technologies, leadership practices and so on, that are important for organisational performance. The phase can also be extended to detail parameters in the marketplace such as future customers, competitors, value creation, distribution channels, networks, etc., in order to keep the “outside-in” versus “inside-out” tension. A government organisation we led through the change design process shifted in this phase its focus from external strategic positioning, to working with its internal culture and supporting incentives in order to become more customer-oriented as a way to achieve its change objective.

Dancing the dance of change: creating how to get there

- (6) This is the practical phase where we “look back from the future” and plan short and long term actions and initiatives to advance our positive organisation core in the form of competencies, relations, and other assets, and move the organisation towards our desired future. Game planning is one useful technique normally applied at this stage, as a way to energize forward actions and distribute responsibility for change throughout the organisation.

The “dance of change” exercise starts with a definition phase where we set and agree on the key issues we want addressed in the change effort. This can be in the form of strategic planning, strategy implementation, competence development, cultural changes, mergers and acquisitions, restructuring efforts, business innovation, new product development, or any other major or minor change issue in question.

The exercise is best conducted through a series of dialogue based change workshops, either in one go, over say a five-day summit as shown in Figure 3, or in shorter workshops, with a period in between them, involving multiple stakeholders. The workshop based change process as outlined may be executed with pre-prepared data as interviews, research, compelling stories and so on, or the workshops may be conducted without any pre-prepared information by using the knowledge and experience the participants themselves bring to the workshops.

The approach is a non-expert, easy-to-use generic method which may be rolled out to a wide group of stakeholders and interest groups involved

Figure 3 The “dance of change” exercise

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| <u>Day 1:</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning the tools |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> AI interviews |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Discovering the positive core of the organisation |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Dream phase: envisioning our ideal future |
| <u>Day 2:</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Driving forces in the business environment |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Scenario development |
| <u>Day 3:</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrating scenarios and dreams |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Visioning the future of the organisation |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Robust-testing our future |
| <u>Day 4:</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Designing the future organisational elements: alignment and change enablers |
| <u>Day 5:</u> | <input type="checkbox"/> Creating how to get there: game planning |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Action planning and communication initiatives |

The exercise may start with a top level group and rolled out wide, before summarized centrally at the end of the process

in a change effort in order to facilitate and structure the change process, sustain change momentum, and ensure an ongoing change dialogue. The process is shown in Figure 4.

This “dance of change course” has been applied successfully to various change initiatives in Scandinavian business organisations within industries as diverse as construction, oil and gas, finance, telecom, and consumer goods, as well as to governmental organisations, NGOs, and a number of local communities as part of their community development.

Learning to improve change capabilities

Change is again high up on the corporate agenda but the record of change management needs to be improved and change capabilities need to be strengthened. We must therefore better learn the dance of change. People more than ever will determine the speed of change and success of change initiatives. To improve current practice, we have presented in this article a process based approach to change by integrating “inside-out” positive organisational scholarship with “outside-in” future studies. This method is, in our opinion, an effective and practical way of structuring and facilitating change initiatives, particularly large-scale change processes. The method has been tested on a number of Scandinavian organisations, and it facilitates better organisational learning as well as boosting people’s commitment.

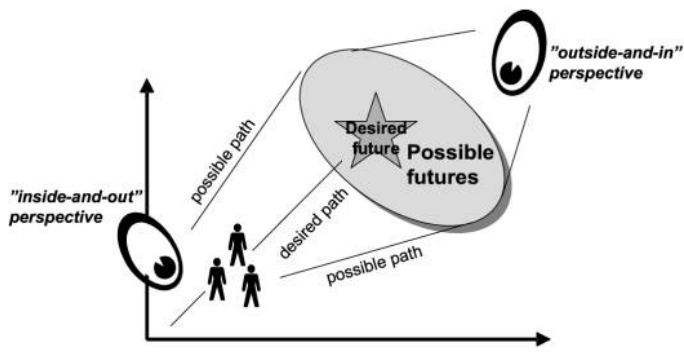
In order to become motivated to work in new ways, organisations must accept signals from their business environments and connect them to something they care about in the form of a deeper meaning or a higher purpose. Until sufficient

psychological safety is created, no change will take place. The key to improving change capabilities is the ability to balance the amount of threat with psychological safety. This allows people to accept new knowledge, and become motivated to work in new ways (Schein, 2001). If business organisations really want to improve their change capabilities, they need to reflect on what it means to transform underlying organisational assumptions – why dancing the dance of change is better thought of as organisational learning and motivation, why organisations change through positive enlarging and broadening, not through destruction, and why learning from the future, the present, and from the past is vital for any change to take place.

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Figure 4 The dance of change process



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