Understanding why organisations find it so hard to deliver Change

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The context of Change in modern western societies

Steven Arthur Pinker (born September 18, 1954) is a Canadian-American cognitive psychologist, linguist, and popular science author. He is Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, and is known for his advocacy of evolutionary psychology and the computational theory of mind.

He is, by his own admission, a holder of some unfashionable views. One of his more contentious views is that according to the data (and he is a very big advocate of data) the human condition is better than at any time in our evolution.

Steven believes that in the late 18th Century 'we' (humanity), got it just about right when it came to a belief in markets, the scientific method, reason, rationality, and humanism. These were the tools that mankind developed during that period of western civilisation referred to as the 'enlightenment', which have now spread around the world. The central tenant of purpose being defined within this structure as:

"The valuing of human flourishing is the ultimate good" and that the purpose of society is to enable people to **"enjoy long, healthy, stimulating lives."** [i]

The application of these tools has been the great driver of 'progress' and, he argues, that by almost every measureable data point we are, as a global species, in a better place today than ever before.

Pinker in his latest work directs us to a sea of measures and statistical evidence showing that indeed poverty is reducing, unhappiness is reducing, global inequality is reducing and that, in general, we as a species have never been healthier, wealthier, and happier.
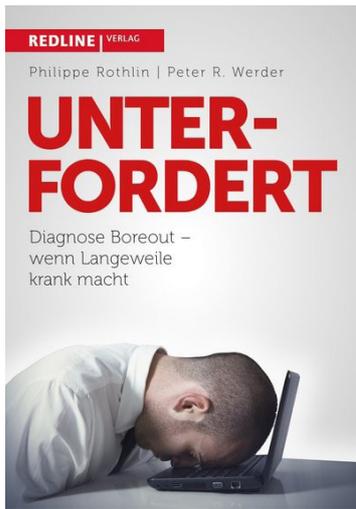
Interestingly this view is not particularly fashionable in the UK or US where post rational, counter culture appears to be gaining in influence. In fact, even the concept of society is being challenged. The Philosopher most admired by President Donald Trump, Aryn Rand, a darling of the US right and increasingly in the UK too, created her 'Objectivist' view which denies collectivism exists outside of possibly the immediate family, striking a blow against the role of the 'State.' [ii]

In the developed world Pinker's view appears to run counter to what we seem to see around us. The neo-fascist religiosity, anti-science and anti-rational values are being openly and strongly espoused.

The whole weight of this presents an anti-progress message which states that we're all heading to hell in a handcart filled with mystic 'woo' products, conspiracy theories, and fake facts.

We have been here before of course, and not all that long ago. George Steiner in 1971 [iii] looking back to the end of the 19th century, a period referred to as the 'fin de siècle' by other academics, suggested a civilisation spanning 'ennui' a state of malaise, boredom, dissatisfaction, cynicism, pessimism and a widespread belief that civilisation leads to decadence. He identifies this as one of the non-structural root causes of the First World War.

More recently Werder and Rothlin in 2007/14[iv] applied this to modern organisation theory suggesting that that lack of challenge, meaningful work, boredom, and consequent deficiency of satisfaction are a common malaise affecting individuals working in modern organisations, especially in office-based 'white collar' jobs. Their 'Boreout' theory suggests that the focus on stress was misguided and boredom is a much more pernicious problem that actually makes workers ill.

There is of course the perennial issue of each generation believing itself to be unique and special, encountering challenges and issues never before faced - sometimes engaging in nostalgia for perceived, although poorly remembered, 'golden ages' of competent governments, inspiring leaders, heroic deeds, along with endless summers filled with peace, prosperity, and critically happiness. For us the messages are connected with digitisation, the changing workplace and patterns of work it is causing.

For those of us who work within organisations to help them Change, this is the real context of the people we are supporting. All of them to a greater or lesser extent are immersed and impacted by these factors. This is what influences their opinions and drives their behaviours. So immersed are they that this may not even be a conscious process.

In a recent article titled 'Lunar Lies'[v] the team of authors concluded that the current attraction of societies to Conspiracy Beliefs can be directly related to an individual's state of mind. "Certainly there is evidence to suggest that when individuals are experimentally made to feel they have a lack of control, they are more likely to believe in CT's" (Conspiracy Theories)

The impact of society on traditional Change management and leadership approaches

It would appear that people are willing to ignore data, discount evidence, act against their own apparent interests, and believe in things which are extremely unlikely if not proven impossible to be true. They are primed through the day to day boredom they experience to a sense of despondency. They are fluid in their memories of actual facts or events, and vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupulous groups or individuals. In addition they are surrounded by a society currently reflecting and echoing cynical, pessimistic messages which reinforces a view that it is in a state of decline.

It is no wonder then that running a successful Change 'event' within an organisation has proven so difficult for so many organisations. The traditional tools deployed to deliver Change include:
- Clearly presenting the facts - which assumed that all engagement is rational.
- Marketing the benefits - which assumes that individuals will treat the Change as something to be consumed and that they can be convinced.
- Removing the roadblocks - which assumes that by successfully removing the reasons for opposition people will accept the Change as logical.
- Providing inspirational leadership which will create the cultural environment to accept Change - which assumes leaders are both inspirational and actually influential.

Is Change changing?

Are we to conclude from this that effecting Change is practically impossible and that the fall-back position of simply implementing and accepting the consequential performance and morale impacts is a more rational approach? We might reach this conclusion were it not for the fact that in some cases organisations can adapt to Change and thrive as a result. Some leaders are inspirational and some organisations can become nimble and adaptable at a cultural level.

Deborah Rowland[vi] recently outlined four leadership practices which she has identified as being directly linked to successfully enabling Change in an organisation. Coupled with her seven big messages, this kind of approach is a way of providing senior leaders, Change sponsors, and the key agents of Change with a set of behaviours and objectives to create an environment which can embrace and nurture Change. Rowland also encapsulates the current view of Change as:

"The emphasis has now shifted from viewing Change as an event to acknowledging it as an endemic phenomenon."

In effect we need to think in terms of 'changing' not 'Change' when we consider organisational environments. Douglas Coupland[vii] uses the equally useful term 'extreme present' by which he means the pace of Change is continual and organisations are operating in the 'extreme present.'

Rowland does of course recognise the need for leaders to do more than just bring about Change without having an understanding of how it is to be achieved.

"How you do Change fundamentally determines where you end up."

She also recognises that there will be contained Change events such as IT system Changes or Merger & Acquisition events. In essence, however the "leadership enabling approach" is more about pre-emptive creation of a positive or at least benign environment which can cope with continual Change and happily live in the 'extreme present.'

Most practitioners and consultancies offering clients support in the delivery of Change events do so around the traditional model of programmatic Change. An organisation has a strategy, it develops a course of action, which in turn includes Change events. These events have deliverables and outcomes, and usually some level of measures which indicate if the Change has delivered its intended outcomes. This end of the market is arguably larger and impacts more individuals in more organisations than the more developmental 'leadership enabling' end of the market. It's also more closely linked to project or programme management thinking and incorporates a number of methodologies, frameworks, or approaches which incorporate Change management into the overall delivery of the project.

While both of these formulas are indeed all about Change they appear very different to the potential customer. When an advisor speaks about Change it is important for all parties to understand where on the spectrum of Change they are coming from. Of course when I say spectrum it's a little more complicated than a linear representation usually associated with light.

Making the task of understanding more difficult and nuanced.

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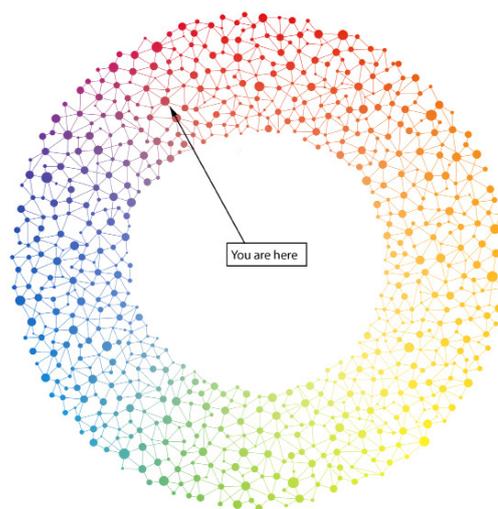
Navigating a course through uncertainty

Perhaps Steven Pinker's data-heavy approach might serve us well here. One of the things we know that we know, and that applies consistently, across cultures globally is that people are hardwired to feel uncomfortable about uncertainty. A recent paper on Uncertainty in 'Nature Communications (2016)'[viii], was able to demonstrate that even relatively low levels of uncertainty produce a physiological 'threat-based' response in subjects. Interestingly, there was some suggestion that the response reduces over time as the threat isn't realised however it does not disappear. Individuals who are operating in this state under performed in tests and showed significant reluctance to engage in more risks or engage with actions leading to more uncertainty.

Hard evidence central core of most Change programmes which is to focus on the removal of uncertainty. Bad news - if understood - can be managed, internalised and processed. Uncertainty festers and plays into all of the other negative elements we have covered above.

This then is the difficulty for Change practitioners and their Clients alike. If Rowland and Coupland are right we have to achieve a long term acceptance of uncertainty within our organisations despite the social context, the hardwired 'natural' settings, in an economic and technological sea of uncertainty driving Change.

The short and mid-term answers do not lie in cookie cutter methodological approaches, nor for the wider impacted workforce do they lie totally in the expansion of leadership mindfulness and developmental re-wiring of behaviours. The long term will require global society wide Change in economics, politics, and personal values which lie well beyond this paper.

A practical approach seems to be in order. A little like the modern day application of treatments in the face of anti-biotic resistance. Savvy Clients will want a partner who can deliver multiple approaches on multiple fronts, and not be a one trick pony. Programmatic Change needs to be managed well, deliverables need to be produced, pragmatic solutions developed to onboarding, training, and of course engaging with the impacted individuals and groups. The days of communicating at or indeed marketing at target audiences are over, engagement needs to be in a way that actively manages uncertainty and enables rather than disables engagement.

At the same time the organisation needs to be supported and coached in ways to establish a working model that can cope with uncertainty and move the narrative around the water cooler away from 'threats' to interesting and stimulating opportunity.

Partnership and collaboration between the different groups actively working on Change is now the order of the day, not competition based upon rival philosophical positions. The future of successfully delivering Change in changing organisations is an integrated one. So if I can take a liberty with a Mark Twain quote I would suggest: (Integrated) "Change is the handmaiden nature uses to achieve her miracles."[ix]

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HRCubed work with organisations of all sizes across all industries who aspire to provide cutting edge people services within their organisations. We are passionate about HR and its power to influence how people exist and relate within organisations. In particular we believe that people are the conduits to business success and importantly that HR can become the Change catalyst needed in a business to drive engagement, productivity, innovation and ultimately customer satisfaction.