Intentional Change Theory

Designing effective change efforts in high complexity business contexts.
The World Has Changed
Leaders and organizations across all sectors, sizes, and ages are experiencing a growing pressure of change. The rise of the internet and information technology along with growing customer expectations have reshaped our world in ways impossible to predict. These forces are certainly not the only ones creating a business climate that challenges many fundamental assumptions formed in the 20th century and still widely held today. Organizations that ignore or deny how the business context has evolved do so at great and growing risk.

However, leaders and organizations can learn how to adapt in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) contexts. To do so, novel ideas and approaches to organizational change and leadership are needed; not simply iterations of what worked in the past, though entirely new ways of thinking about the very nature of change. Many of these ideas, principles, and practices exist, having emerged in contexts including academic study, organizational change practitioners, and organizations and leaders themselves.

Intentional Change Theory Overview
Intentional Change Model or Theory is the work of Richard Boyatzis at Case Western Reserve University and his colleagues (Boyatzis, 2006). Unlike many models of organizational change derived exclusively from human sciences, ICT has been directly informed by neurophysiology as well as psychology. The model provides a template for successfully changing human organizations of any scale through a series of five insights or revelations. The model fully embraces human beings as primarily emotionally-driven, which can be a challenge for belief systems. Most contemporary large organizations are particularly challenged by the idea that they are not simply an increasingly complicated machine. Rather, the organizations that are thriving in today’s business climate are highly adaptive, behaving more like an evolving living system than a deterministic mechanical one. (Morgan, 1986)

Topic Selection
Clearly and powerfully articulating the topic of change sets the stage for purposeful execution. The opposite is true; ambiguous topics, or those lacking a sense of accessible invitation fail to widely engage the people who will implement them. Effective topics resonate with affect, meaning, and authority; cognitive and emotional domains identified by other models (David Kolb, 2017); since the people that make up organizations are not homogenous, effective communications are carefully designed to be accessible to a wide range of preferences.

Ideal/Aspirational Future State
The first step is to create a visionary future state that is aspirational. That is, beyond simple obligation; what we believe we need or ought to do. Rather it is what we see becoming if there were no limits. It is driven by common values and principles through a conversational process that is experiential, engaging, and taps into the creativity and innovation of each and every participant.

The future state becomes the change effort’s north star; the reference point to guide efforts through the inevitable ambiguity of adapting to complexity where no clear answers exist prior to finding them.
The most powerful future states elicit a mix of hope and anxiety; there is just enough question of “can it be done?”

**Current State**

In addition to becoming a sort of navigational reference point, the ideal future state also functions as an emotional buffer for the difficulties of facing the truth of the current state. Organizations facing the growing complexity of the world, what the US military has termed VUCA for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, will be challenged to their fundamental beliefs about effective structure, leadership, and employee motivation.

Coming to terms with current state requires honesty, vulnerability, and courage. However, without a shared understanding of what is actually happening, already difficult improvement efforts become even more at risk of generating undesired outcomes.

**Identify Gaps Between Current and Ideal States**

Once both a current and future state have been agreed to, the work of identifying the areas where there is a gap between the two. Gaps are not equal in size, complexity, effort to close, or value of outcome. Having not only a way to articulate the gap, though also a range of metrics to enable informed decisions about tradeoffs is critical.

With an inventory of gaps, applying a decision-making framework, such as Cost of Delay, enables their sequencing or priority to become self-evident.

**Experiment Through New Thinking and Behaviors**

Quite simply, if our current thinking and behaviors were capable of achieving the future state, it would have already been achieved. Instead, closing gaps will call us to experiment with novel ways of thinking and by extension, new ways of behaving. Behavioral shifts may include how we choose to communicate, to lead, and to implement. They also can extend to the organizational system itself; incentives, reporting structures, and metrics.

It is critical that experiments be designed to have sufficient protections to be both safe to fail and easy to recover from. Concepts from Lean and Agile software development support designing such efforts.

**Supportive Social Networks**

Organizational change is not a heroic journey; it is a social one. Fostering relationships and social networks that will support and reinforce desired changes in thinking and behaviors become critical. The field of Change Management is one example of directly addressing the role of people in change. However, in VUCA contexts the control-based paradigm of managing quickly breaks down as adaptability replaces efficiency and predictability as the most effective organizational traits.
Conclusion
There is one critical difference in outcomes between the efforts invested in riding a rocking horse and a real horse: one of them actually goes somewhere and the other just stays busy in place. Applying traditional management and change efforts in VUCA context is akin to wildly riding a rocking horse. Tragically, the business landscape is littered with failed change efforts; as complexity continues to grow this trend is likely to only increase. Riding a real horse; bringing a model of change designed for adaptability and fit for purpose in complexity, is no longer optional. Intentional Change Theory meets these criteria; adapting it effectively requires a willingness to fundamentally examine and question even our deepest beliefs about organizational life. The rewards are for leaders and organizations successfully learning to navigate VUCA extend beyond survivability to discovering what a flourishing enterprise can be.

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Works Cited