

## Strategies for Change

**Jack Lindquist, Ph.D. and William Bergquist, Ph.D.**

*During the 1970s Jack Lindquist and I (William Bergquist) worked together quite frequently in helping to bring about change in many American colleges and universities. We were sometimes referred to as the “Swedish mafia.” Unfortunately, unlike the more official Mafia, we didn’t have the resources to make offers that academic leaders “couldn’t refuse.” However, we did have some success, and Jack went on to become President of Goddard College (one of the truly innovative educational institutions in the United States and an heir to the educational philosophy of John Dewey).*

*During this remarkable decade, Jack Lindquist (with his mentor, Arthur Chickering) received a grant from the National Institute for Mental Health to study change in American college teaching, curriculum and evaluation. Six liberal arts colleges and two universities across the country participated from 1971 to 1975 in an action-research project called *Strategies for Change and Knowledge Utilization*. As one of the largest research projects of its kind in American higher education, *Strategies for Change* yielded some remarkable insights about not only change in collegiate institutions, but also change in virtually every kind of contemporary institution. I had the privilege of publishing the book, *Strategies for Change*, which summarized the findings from Jack’s four-year long project. Unfortunately, my publishing house (Pacific Soundings Press) was not very big. I had neither the time nor financial resources to extensively promote this remarkable book, though I wrote more than a dozen articles and four books (with Jossey-Bass) that built on and referenced the findings from Jack’s book.*

*Tragically, Jack Lindquist died a few years after his book was published. He never had a chance to disseminate the insights he gained from this project. To use one of his own favorite phrases, the “diffusion” efforts were thwarted and the leaders of change efforts throughout North America (and the world) were unable to benefit from the insights offered by Jack Lindquist. The light he offered sadly remained covered.*

*I recently had occasion to dust off my own copy of *Strategies for Change*. I found that it was filled with insights that are still relevant in the formulation of 21st Century change initiatives. I particularly found his introductory chapter on four fundamental strategies to be still invaluable. These strategies (a coherent set of assumptions about effective change) built on findings from an even earlier project conducted by*

*Ronald Havelock and his colleagues at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge. In honor of both Lindquist and Havelock, I have edited and updated the first chapter of Strategies for Change and offer it as a framework to be used by those planning for change efforts or those who are coaching and consulting with other men and women who have taken on the challenge of planned change.*

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We carry in our heads, and lower, basic notions about how to bring about change. Some of these "models," or "strategies," are rather simpleminded, such as those based on carrot and stick assumptions: threaten to take away some source of security or status, or promise to provide more of what the target of your change efforts wants. Some are elaborate. Basically, however, four very different assumptions about what leads people or organizations to change are represented by four rather different change strategies. They are the Rational Planning, Social Interaction, Human Problem-Solving and Political approaches to planned change.

The first three emerge from the seminal scholarship of Ronald Havelock and his associates at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge. They observed that all change strategies emphasize one of three particular aspects of the basic communication act: I create a message which I deliver in such a way that the receiver (myself, someone else or a whole organization) accepts it and acts on it. One set of strategies, which Havelock called Research, Development and Diffusion (R&D), and which we call Rational Planning, concentrates mainly on developing a terrific message. Another set, called Social Interaction or Communication of Innovations, emphasizes the process and factors by which the change message gains the attention and acceptance of the receiver. It focuses on the social act of communicating new notions. A third group of studies and attendant theory, called Problem-Solver by Havelock, focuses upon how the receiver comes to feel the need and then the willingness to change. The Political model dwells on this same part of the communication act, but with quite different assumptions about how to generate change than those of the Problem-Solving model.

Havelock and later theorists see effective planned change as a combination of these approaches. But the separate models are well worth elaborating, for they represent strong differences in the ways changes are undertaken.

## **THE RATIONAL APPROACH**

This approach is based on assumptions regarding rationality which lead to heavy investment in basic and applied research and to considerable investment in the formulation, testing and packaging of innovations based on research. Havelock identifies five basic assumptions about change which underlie the Research and Development strategy. First, the R&D model suggests that dissemination and utilization should be a rational sequence of activities which moves from research to development to packaging before dissemination takes place. Second, this model assumes that there has to be planning, and planning on a massive scale. It is not enough that we simply have all these activities of research and development; they have to be coordinated; there has to be a relationship between them; and they have to make sense in a logical sequence that may go back years in the evolution of one particular message to be disseminated.

Third, there has to be a division of labor and a separation of roles and functions, an obvious prerequisite in all complex activities of modern society, but one that we sometimes ignore. Fourth, it assumes a more or less clearly defined target audience, a specified passive consumer, who will accept the innovation if it is delivered on the right channel, in the right way, and at the right time. Extensive scientific evaluation is needed to assure that this happens. Evaluation is to occur at every stage of development and dissemination. Fifth, this perspective accepts the fact of high initial development cost prior to any dissemination activity, because it anticipates an even higher gain in the long run—in terms of efficiency, quality, and capacity to reach a mass audiences. We can see around us plenty of examples of the rational change model. Cars and planes and other material "products" are made and sold that way. Many federal government agencies have employed R&D assumptions in supporting the research and development of various programs ranging from agriculture to education, and from Internet technology to defense.

Change in many organizations is often supported by encouraging individuals, task forces or departments to formulate proposals based on the best reason and evidence available. We see this approach flourishing today in the emphasis on “evidence-based medicine,” “evidence-based psychotherapy” and evidence-based almost everything else. Review bodies, whether based in governance or management, then judge these proposals and decide for or against ostensibly on the basis of rational considerations. Although we all know too well that good reason and sound evidence are not the only grounds on which decisions to change are made, the formal system, the one we put on organization charts and admit in public, stresses the rational model. We formally act as if we all approach change rationally. This is particularly the case in organizations that are in the business of education, research and technology—that embrace the culture of what Parsons calls “cognitive rationality.” The leaders of these organizations find it hard to admit other approaches.

Certainly, there should be participation by those whose attitudes and behaviors are aligned with the rational model, but this should not be the sole source of building a case for change. Research conducted over many years has found the rational model inadequate in several respects as a way to go about the introduction of change in human attitudes and behaviors. In the main, criticism has focused on the isolation of R&D from its audience—the stakeholders, the people who supposedly are going to use these new fangled ideas or behaviors. Rational systems may be good ways to research and develop change, but they do not explain all the motivations and activities by which those new things get used.

The dynamics of local implementation are especially critical to the actual use of planned change. Organizations, like the individuals and groups in them, do not operate simply as rational systems thoughtfully buying the latest innovations. If a change proposal threatens individual or group security and status, it is in trouble no matter how elegant its reason. Informal systems of communications and social status may be far more potent than formal communications in persuading members whether or not to do the new thing. Certainly reason and evidence are part of the change equation. You will not get very far off lousy evidence and flimsy reason. But an adequate strategy for change must include much more than clear and compelling reason.

## **THE SOCIAL INTERACTION APPROACH**

We live in social networks. One connects us to professional colleagues; another unites us with family and friends. Through these connections we get news and views about what's happening in the world around us. We can gain security, status and esteem from these informal systems, just as we can from formal organizations. Some researchers maintain that these contacts are essential to change, for new ideas get communicated and validated through social networks; Everett Rogers is most frequently identified with this school of thought. Agricultural extension agencies are the change agent units which best represent this approach in contrast with research and development centers.

Everett Rogers (along with his Diffusion of Innovation colleagues, including Floyd Shoemaker) find that most empirical studies of innovation identify a few consistent types of "potential adopters" and a few specific stages in the adoption of new ideas, practices or objects. In every organization or community, there will be a few *Innovators*, eager to try new things and usually uncomfortable with the status quo (which in turn is uncomfortable with them). These have also been called by Sally Kuhlenschmidt, the "explorers" who boldly go where no one else has gone before (to borrow from the intro to "Star Trek") and map out the newly discovered territory. They are the innovative thought-leaders and daring practice-leaders in organizations.

A second group, somewhat larger than the first but still rarely more than twelve to fifteen percent of the outfit, are the *Early Adopters*. They usually are quite cosmopolitan in contacts and open to new ideas, though not as eager as the Innovators. Keeping with Kuhlenschmidt's metaphor, these are the pioneers who "venture West" after the explorers map out the territory. These men and women are willing to try out any new idea—at least as a pilot test—often because in other areas they are themselves the innovators.

Following in sequence of adoption is the *Early Majority*, making up perhaps a third of the population; these are the cautious followers of the Earlier Adopters. These are the settlers in the new territory. They want some proof or at least some stability before making a commitment. How do I know that this product will work? Can you assure me that this service will be effective and of value to me? Do we have any evidence?

Another third then comes along—the skeptical *Late Majority*—which wants overwhelming evidence that this new practice is possible, effective and rewarded before it ventures a try. We would suggest that these are the burghers, who only move into a town or city after it is formally established. The "band-wagon" effect is often evident (as is Malcolm Gladwell's "tipping point")—employees will embrace the new product and engage the new services only after they see most other people around them already committed.

Finally, about fifteen percent of most systems will be made up of *Laggards*, who probably will resist change until everyone else is already doing the next new thing. These are the people who never move or move only after they are forced to do so (because of deteriorating financial conditions, political exile or related external pressures). In some cases, the laggards are the former innovators who got "burned out" by the failure of others to accept their plan. They now view other innovators as threatening to their own self-esteem. If I can't do it, I certainly don't want anyone else to do it!

Each successive group needs substantially stronger persuasion in order to change. While change messages delivered through impersonal channels (books, articles, formal addresses, Internet essays, written proposals) can persuade Innovators and Early Adopters, as well as increase awareness generally, later adopters need more personal communication and contact in order to be willing to change. Although it can take a short time for a change to move from one category of adopters to another (especially since the world became "flat"), several years is more common for new behaviors to be firmly established and several decades for new major ideas and perspectives to be anchored in a society. Clearly, the change advocate who thinks she can gain acceptance and use of new human behaviors or ideas by impersonal communication over a short period of time to a whole organization is in for bitter disappointment unless

the group can be coerced and carefully controlled—and this is rarely the case today (at least in most technologically-advanced and autonomy-oriented societies).

Innovation diffusion researchers find that the best route into an organization or community is through *Opinion Leaders*, those persons (or institutions) to whom others turn for advice. Hovland and Weiss noted many years ago that the most persuasive communicators are those whose expertise, experience, or social role establish them as credible sources of the information presented. Harvard has been an institutional opinion-leader on almost anything—as are Yale, Stanford, the University of California and many other major universities. Today, with the dominance of the Internet as a source of information, there is much less a centralization of opinion-leadership. As Thomas Freedman has noted, we have become a “flat world” in which opinion-leadership is diffuse and constantly changing (and often isolated and reinforced in small opinion enclaves).

Social interaction researchers also find that certain attributes of innovations besides impressive reason and evidence influence their adoption. Does the innovation have clear relative advantages for our particular situation, whether those advantages are better ability to meet institutional objectives, reduced costs, higher status or greater enjoyment? Is the innovation compatible with our values, our structure, our skills and styles? Is the innovation divisible so that we can adopt only the parts we like, or adopt in some easy sequence, rather than buying the whole change at once? Is the new thing simple to understand and do? Does it involve low risk and low uncertainty? Can we observe it and try it out so we know better what we are getting into? Whether it's a consultant's recommendation or an internally-generated proposal to modify a production process, these ingredients will be important. Yet it is difficult to assess the relative advantages of specific innovations. They often clash with traditional organization-wide values and structures. Often, a whole, complex proposal is laid on the leadership team at once, with little promise that it will reap positive rewards. And such proposals are usually paper descriptions, not visible experiences which members of the organization can see and try before accepting. Small wonder that significant, planned change is such a rare occurrence in many organizations.

## **THE RESOLUTION OF HUMAN PROBLEMS APPROACH**

Parsons has noted that institutionalization of a change is imbedded in the non rational layers of motivation among the people who work in the organization. Change will not occur simply through the presentation of rational arguments regarding the advantages of this change. People are not the issue—rather it is the need of these people for dependency or autonomy that is the issue. Or it is the intensity of anxiety experienced by these people as they face the challenge of change. There is, in short, a psychological dimension to change to which neither the Rational nor Social models do justice. Rational planning and social

interaction do form part of the equation, but underlying interests, habits, fears and prejudices compose the bulk of the iceberg. We often pretend that the essential aspects of planned change are out in the open, in our plans and public discussions. We know better. And if we seek a strategy for intentional change which will actually work, then we need to get at these hidden sources of resistance. Human Problem-Solving approaches offer some assistance.

The general strategy is familiar enough to most people: change is a process of solving problems. Something is not going right, so we diagnose the problem, set some objectives, find a solution, make a decision, implement it and evaluate its worth. Simple. It really is the Rational approach. But not if the problem is my need to have control, your fear of a change which may endanger your security, or our general distrust of one another. Then, say advocates of Human Problem-Solving strategies, we need skillful interventions. We need someone or some process which can help us confront and reduce these hidden obstacles to change. Intervention may come in the form of leadership training. It may involve building an effective problem-solving team. It may focus on the department or on the relationship of the whole organization to its environment. Some intervention tactics, such as organization development or appreciative inquiry are quite psychological in their focus. Others, such as various survey feedback interventions, are more sociological. But all aim to help us deal with the human resistances to change which we may otherwise avoid.

The Human Relations School of business administration, from Elton Mayo and Chester Barnard in the thirties to Rensis Likert and Chris Argyris in the second half of the 20th Century, to the appreciative inquiry movement and many organizational coaching strategies in the 21st Century, has used this strategy extensively in efforts to improve the functioning of businesses and industry. In his synthesis of the literature in this field, Havelock identifies five basic tenets of this approach. First, the user world (the person who is to adopt a new idea or practice) is the only sensible place from which to begin to consider utilization. Second, knowledge utilization must include a diagnostic phase where user need is considered and translated into a problem statement. Third, the role of the outsider is primarily to serve as catalyst, collaborator, or consultant on how to plan change and bring about the solution. Fourth, internal knowledge retrieval and the marshalling of internal resource should be given at least equal emphasis with external retrieval. Finally, self-initiation by the user or client system creates the best motivational climate for lasting change.

There frequently also is an assumption that collaboration and openness rather than competition and closedness are preferred ways to behavior. In keeping with the founding values of this approach (articulated by Kurt Lewin) consensus is sought over majority rule or authoritative decree. Those who

must carry out the change need to own it as their solution to their concerns. Trust between the persons attempting change and the people to be changed is deemed crucial to genuine change. In all these assumptions, you can see the influence of humanistic psychology. Essentially, applied behavioral science takes a clinical model and applies it to groups and organizations.

This strategy for change has been far more controversial in many organizations over the past four decades than R&D or Social Interaction, if for no other reason than that it probes sources of resistance we prefer to leave buried. Also, because it focuses at least part of its attention on our emotional needs, it conflicts with the assumption of “cognitive rationality” that Parsons and Platt claim is so prevalent in many contemporary societies. We would like to think we are “above all that.” Even if we are rather irrational at times, we dare not admit it. Do bankers admit they sometimes lose things? Are banks not only too big to fail but also too important to appear irrational? There is little space for the recognition of irrationality in a world that is not flat and information-based (Friedman’s proposal) but curved and dangerous—as David Smick counter-proposes. Still, applied behavioral science has been with us for over a half century. If Parsons is right, we will not get very far toward effective strategies for change unless we face the human barriers to change which human problem-solving interventions confront.

## **THE POLITICAL APPROACH**

If we follow the Rational model, the route to change is to build and argue an impressive case. The Social strategy takes that case, puts it on terms attractive to its audience, personally introduces it to Innovators and Opinion Leaders, then communicates through them to their various reference groups. The Human Problem-Solving path releases the resistance to change within us and makes change our solution to our concerns. All well and good. There is much to learn from the experts in these three general schools of thought. But what if Laggards block the road, blind to our eloquent presentations and determined to let no “touchy-feely” intervention get into their locked closet of fears, prejudices and selfish desires? Not a few upper level managers, corporate executives and blue ribbon task forces have been characterized as such obstructionists by those who want to turn their heads in a new direction.

The most common answer is political power. Build coalitions among influential persons and groups, then seek an authoritative decision which requires others to comply with the new idea, employ the new behavior, use the innovative product. Here is the way political processes usually work. First, some range of gnawing concerns, some “wants,” arise. Things are not as they should be for some persons in a community or with influence over it. Unless these various wants are felt strongly by influential people, and the people who hold them bring together various subgroups, no change is likely. People are usually upset about something or other but not sufficiently so to press authorities into a decision. But if the gap, if



the discontent, is great enough a “demand” may well be in the offing. Then, if those concerned feel they can make authorities take notice and have confidence that a more desirable state of affairs is possible, they take action.

Once a demand is made, it must gain access to the formal decision-making system if it is to become a change in policy or program. Key here is a sympathetic "gate-keeper," a person or group who can put the demand on the authorities' agenda. Without a supportive gatekeeper, demanders must be powerful enough to break the gate down and be willing to take that risk. Committee and task-force chairpersons and upper level managers and members of the C-suite can play gate-keeping roles concerning demands for policy change. Once on the agenda, the demand gets deliberated. It is studied and debated, often modified or changed, usually by an executive or some committee. If it survives this buffeting, it emerges as a formulated proposal for change which then gets reviewed, modified, revised, reduced and in general worked over by all the persons or groups concerned about its potential impact on their vested interests.

Will this new program or product gain our department more attention, more autonomy, more status, more funding? Or is this program or product likely to have the opposite impact? Is it likely to attract more customers or are we likely to lose customers? Usually, coalitions of interest will form pro and con. Compromises are made to get some decision through. Much of the debate may focus on the proposal's soundness of reason and evidence, but savvy observers know that the issue is who gets what coveted "goodies." Important to the survival of change proposals in this river of nibbling piranhas are the persistent efforts of highly influential "issues sponsors" who are determined to carry the change through. Without such determined advocates, the status quo powers will defeat any change attempt.

In most organizations, change proposals can take the short route if the demander is a president or CEO who goes ahead and exercises formal authority to set policy, or it may take the long route by moving up the hierarchy or through layer upon layer of committees. In either case, the outcome is not yet change. It is an authoritative decision to change. Now comes the problem of making it stick. Usually, an executive instructs organizational units and individuals to carry out the new idea or behavior. Unfortunately (or fortunately) the Political model breaks down in implementation unless that executive can force units and individuals to comply, identify whether or not they are complying, and get rid of noncompliers. The formal authorities turn out not to be the real authorities. Departments and employees (accountants, engineers, information technologists, etc.) in many contemporary organizations have considerable autonomy—illustrated brilliantly in the “Dilbert” cartoons of Scott Adams. If these autonomous “experts” do not like a new policy or program, they often can avoid serious implementation and, meanwhile, build a new coalition to get the policy rescinded or program dropped. The process is not one of open

collaboration seeking consensus. It is instead a constant struggle for control. Losers of today's battles do not give up. They mount a new demand.

If vested interests and power were everything involved in planned change, an effective political strategy would be all one would need. But reason and evidence are sometimes heeded even by those whose vested interests are somewhat challenged and who have the power to ignore rational persuasion. Social dynamics are at work, and the more the change agent knows about how to make them work, the better. Often, it is more effective to seek to reduce resistance to change by human relations strategies than to try to overwhelm that resistance by force. If motivation researchers are correct that we all have the need for achievement and affiliation as well as for power, then we need a change strategy which speaks to all three motivations, not just to power.

### **COMBINING CHANGE STRATEGIES**

Is it possible to entertain the notion that humans are rational, social creatures who want to solve their hidden problems but also want to protect and enhance their vested interests? If we make such an assumption, we must combine our strategies for change. Rational research and planning is not enough—nor is connecting innovations to opinion leaders in all the right ways. Nor is skilled intervention to diagnose human needs and to reduce resistance—nor is the most effective political maneuvering. We must do it all.

Planned change starts with a “felt need” on the potential user's part, on the part of the person, group or organization which might change. Something is wrong; something needs improvement. A diagnosis is conducted and a problem statement emerges. Then there is a search and retrieval of alternate solutions both inside and outside the user system. Some solution for the local situation then is developed and approved. Application follows. Often this implementation raises another need which starts the cycle all over again.

In essence, all effective change projects involve a basic act of communication—an interactive process, with all parties involved as sources and receivers of change messages and with all focused on solving the receiver's problem. In such a model, all of the problem-solvers (including those that are external to the organization) would employ rational planning, the R&D model, probably with the help of experts in research or development. All would exchange messages through social networks, perhaps with the assistance of skilled linking agents. All parties would confront and resolve human barriers to change, and an applied behavioral science interventionist could be of valuable assistance there. All parties would use, or run against, power and authority, and a political strategist would come in handy.

## **SUMMARY**

What brings about changes in attitudes and behaviors? Some believe that humans are essentially rational, so reason and evidence should do the trick. Intentional change, therefore, takes the form of a rational sequence of activities to produce a change message based in theory and research, then developed and tested empirically and logically and finally accepted because of its sound evidence and reason. Research and Development centers, institutional research and planning offices and formal governance systems are designed to operate as if change is mainly a rational process.

Others find that humans are social creatures. New attitudes and behaviors, though they may be developed by rational processes, raise awareness, interest, trial and eventual adoption through a process of social interaction and persuasion in which opinion leaders and reference groups are influences perhaps as significant as the rational soundness of the change message itself. Intentional change under these assumptions puts time and skill into linking innovative ideas, practices or products to "potential adopters" through social networks. Professional associations, information clearinghouses, learning resources centers, conferences, workshops and extension agencies use this strategy.

Still others feel that the main obstacles to change are not impressive messages nor social influences. Psychological barriers are the problem. What is needed is the skilled intervention of human relations consultation in order to diagnose and facilitate the reduction of those barriers. Yet another group maintains we are political animals at base, busy protecting and strengthening our vested interests. In order to accomplish change, we need to build powerful coalitions among interests and obtain authoritative decisions which will be enforced by requiring people to change their attitudes and behaviors. That strategy is visible in the informal governance process and in administrative policies regarding program and personnel priorities.

All of these assumptions hold true, probably in varying degrees depending on the issue, the situation and the people involved. It would seem that one of the most important roles to be played by an organizational coach is to help her client appreciate the value inherent in each of these change strategies and find a way to effectively implement and interweave these strategies on behalf of her organization and those being served by her organization.

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