



This is September 2009's newsletter, Changing Organisations, for my clients and other professionals interested in organisational change. Last month's feature about cooking a menu or using what's in the fridge got amazing feedback – thanks so much. This feedback is what keeps me going. It now seems to be spring here in the Wellington countryside – lambs, blossoms, daffodils, and the annual barndance. What a great time of year.

This month's [changingorganisations](#) is in two parts:

- What Is Your "Working Picture" of Organisational Change?
- Controversy on the [changingorganisations](#) Blog

## What Is Your "Working Picture" of Organisational Change?

### Change as a Journey

"Change is a journey." That must be just about the most pervasive way there is of describing change. We think back over the experiences we have had and call the current situation we are in the result of a journey. "It's been a long journey," or "It's been a difficult journey," or "The journey is not yet over."

A journey is long and arduous, with many turns in the road. There can be unforeseen experiences, obstacles overcome, and side roads. Looking back, this can seem similar to our experience of organisational change and intuitively seems to make sense. We have come to take it for granted that change is like a journey.

Nevertheless, seeing change as a journey is only one way of looking at change, even though it's a way that is commonly taken for granted.

The way you see change affects how you attempt to influence and bring about change – both in your personal or professional life, so it's worth while to take a moment and think of how you might view change. If your "working picture" of change were different, then you might approach change differently.

## **Problems with Change as a Journey**

Back to the journey metaphor – it does have a seductive appeal. And it has a few problems as well.

First, a journey implies a known start and finish point. So the explanation of the past as a journey to the present moment implies that the future will also be like a journey – one to which you can plot your future destination. Although your journey from Whangarei to Wellington (a trip I have often made) might have a known start and finish point (and a lot of driving) you do not have such clear start and finish points in organisational life. Actually, you can't really articulate where you want your organisation to go (witness the many different "future search" methodologies to confirm this). Likewise, it is very difficult to say where you are now, even though it is common to use a gap analysis model to concentrate on the gap between where you are now and where you want to be. I am saying that in your organisation, you cannot define "here" and "there" with the same kind of certainty that you can in relation to a trip from "A" to "B".

In a journey, although you might not have been to the destination, someone else has. No doubt there is a map for how to get to your destination. In your organisation, no one has written the Lonely Planet guide or even a map, because no one has done exactly what you are trying to do. You cannot predict how people in your organisation will respond to your strategy, your intended change or your big picture. I was just talking today to a client who said that while staff were ok with the concept of the change, they did not think the proposed method would work. With a journey, you can get an AA map, or an online plan booking, or train timetable and have certainty about arriving at your destination (with recent problems at Tranzrail in Wellington, this probably no longer applies to the train).

And finally, unlike in a journey, the present moment is not merely the linear successor of the past but a novel outcome of it. Each moment has the possibility for many outcomes as we each make decisions about the actions we will take – including mundane decisions about who we contact, where we go or don't go, when we eat and so on. The future does not unfold as the inevitable linear outcome of the present, rather the possibility for novelty and familiarity exists all the time, unlike in a journey in which the destinations unfold in a linear way. Each moment is a never-to-be-repeated occasion necessarily grounded in its past, but always projected towards a not-yet-knowable future.

This view of change as a journey is really a retrospective story that we tell ourselves to help ourselves make sense of what has happened to us.

## **Other Metaphors for Change**

There are other images of change, and it is worthwhile to consider other conceptualisations. After all, your "working picture" of change will determine how you go about implementing change, whether or not you talk about it explicitly with your team.

OK, we have to cover the cascade, which is another popular metaphor for change. We've all experienced it and no doubt have attempted to implement it. If you're thinking of organisational change as a cascade, you'll hold a workshop for senior managers and they will in turn hold a similar workshop for their direct reports. And so on down through the organisational hierarchy, the message will flow, like water. The cascade approach is great from a project team perspective

because it allows them to feel that they can plan and control the sequence of events – in terms of a rolling timetable of workshops. And then the change is done. No problem. Apart from the reality that people die trying to negotiate white water cascades. Like Chinese Whispers (where did that term originate?) by the time the cascade has made its way through the organisation, the meaning has changed substantially.

Some change projects treat change as though it were a relay race. This is another metaphor which is a logical development from the cascade approach. While it may not be explicitly called a relay race, you can see this metaphor at work when the "baton" of change is passed to someone else, and, thank goodness, that's my part finished. For example, the project team trains the senior managers in workshops, the senior managers then train their direct reports. The senior managers are expected to front the initiative to their people and then make it happen. The project team did their bit by training the managers. The senior managers did their bit by approving the project plan and participating in the workshops. The problem is that once you as the senior manager have given the baton to me, your part in the race is finished, it's now over to me. It's up to me whether or not we win. But in organisational life, I will be responding to questions and issues that arise in relation to the change. Sometimes I will need to refer to you and how you respond to me will affect how I respond to my people. So you can't just pass the baton of change – you need to be involved to some degree in what happens after you have passed the baton on.

Both the journey and relay race metaphors assume that there is a movement from point A to point B. In organisational terms, Kurt Lewin back in the 1950s suggested that in order to change an organisation, you must first unfreeze, then change, then refreeze the organisation. In other words, he proposed change as a journey from one stable condition to another stable condition. It is not a great stretch to see how this became a relay race from point A to point B. The change (changing of the baton, the journey) is the problematic bit that occurs between one equilibrium state (current state or point A) to another (desired state or point B).

I want to suggest that your working picture of change needs to be, instead, a picture of change as a constant and always occurring state.

Perhaps you could think of change as a dance, in which the partners are responding each other in movements that make up recognisable patterns, but never repeated in exactly the same manner. There is always the element of performance on the night and the possibility that magic might occur. Although that's unlikely if it's me that's doing the dancing.

Alvesson and Sveningsson in their recent book *Changing Organizational Culture* suggest that change could be seen as a football game. It's not enough for the managers to pick the team, develop the strategy, instruct the players, give the pre-match speech, have the kick off and then leave, hoping for a good result. Rather, as a manager you could see yourself as a player in the game. Although you rely on delegation and not everybody is equally involved at every moment, everyone must be prepared to keep an eye on what is happening and get involved more when necessary. I used to be a goalie and if things were going well I wouldn't be doing very much for lots of the time. But at certain times I definitely had to be involved. So you cannot focus on a limited contribution and ignore what happens before and after. As a manager you have to be keeping a watchful eye all the time because, like it or not, you are involved, even if your role is like a goalie, only needed in times of emergency.

So let's see if we can add to our repertoire rather than simply seeing change as a journey. Reply to this email and quickly let me know of your picture of change. If I get enough responses, I'll publish a compilation in the next issue.

## Controversy on the [changingorganisations](#) Blog

The blog had another record month in August, for the seventh month in a row.

Two topics generated a lot of interaction, comments and some controversy. One was my questioning of [whether there is such a thing as corporate culture](#) and the other was about [what it means to be self-organising](#).

In the first discussion, I made some tentative steps to ask whether the seemingly obvious concept of corporate culture actually makes sense. Culture is often seen as thing that affects those in the organisation, at the same time as those in the organisation make up the culture. Seeing culture as a "thing" gives the impression that it can be managed, much like a physical thing can be manipulated. Quite a few people reacted to this suggestion.

In the second discussion, a group of us grappled with what it means to be self-organising, and the notion that managers can't empower people to be self-organising, because they already are self-organising. I suggested that as a manager you can perhaps ask yourself how you can influence the constraints and power relationships so that different (hopefully more desirable) patterns of social interaction emerge. This got quite a response as well.

Whether it's spring, autumn or fall where you are, I hope this month finds you closing out the calendar year in good spirits. As always, thanks for your interest in our work.

Regards,

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Stuart White  
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