

Isn't It Time We Had A Change About Change?

A client of mine recently took me through some materials he had brought back from his two week course at one of the US's major business schools. The client and I had worked on many change projects over the years, so he knew I'd be interested in what was being taught at that level - from the wisest professors to the brightest business leaders.

The charts he showed me were themselves the result of research into what leading organisations were doing in terms of change management (so here we had organisations teaching professors what to teach to organisations!). And I was saddened – if at the same time unsurprised – to see that today's 'bleeding edge' thinking on change management is still based on what I call The Change Evangelist model.

The key features of this model you will be very familiar with: they are part of our instinctual thinking about change. There is a Present Reality where we are and which we don't want or have some sort of problem with - low revenues, poor morale, inappropriate behaviours, whatever it might be. And there is a Future State we want to get to, of higher revenues and strong morale and so on. Furthermore in this model there is a distance to travel, a gap to fill (from Current to Vision, from As Is to To Be) with new training, strategy roll-outs, a new IT system, office redesign, new values, improved leadership behaviour: whatever we have identified the 'fix' to be. That's the standard model, but I call it Change Evangelist because increasingly over the years, business' obsession with Leadership as the prime force in organisations has made us think that we need a Charismatic Someone who is going to have to inspire us with the promise of the Future State and save us from our Present Reality. That we have little say over our salvation has led the writer Peter Block to term the assumptions behind this sort of change as 'benign colonialism'.

(Stories – by which I mean edited accounts of actuality – of 'Successful' Charismatic Someones are celebrated in business conferences and books, reinforcing the generally held belief that if we don't have our own Charismatic Someone, we'd better get one).

One of the contributing factors that has led to this great reliance on the Evangelist model – with its emphases on selling benefits and enrolling or engaging others – is the story that human beings don't like change. My sense is that the story that people don't like and resist change is a myth perpetuated by those who secretly (or not so secretly) like trying to control other people. It's a story so widely told that we almost believe it to be The Truth, but it's a story nonetheless. In my 17 years of working on the human dimensions of change, my experience shows me that human beings love change, but they are deeply suspicious of *being changed*. And being changed is precisely what the Change Evangelist model is all about. As a result, the approach sets up the very conditions it then identifies as a problem and has to overcome.

I remember some years ago being asked by a bank in Australia to help their legal department come to terms with the new open-plan office that was being proposed. In the first 15 minutes of the first workshop I ran with the lawyers, it appeared that all

their innate maturity, intelligence and talent had deserted them; what seemed to be left was a group of surly, recalcitrant and stubborn employees. And this I think is the inevitable result of the Change Evangelist model as applied in organisations: the Salvation is trumpeted; this in turn raises the suspicions and doubts of the people involved; this doubt is interpreted as 'resistance: a common symptom in change' or even 'change fatigue'; and to combat these symptoms, more and better selling of the Solution is deployed.

As the outside consultant to the Australian bank, of course, I was part of the whole problem: Leadership had spotted 'resistance' – a reluctance to be Saved – labelled it as Wrong (and in so doing reinforced the Salvation as Right) – and called me in to 'fix' the people. And that's another thing I've learnt about human beings: they really appreciate and aspire to health and well-being, but are suspicious of 'being fixed'.

Of course, we don't use language like this within our change programmes: we wrap it up in kinder language talking of 'getting people involved' and 'letting everyone air their views' – but the intention behind the language is the same: *we need to get people onside, because they'll never be onside on their own.* And the recurring challenges around this model are:

- How can we make sure the Saviour (whether in the form of a CEO or new office design) is attractive enough?
- How can we ensure the Saved are Saved?
- How can we make sure the Salvation-Solution we've bought is robust and comprehensive enough, and implemented well?

And as an ordinary member of the organisation, all "I" get to do is be Saved. Success is how well I engage in the Salvation process.

This over-reliance on the Change Evangelist model wouldn't be so much of a problem did not the same organisations who rely on the model report that 70% of their change initiatives fail to deliver anything like the intended benefits. But they don't challenge the basic model: they seek to improve its parts (eg "Well, we'll get a better communication plan next time!" or "This year's consultants have a better product which apparently worked very well elsewhere".)

It is appropriate, I think, to encourage different thinking around change in organisations, something which has change itself be less of a problem, and certainly shifts people from being the source of resistance to being the source of change itself.

I refer to the process I now take my clients through as Change Anonymous, since like the 12 Step programmes which influenced it, it puts the "I" back at the centre of things, and sees him or her as the source of their own "redemption". The "I" – which might be an individual or a team or colleagues in a process - get to identify the Problem but also realise that they helped make the Problem too. "I" therefore do not need a Saviour and may not even need anything new as a Solution. "I" may just need to stop doing what I've been doing that contributed to the problem. And even if I do need help from others, I can be part of the design of the help and be in control of its implementation.

Change Anonymous has many differences from Change Evangelist, but I think there are two humane distinctions worth underlining:

1. Change Anonymous assumes that 'ordinary people' in companies know when there are problems; they do not need to be persuaded that they exist. Moreover in their everyday work, they are the ones best-placed to be identifying them (compared with consultants selling solutions identifying our problems for us)
2. It assumes too that people are robust enough to acknowledge that they are somehow accountable if they are involved in something that doesn't work – and more than willing to be involved in putting it right.

It is undeniably exhilarating for a while to get Saved. But I believe that enduring success comes from being widely and deeply involved in the identification and resolution of our own problems.

David Firth
One Development
June 2007

POSTSCRIPT: Why does the Evangelist model maintain? Because it serves people: it serves those who like to 'drive change' because the model seems to place them in control of what's going on (though their actual experience may not feel like that!). It serves those who Sell Solutions, because there's always a whole bunch of 'new' stuff to be done in that middle Journey section. And it serves those who buy Solutions, because it is possible to believe – and justify to the Board or Shareholders – that all that activity/busyness is the same as progress or growth. With these many and reinforcing pay-offs, it is hardly surprising that there is an assumption that Change Evangelist is a model that works...