Choosing the Right Change Model

By Dr Johan du Toit

Show me your preferred Change Management model and it will tell me a lot about you and your organisation. Your preferred world-view is truly revealed by your preferred Change “technology”. Beer and Nohria studied the vast Change Management literature (Breaking the Code of Change, 2001) and concluded that all the existing approaches lean to one or the other pole in their “polar” framework. They point out that neither approach is necessarily always better than the other. What these authors do advocate is being aware of your choice (or your “theory in use”), not muddling the two inadvertently, and ensuring the adopted approach suites the circumstances.

Table 1. Theories E and O of Change (from Beer & Nohria)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose and Means</th>
<th>Theory E</th>
<th>Theory O</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Participative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Structure and systems</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Programmatic</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Incentives lead</td>
<td>Incentives lag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants role</td>
<td>Large/ knowledge-driven</td>
<td>Small/ process-driven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is easy to point to the business literature to find proponents of both approaches. It is even easier to draw caricatures of each type of change leader – Attila the Hun versus Mother Teresa or General Patton versus New-Age Nelly, depending on where you’re looking from…

The shorter-term focus of many of the Theory E adherents does tend to set them up for ridicule at the end of each bull-cycle, when cases of egregious corporate excess inevitably surface.

But can one attempt to get the best of both worlds? Beer and Nohria do indeed advocate the need to “...integrate these theories and their strategies in a way that resolves the tension between
them....This integration, we argue, is essential if executives want to develop business organizations that satisfy shareholders and yet have the capacity to adapt and survive as viable institutions in the long run.”

This article will examine some of the most popular change models and attempt to see which potentially best achieve this integration. Finally, a new model will be presented which does address this integration challenge quite overtly.

DIFFERENT MODELS OF CHANGE PROCESSES

Five well-known models were explored. A qualitative assessment of each of these models was made, using the five dimensions from Beer and Nohria (see table 1). A score of 1 to 5 was assigned for each model (‘1’ for very close fit to Theory E and ‘5’ for a very close fit to Theory O; or somewhere in between if more appropriate). The resulting radar plot for this assessment is alongside:

This assessment clearly shows that most of the models are clustered close to the middle of the plot, i.e. they are mainly Theory E biased models. Since ‘neat’ models by their nature tend towards approaches akin to ‘programming’, this result is not very surprising.

John Kotter’s model is shown with the widest ‘web’. The implied greater ‘integrativeness’ of Kotter’s model - lying between the extremes of Theory E (value of 1) and O (value of 5) - perhaps explains the popularity of his Change writings over the last decade.
What would a more integrative model look like? To expand the above radar plots ‘outwards’ (towards including, and hopefully integrating, more of Theory O) changes in three of the five dimensions is crucial, we believe. The black arrows on the plot show the direction of such a change in Theory E/O mix.

These three dimensions speak most directly to the social aspect of “socio-technical” challenges and are also the most visible (Planning and Consultants tend to be more behind-the-scenes). They are:

1. Leadership (Top-down versus Participative)
2. Focus (Systems & Processes versus Culture)
3. Motivation (Incentives-leading versus Incentives-lagging, or Push versus Pull)

Number three is the “biggie” in our minds. This is the key differentiator between the Machiavelli’s and Mandela’s.

The push/pull dichotomy used above comes from the lovely book “Why Change Doesn’t Work” by Robbins & Finley (don’t worry the book delivers the better news, in its sub-title!). These authors usefully distinguish between these two change attitudes:

**Push.** Distress: “Do what you must do or the enterprise will die.”

**Pull.** Eustress: “Do what you must do to achieve the future you dream of.”

The five Theory E biased methods presented before, tend to be driven by Push (Urgency! Burning Platform!). Other well-known Change philosophies (in contrast to methods) like Appreciate Enquiry are very much focused on Pull.

**Future. Dreams.** This is the realm of stories that appeal to the heart first – the head only becomes involved later. Stephen Denning has written convincingly on Leadership and Story-telling. He is certainly a strong champion of “pull”...

We have found from supporting change efforts in many public-sector organisations that although Clarity and Conviction are vital, these transformation twins are usually woefully neglected. There is simply no pull...unfortunately push is not an effective alternative in our public sector (arguably so in the South African private sector too).

Appreciative Enquiry (AI), one of the leading alternative change schools, advocates starting change journeys by first Discovering and then Dreaming. Once people are well energised it is the right time to enter into the more traditional Design & Deliver stages (its 4-D cycle). We agree whole-heartedly with this ‘unconventional’ AI ordering.

As a result, Decipher has crystallised an integrated nine-element process, called Delta⁵, to better describe successful organisational change. Delta⁵ is pronounced ‘delta five’ (delta is a general label for “change” used in science/engineering/maths) and is a memorable acronym to boot.

- **Define the future** (some mystical story-tellers would say “Divine the future”!)
- **Enlist the change leadership team**
- **Layout the roadmap for the journey**
- **Tell the story!**
- **Act! - Assess progress - Adjust course as necessary - Affirm progress - Anticipate next wave!**
Why this order?

Figuring out what the rousing story is really does come first (the “D”).

\textbf{Delta}^V is different by both putting the heart before the head and staying true to a true pull attitude.

Anything less, we believe risks treating people as objects, assets or mere chattel.

We obviously do not support Machiavelli’s Theory E (?) prescriptions for change management.

Once the story is ready, the conventional wisdom of most models hold – get the right change champions on board (the E) and then really sweat the details (the L). The why and the how are then ready to be widely proclaimed; there goes that pull again!

“Tell the story!” helps employees commit by providing the compelling reasons for embarking on the journey (why) and then empowers them with knowledge of the new way of working around here (how).

The “T” properly sets up the next five A’s of Delta$^V$ for success:

1. \textbf{Act!}
2. \textbf{Assess progress}
3. \textbf{Adjust course as necessary}
4. \textbf{Affirm progress}
5. \textbf{Anticipate the next wave!}

We leave the last words to Joel Barker, who sums it all up beautifully:

“Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.”

Dr Johan du Toit is the founder and Managing Director of Decipher Consulting.