

The Dance of Change

by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth and Bryan Smith, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1999.

(Reviewed by Kevin Barham in October 2001 – source Ashridge Virtual Learning Centre)

Abstract

Change is best carried through by the many, not by just the hero-leader. Ten challenges to the initiation and sustaining of change are elaborated, illustrated by a rich range of case studies and supported by a practical checklist.

We all know that change and innovation are of the essence for organisations today and in future. The bad news, according to Peter Senge, is that most change initiatives fail. The good news is that Senge and his co-authors think they know why and what to do about it.

Senge is the guru of the 'learning organisation' whose previous book *The Fifth Discipline* was hailed as a groundbreaking book about organisational transformation. Senge and his co-authors, all of them change experts, call this new book a Fifth Discipline 'resource'. The aim of the book is to show how organisations can move beyond the first steps of corporate change and sustain the momentum.

The problems that cause the failure of change projects cannot be solved by more expert advice, better consultants or more committed managers, say Senge and co. They stem from our most basic ways of thinking. Unless these change, new initiatives will only produce the same unproductive types of action. The fundamental problem is that most change initiatives deal only with growth processes and not with the limiting processes. We need to change our way of thinking so that we can understand the forces that impede progress and develop strategies for dealing with them.

One of the early messages of this important book is that we need to think differently about the role of leadership in managing change. Senge acknowledges that leaders are critical in changing our way of thinking but calls for a different type of leadership. He is at pains to dispel the myth of the omnipotent 'hero-CEO' who 'drives' change from the top. Our obsession with the hero-CEO is, he says, a 'cultural addiction' that distracts us from building organisations that, by their very nature, continually adapt and reinvent themselves, and where leadership comes from many people in many places, not just from the top. Senge defines leadership as the capacity of a human community to shape its future and to sustain the processes of change required to do so. In this view, leadership grows from the capacity to hold what he calls 'creative tension' - 'the energy generated when people articulate a vision and tell the truth about current reality'.

There are many people at many levels in the organisation who play critical roles in generating and sustaining creative tension. So the book focuses on 'leadership communities' rather than hero leaders and on the interplay between three types of leaders - local line leaders whose passion is to create better results within their unit; internal networkers and community

builders who are the seed carriers of new ideas and practices; and top executive leaders who remain vital in creating an organisational environment for continual innovation and knowledge generation but must give up the feeling that they have to have all the answers. All these leaders need each other to sustain significant change. Furthermore, the consequence of abandoning the myth that a heroic CEO creates change is that we think naturally in terms of 'pilot groups'. Organisations need an incubator where concept can become capability and where theory can meet practice.

We have all experienced change situations where we have gone from a feeling of comfortable stability into a feeling of panic. It is useful for anyone in improvement to remember when it happened to them and understand those feelings.

The **comfort zone** is where some people are quite happy to stay. It may be a way of thinking or working, or a job that someone has been doing for a long time. In a comfort zone:

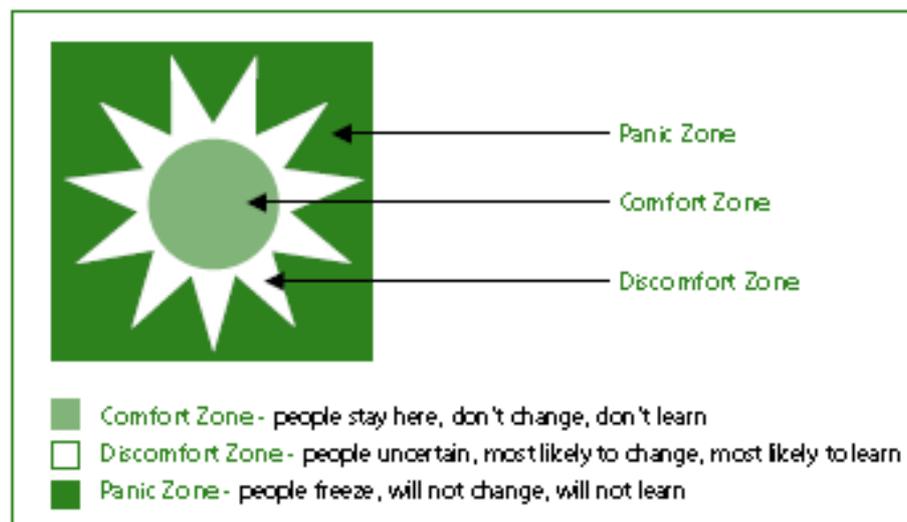
- things feel familiar and certain
- the work is controllable and predictable
- people feel comfortable and competent
- there is no threat to self esteem or identity
- there is a sense of belonging

However, in the comfort zone people generally don't need to learn new things and therefore don't change.

The **panic zone** is the place many are forced into when confronted with a change that they do not agree with. It is when people have been forced into the panic zone that they will most likely feel:

- stress, worry and fear
- anger, irritation and annoyance
- sadness, hopelessness and apathy
- guilt and shame
- inadequacy and frustration

Here people freeze, they certainly don't change and they won't learn.



As a leader, the best strategy is to help people out of their comfort zone but not into a panic zone by encouraging them into the **discomfort zone**. It is in the discomfort zone that people are most likely to change and learn how to do things differently.

Senge's book is structured around the ten challenges that profound change will ultimately force the organisation and the leaders of its pilot groups to face. These occur at different stages of the transformation and arise from the assumptions and practices that people take for granted. They are a natural part of change processes but can stop innovation cold unless managers at all levels learn to anticipate them and recognise the hidden rewards in each challenge and the potential to spur further growth.

First, there are the challenges of initiating change that occur when any team or business unit begins to work in unfamiliar ways and which must be confronted at the outset:

- 'We don't have time for this stuff!' This is the challenge of control over one's time. People involved in change initiatives need enough flexibility to devote time to reflection and practice.
- 'We have no help!' The challenge of inadequate coaching, guidance and support for innovating groups.
- 'This stuff isn't relevant!' The challenge of relevance: how to make a case for change, articulate an appropriate business focus, and show why new efforts, such as developing learning abilities, are relevant for business goals.
- 'They're not walking the talk!' The challenge of management clarity and consistency: dealing with the mismatch between behaviour and espoused values, especially for those championing change.

Along the way, the challenges of sustaining momentum occur after some progress has been achieved. These take place both within a pilot team as it achieves early success and also between the team and the larger organisational culture:

- 'This stuff is _____.' The challenge of fear and anxiety: concerns about exposure, vulnerability, and inadequacy.
- 'This stuff isn't working!' How to overcome negative assessment of progress stemming from the gap between the organisation's traditional way of measuring success and the achievements of a pilot group.
- 'We have the right way!' or 'They don't understand us!' The challenge of isolation and arrogance, which appears when the 'true believers' within the pilot group confront their non-believer counterparts outside the group; the pilot group and the rest of the organisation consistently misinterpret each other.

Lastly, the challenges of redesigning and rethinking appear when change initiatives gain broader credibility and confront the established internal infrastructure and practices of the organisation. These may be present from the start but tend to show themselves as obvious impediments after some success has been achieved:

- 'Who's in charge of this stuff?' The challenge of the prevailing governance structure; conflicts between pilot groups seeking greater autonomy and managers concerned about autonomy, leading to chaos and internal fragmentation.
- 'We keep reinventing the wheel!' The challenge of diffusion, the inability to transfer knowledge across organisational boundaries, making it difficult for people around the organisation to build upon each other's successes.

- 'Where are we going?' and 'What are we here for?' The challenge of organisational strategy and purpose: revitalising and rethinking the organisation's business focus, its contribution to its community, and its identity.

For each of the challenges, the book elaborates a strategy illustrated with case studies from organisations such as British Petroleum, Dupont, Ford, General Electric, Harley-Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, Mitsubishi, Shell, Toyota, the US Army, and Xerox. The authors suggest that there are five sets of questions the reader should ask when relating the challenges described by the book to his or her own circumstances (and which constitute a useful checklist for any manager introducing a new approach):

1. Do I see the challenge in my situation? Am I aware of the forces that might be working counter to my efforts (and which might be invisible at first)?
2. Do I understand the nature of the challenge? How do I tend to see it? Can I see it differently? How do others see me when this challenge is encountered? We need to develop an attitude of enquiry toward developments that we might otherwise only see as barriers blocking our path. Blaming 'barriers' tends to evoke our most habitual, not our most creative, response.
3. Who can best help me in understanding and dealing with this challenge? How might we help each other? Rather than acting alone, we can operate much more effectively by sharing our efforts with colleagues who are part of the same 'system', or whose abilities and interests complement our own.
4. What would constitute effective action in dealing with this challenge? What capabilities might we want to develop? ie look strategically at your actions over the next several years rather than just reacting to circumstances.
5. How will I know if I am making progress? All courses of action need to be continually assessed but most people when acting stop paying attention to what is going on around them. Don't lose sight of the effects you are having, including those on the periphery of your attention.
6. The book acknowledges that a simple 'one-size-fits-all' approach to change will backfire. Experience, however, suggests some basic strategies. Don't push so hard for growth. When the first counterbalancing forces confront you, slow down and take time out regularly to talk together about the limits that may be facing you. Think about the future today - look ahead to identify the most significant challenges facing you, the sources and nature of that resistance, and their impact on your group. Conduct experiments and develop a learning orientation where solutions are treated as plausible hypotheses rather than as answers. Reset the goals by examining your mental models - reflecting on the reasons why people find it hard to tolerate

ambiguity or change can help to identify the priorities that inhibit organisational learning.

This is a 'must-have' book for any manager involved in change - and that means most managers today. Don't be put off by the size of the book. It is designed so that the reader can start anywhere and browse in any direction. Cross-references in the text, for example, point out useful links to follow. The authors urge the reader to mark up the pages and to note the results of what you have tried and ideas of what you would like to try. 'Draw. Scribble. Daydream'. The idea is that, over time, as the notes accumulate, they will become a record of effective practice and a tool for reflecting on the design of the next stage of your change initiative.

The book includes many individual and team exercises, and in-depth accounts of sustaining learning initiatives by managers and leaders in the field. Icons in the margins refer to the five 'learning disciplines' or sets of practices that Peter Senge suggests are fundamental for building learning capabilities in organisations and each of which, he says, represents 'a lifelong body of study and practice for individuals and teams in organisations' (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking). Other icons point to material that will be especially useful for different types of leaders - local line leaders, executive leaders and internal networkers and community builders. One particularly helpful innovation is the 'systems diagrams' that illustrate the interrelationships in change processes. These not only help to show interrelationships that are difficult to describe in text, they also provide a way for the reader to sketch out systemic interrelationships in his or her own situation.

The authors' ultimate message is that we should stop thinking about preparing a few people for 'the top' and start nurturing the potential for leaders at all levels to participate in shaping new realities. Maybe that way we can stop so many expensive change initiatives running into the sand.