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What Kind Of Change Enables Transformation? Kathryn Goldman Schuyler, Alliant International University

Although much has been written about ‘empowerment’, ‘total quality’, ‘integrity’ and ‘teamwork,’ the effect on people throughout most organizations has not been positive. In my experience as an organizational consultant, far more people feel disturbed than pleased about the nature of change they have been living. Instead of feeling ‘empowered,’ they feel exhausted and somewhat over-used — a bit like Alice, in the Lewis Carroll story, who had to run faster and faster to stay in the same place. They agree with the Dupont manager I met on an airplane, who snorted and said “What a joke!” at the uses of these concepts in his company.

Can we, as organizational sociologists, learn to design and lead change processes that are truly supportive for people at work, while also increasing organizational effectiveness? Change processes that people can more readily integrate? Change process that are not imposed and therefore resisted? Change processes that support exploration and knowledge creation, rather than obedience and acceptance of hierarchy?

I have come to believe that the issue is not really the fact of change, but rather how we approach it. It is important to re-think our understanding of the nature of change and what it takes to create it. In recent years, American management assumed that forced breakthrough change enables major organizational shifts. As sociological practitioners, we know that this belief is not grounded either in experience or data. Data indicate that the majority of breakthrough change projects fail. We see this in Wall Street Journal articles on re-engineering that document the failure of over 60% of major, multi-million dollar projects. We see similar problems in work done to ‘flatten’ organizations in order to increase productivity.

I want to put forward a novel suggestion, but one that is grounded in years of practice. I think that the best and easiest way to create a vivid experience of significant change is via our bodies and somatic learning. If we enable people to experience and sense that they can change habits and patterns that seemed immutable, we can teach them how to generate their own simple and highly effective mental models for change leadership.

I have piloted this as a change process in a number of graduate seminars with sufficient success to be interested in developing the approach further and dialoguing with colleagues who have undertaken analogous initiatives.

Systems Thinking And Somatic Education

Both systems thinking and somatic education practices teach us similar things.

(1) Breakthroughs occur when we create choice and multiplicity. When we enable people to experience differences among a range of options, a healthy person invariably selects the one that is most effective. (2) In learning new skills we need to slow down before we can speed up. And (3) we generally don’t assimilate change unless we experiment with ways of making it our own.

I am convinced that most people can better appreciate the value of these and other foundations for effective change integration if they first experience them personally. A powerful way to help them have such an experience is through using a method that lets them discover how to introduce change in the way they move and use their bodies.

Popular organization change models are based on the assumption that there is a dichotomy between change and pleasure. Most people believe that change is intrinsically difficult and painful and that the best one can do is “grin and bear it.” Starting from this point, they proceed to assume that resistance is inevitable. They then focus much of “change management” on dealing with resistance. Similarly, we “diagnose” problems and then try to fix them.

Instead, we can think in terms of a new somatic model that looks at change as it can occur in children, using movement. This approach, which I personally have grounded in sixteen years of practice as a certified Feldenkrais practitioner, is rooted theoretically in developmental psychology, philosophy, and mind science.¹ These authors make clear that we learn to think and develop our cognitive categories about the world via body-based interactions with it — initially with our mothers, and then with objects and other people. As Fogel vividly points out, all of these very basic experiences occur within a cultural context and thereby shape our views of what is “normal” or “abnormal” in life.² Using Feldenkrais work and other somatic approaches to learning, people are surprised to find change can be easy and pleasurable, rather than threatening or overwhelming. What if we taught them this within an organizational context and supported them in bringing this learning into their work? Instead of exhorting people to try harder, what if they learned somatically that it is more efficient to “try softer”? Would they bring such experimentation and a spirit of ease into their work? Mightn’t there be levels of improvement comparable to those that we are accustomed to seeing in personal movement learning? I have seen this take place through my graduate workshops.

Since my expertise among somatic approaches is with The *Feldenkrais Method*[®], I can best discuss how they work via a brief overview of this approach. Although typically viewed as a type of ‘bodywork’ or movement education, this method is actually a means for improving how people learn. The focus is on strengthening one’s capacity to notice small differences by enhancing awareness of oneself in motion and action. By drawing upon “non-habitual” movement patterns, the teacher helps the learner feel how s/he moves, rather than just moving automatically and without awareness. What is remarkable is that the introduction of awareness often leads to profound shifts at the level of personality as well.

The *Feldenkrais Method* enables people to learn new ways of moving through life without having to think about it. Rather than promoting cognitive learning, the movements work “behind” or “underneath” left-brain thinking processes to cause change in how people act and react. It has profoundly impacted the way I think about organizations, in addition to the way I consult.

Awareness — through movement is the heart of this approach. A basic assumption is that unless people know what they are actually doing, they can’t do what they want. A person who does what s/he wants, not superficially, but deeply, is seen as living a healthy life. ‘Health,’

¹ Behavioral scientists include Alan Fogel, *Developing Through Relationships: Origins of Communication, Self, and Culture*, 1993 and Esther Thelen and LB Smith, *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action*, 1994. In the literature on knowledge management, a major source is Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge-Creating Company*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

Philosophers who have re-thought these issues include George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 1987; Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, 1987; and Francisco Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 1991.

The *Feldenkrais Method*[®] of psychophysical re-education is widely used for increasing mobility in a wide range of situations. It is used internationally with those who are injured, in pain, have crippling neurological diseases such as cerebral palsy, and also to help performers and athletes discover ways to enhance their performance. It was developed over decades in the first half of the twentieth century by physicist, engineer, and martial artist Dr Moshe Feldenkrais, who published numerous books in addition to training roughly 350 students.

² Fogel, *op.cit.*, pp. 23 - 24.

in this context, means “fully living one’s dreams” —rather than putting them off, declaring them impractical, or giving up and pretending they never existed.

Awareness is essential for changing this situation. However, rather than asking people to sit still or become aware of intangibles (as does meditation), the Feldenkrais method focuses on mundane and concrete aspects of life. It teaches awareness indirectly, in the process of helping people to become more comfortable and effective in their bodies. Since life intrinsically involves movement and action, the method aims to enable people to become more easily aware of what they are doing while in action.

This contrasts with most medical approaches to improving an injured or problematic part of the body, which focus on that part. It may be massaged, immobilized in a brace, or moved repeatedly to strengthen it or increase its range of motion. Rarely is it looked at as part of a larger and more complex series of systems. However, from the Feldenkrais perspective, when a hand does not function well, the difficulty is not in the hand — but is more commonly in the organization of the hand for action, which means in the shoulder, ribs, and breathing. In order to improve the hand, we need to work with much of the body. If we focus on the problem, the person’s awareness remains with “having a problem”. If we improve everything else, we are altering the organization that perhaps induced and certainly supports the existence of the problem. This enables the problem to improve – and sometimes to disappear entirely.

Conclusion

If change is making people unhappy, perhaps our approach to it is part of the problem. We *cause* much of the difficulty we think is inherent in change by the ways we think about ourselves, our work, and our organizations.

Change can be managed as a source of increased effectiveness and productivity. However, the nature of the work would shift in emphasis from planning large, scheduled change programs that “drive change through the organization” to interventions that

- ✓ enable people throughout an organization to experience themselves as somatic beings and use this as the ground for improving their decisions,
- ✓ help managers support people’s learning in an atmosphere of both challenge (as now) *and* play,
- ✓ create physical work environments which help people feel great while working — environments that people do not just tolerate, but enjoy and experience as genuine expressions of the values and culture of their organization.

We can use our experience with somatics to shift some of the approaches that have lead organizations down a path that nobody wanted. Many people throughout the worlds of business, education, and government are now struggling with overwhelming change that leaves them feeling their lives are out of control. The paradigm of embodied change provides new perspectives and tools for eliciting fundamental change that does not damage but actually enhances the quality of their lives. When people experience themselves and their organizations as evolutionary, embodied networks instead of as static structures requiring force for change, major transformations become possible.

My experience suggests that personal and organizational breakthroughs thrive not on exhortation or commands, but on experimentation, movement, and awareness. By applying such an approach to leadership and change, we will get far better results than by forcing or cajoling people into breakthroughs they fear and resist.