

**CHANGE MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES FOR CONSIDERATION DURING
RESEARCH PROJECTS**

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Newton (1990) studied a simple game that many of us used to play as children, in which she assigned participants to one of two roles, namely tappers or listeners. Tappers received a list of twenty-five simple, well-known songs (such as “Happy birthday to you”) and were asked to pick a song on the list and tap out the rhythm to a listener. The listener’s job was to guess the song based on the rhythm being tapped. During the course of the experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners could only correctly identify 2.5 percent of the songs (3 out of 120). What is worth mentioning is that tappers predicted a success rate of 50 percent (one time in two) when asked by Newton at the start of the experiment to predict the odds that listeners would guess correctly during the game. However, tappers only got their message across one time in forty (2.5%). Newton concluded that the tappers had been blessed with the ‘curse of knowledge’ – once we know something, it is hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. When tappers tap, they are hearing the songs in their heads, while listeners can only hear a bunch of disconnected taps (Heath & Heath, 2008).

This story rings true for many researchers and inevitably, their clients. The research process is often initiated by executive and/or senior leadership, after which the researchers and client sponsors spend a significant amount of time discussing, debating, arguing, planning and analysing the methodology and data, thereby *creating the tune in their heads*. When the results of the study are eventually presented to the broader client management team, it is not uncommon for the results or the methodology utilised during the study to be either challenged or outright rejected, or on the other hand, accepted with indifference and filed away - never to be touched again.

From a change management perspective, these diverse reactions can be explained by the phases a person typically encounters when confronted with new information that will initiate change. These phases (denial, resistance, exploration, and commitment) are based on a derivative of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1989) five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), as applied in an organisational change context. As people approach any change (big or small), their first response might be to see it as a *threat*. When this happens, they fear and resist the change. If their reactions are managed correctly, it is not unusual for those affected to begin to see that the change may lead to new *opportunities*. Perceived *threats* lead to denial and resistance, while perceived *opportunities* lead to exploration and commitment. Most people go through these four phases in every transition – while

some move quickly through the different phases, others may get bogged down before they reach commitment. The four phases are discussed briefly below:

Denial

Depending on the nature of the research results and the client's awareness, this reaction may range anywhere from a barely noticeable drawback to an intense outpouring of emotion. This is followed by disbelief or denial, with the classic "maybe if I don't think or do anything about it - it will go away" response. If this phase is not managed, clients simply disengage from the process, withholding their support and participation to such an extent that the proposed change becomes very difficult to implement.

Resistance

During this phase clients often feel threatened, frustrated and angry. As a result, meetings can be derailed by long and drawn out discussions, continuous arguments, excessive fault finding, criticism and requests for more information. Clients may also point out that similar activities have been tried before and did not work. If this phase is not managed, the project will show poor progress due to people's interference with planned activities by, for example, not releasing employees to attend scheduled information sessions, training, etcetera.

Exploration

Although there is an assumption that this phase is "better" than the previous two phases, there is a lot of uncertainty during this phase and is often described as "chaotic" by many of those who experience it. Stress levels are very high during this phase and people may feel frustrated about a perceived lack of direction. As a result there are lots of requests for assistance and guidance. Many questions are asked, and creative ideas surface (sometimes these ideas are really good and of potential value). Project resources should be prepared to meet the increased demand for detailed information during this phase and plan enablement sessions to allow for joint action planning and provide a good mechanism for providing some of the required detail information.

Commitment

The best way to describe this phase is when the "To Be" becomes the new "As-Is", and people settle into a new routine. There is an ongoing requirement for capacity development and more advanced training

as people feel more assured and capable. This is also the phase when the first “success stories” emerge. New roles and new teams should be supported (through development plans, team building, etc.) and adoption and embedding activities initiated to ensure sustainability and entrench the new “As Is” in the organisation’s fabric.

In the absence of effective change management, it is not uncommon to hear the following questions:

- Why did the client ignore the research results after the feedback session without implementing any of the valuable suggestions in the research report?
- Why didn’t the client realise the value and impact of the results contained in the research report?
- Some actions were initiated half-heartedly after the feedback session, but slowly fizzled away after a few weeks. Why didn’t the client take ownership of the results and the proposed solutions?
- Why do clients sometimes say that they were not aware of the results – or implications of the research – when they attended a detailed feedback session?

Unfortunately, the management of change is one of the least appreciated concerns of researchers – the focus is on completing the research, analysing the data, writing the report and presenting the results. Nonetheless, depending on the nature of the research, much more can be achieved if researchers incorporate certain change management principles – either by effectively planning the feedback meeting to manage reactions of key stakeholders, or by sensitising clients to consider the emotional impact of the potential changes brought about by the research results on stakeholders and suggesting change management methodologies to use when results are communicated and implemented that will maximise the impact and value of the research results .

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Holman, Devane, and Cady (2007) claimed that organisational change initiatives are possible through high involvement of and a systemic approach to improvement. High involvement is achieved by engaging as many as possible people in changing and designing their own system, while a systemic

approach implies that all people, functions, and ideas that have an affect on, or can be affected by the change, are included in the process.

Researchers might argue that they adhere to these change management principles, since there is, in most client interactions, one-on-one communication, group involvement, presentation of results at so-called “town-hall meetings”, broadcasts of results on internal channels, etcetera. However, it is not good enough to merely get a group of people together in a room to listen to presentations – sustained change is only possible when “people collectively explore each other’s assumptions, seek and expand common ground, shape a desired future, and jointly take ownership of the solutions to the issues at hand” (Holman, Devane & Cady, p. 2).

Large system/ Large scale change methodologies

Large system or large scale change methodologies have experienced increasing popularity over the past 15 years as effective change tools, largely because of their ability to accelerate action, increase a shared understanding and dissemination of information through the organisation, promote a seeing-is-believing effect, increase sustainable results and enhance management effectiveness. There are numerous methodologies that are categorised as large system change methodologies, such as Appreciative inquiry, Open space technology, Whole-scale change, Real-time strategic change and Future search, among others.

All of these methodologies can be used very effectively to disseminate information and collectively plan and implement proposed changes through the organisation, however only the World Café conversational process, will be discussed in more detail here. Café conversations are flexible and can be easily adapted to different organisational settings and circumstances. These conversations create opportunities to discover mutual insight, innovation, and action that are already present in the group and offer an exceptional mixture of focus and of consistency without rigid control (Brown & Isaacs, 1996, 2001; Brown, Homer, & Isaacs, 2007; Brown, Isaacs, & Margulies, 1997, 1999; Brown, Isaacs, Margulies, & Warhaftig, 1999).

The World Café

The World Café provides opportunities for creating meaningful conversations or dialogue around questions that matter. Although it appears to be a relatively simplistic practice, it is built on the

principles of dynamic networks and living systems and provides a unique opportunity to access a system's creativity and shared knowledge that might not be available through more traditional approaches. Brown and Isaacs (2001, p. 3) explained that the World Café conversational process is based on the following working assumptions:

- The future is created in webs of human conversation.
- Compelling questions encourage collective learning.
- Networks are the underlying pattern of living systems.
- Human systems – organisations, families, communities – are living systems.
- Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself.
- We collectively have all the wisdom and resources we need.

As such, the World Café provides a safe space where participants can contribute to the process of knowledge-sharing through dialogue, engage with each other in a living system of personal relationships, and act decisively in pursuit of common aims (Brown et.al., 2007).

How does it work?

World Café conversations have been used successfully with groups as small as 12 people and as large as 1200 people from around the world (Brown & Isaacs, 2001). During these events, participants are encouraged to contribute in small groups by speaking and listening, without being concerned about solving the issue or saying the right thing. The purpose is to share ideas, while learning from others in the process of discovering innovative ideas and generating new possibilities. It is not about reaching conclusions.

During a World Café conversation up to eight people sit around a table or in a conversation cluster to explore questions or issues related to their work. Since the World Café conversational process is aimed at exploring new possibilities for inquiry and action, well-phrased and focussed questions are used to define intention, focus energy, and direct attention. Appreciative questions that evoke a sense of future possibility are also used to create more energy and engagement, as opposed to those that focus on what is wrong in the present.

Other participants at nearby tables or conversation clusters explore similar questions at the same time. Participants are requested to write down key ideas and insights of the dialogue. After a first round of conversation (20 to 30 minutes), participants are invited to change tables, carrying ideas and insights from the first conversation into a newly-formed small group. This intentional cross-pollination of ideas is a defining feature of the World Café, as participants move from table to table in several rounds of dialogue. As participants move from one table to the next, patterns appear and additional perspectives and insights surface in combinations not previously imagined. The process also benefits from the diversity in the group, as participants bring their varying ideas, worldviews, values, and ways of life into the invisible conversation patterns. A table host remains behind at each table to share the key ideas and insights that surfaced from the previous dialogue, with new arrivals.

This process is usually repeated for three rounds and followed by a feedback session to which all participants contribute. These are usually not formal report-outs (depending on the purpose of the session) but rather provide the group with an opportunity to notice the underlying themes and discoveries that have presented themselves during the process. Participants are usually given some time to identify a key insight from all the conversations they have been involved in. These are shared with everyone in the room, weaving new threads of thought in a rich tapestry of insight and collective knowledge – often leading to outcomes that no one could have foreseen when the conversation commenced (Brown and Isaacs, 2001; Brown et al., 2007; and Schieffer, Isaacs & Gyllenpalm, 2004a, 2004b).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The World Café methodology can be used effectively during initial feedback sessions to manage the anticipated emotional response to change brought about by the research results and to create opportunities for stakeholders to internalise the implications of the research results through well-phrased questions. It follows that the questions asked should support the purpose or context of the research; however some more generic questions that can be asked during initial feedback sessions after the results have been presented, are:

- How do you feel about the research process followed?
- What three aspects stood out for you in the presentation?
- How can these results be used to achieve exceptional results?

- What will the implications be if we don't do anything about the results presented?

This methodology can also be used creatively to disseminate information to the rest of the organisation.

CONCLUSION

The changing nature of the world of work in the 21st century global environment has resulted in a complete review of the type of organisational practices required to be successful in this ever-changing milieu. The so-called "new economy organisations" must be agile to meet the demands of the changing global environment and this can only be achieved if and when stakeholders at all levels of the organisation are involved during the planning of initiatives. Cady (2007) emphasised that those who envision the future are the ones who end up making it happen – in other words, people tend to support and defend that which they help to create.

Conversational methodologies like the World Café can be used with great success as a value added service during the research process. The analyses of the qualitative interview data with participants at a number of World Café interventions reiterated that it encouraged interaction between participants, which not only resulted in feelings of interconnectedness, but also generated a lot of energy that stimulated the creation of new and innovative ideas. As the intervention unfolded, participants also sensed that their contributions were not only heard, but also taken seriously. This encouraged participants to actively participate in the process and contribute to a wealth of new and innovative solutions. Additionally, the meaningful conversations or dialogue regarding various aspects of the specific process under discussion, created opportunities for alignment and resulted in participants understanding the strategic need for implementing and supporting the specific process.

Although the rhetoric of employee involvement in the planning and execution of initiatives resonates through the corridors of many South African organisations, the experience is that leaders often impose top-down initiatives, without involving employees in the process. Within this context, it makes sense for researchers to not only sensitise clients to the impact of unmanaged change, but to also consider and propose the implementation of change management activities that will allow more stakeholders to be involved during roll-out of research results and the consequent planning process to implement actions to address the results when writing research reports. It is important to note that although change management has the potential for adding great value if done well, it can cause great damage if done

poorly. The World Café methodology is only one of a number of methods to consider as part of a more comprehensive and complex change management process that has not been addressed in this article.

For more information on change management visit the ChangeWright website at www.changewright.com or contact Eriaan Oelofse at the following email: eriaan.oelofse@changewright.com.

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