

1

Introduction

‘Much comes from little’

‘Is change changing?’ The three words stared out at us from the centre of the flip chart. We had written up the question the night before at a team meeting. It was the question that excited us. It was the question that mattered. It was the question that engaged our purpose. As change consultants and researchers, how could we be sure that the advice we shared with clients really made any difference? To what extent was our practice and research shaped by our own personal prejudices, styles, backgrounds, experiences and assumptions? Despite many ‘how to’ books on leading change on our office book shelves, why were so many of our client organisations still struggling to embrace this well intended advice?

Unbeknown to us then, these three words were to set us on a significant journey of inquiry, a journey that is ongoing; and

one which has changed, and is still, changing us. Using a combination of in-depth research and practical experience, the journey has led us to discover a framework for categorising the various ways in which organisations approach change. It has also enabled us to see how leaders of those organisations can implement change in ways that produce a sustainable improvement in performance. As members of a change consultancy firm advising leaders on how to do this, we wanted to make sure our advice was rigorous and grounded. The change leadership field can be a very 'fluffy' one. We wanted to make it more tangible for leaders by examining the relationship between different approaches to change, alternative styles of leadership behaviour, and how a combination of these two can produce success in different contexts. The results coming from our inquiry over the last five years have been startling. In the data we found very strong relationships between change approach, leader behaviour and success; findings that could not have been explained by chance alone.

One little question, 'is change changing?', yet big findings arising from the pursuit of its answer. We are writing this book to share these findings with a world beyond our own personal network and client base, in order to stimulate further inquiry in the field. We say 'inquiry,' because the leadership of change is a subject that cannot be definitively sewn up and solved. It's a vast subject. On the other hand, we believe our story combines leading edge research with conclusive findings that have very practical application to organisational leadership. We have seen how an understanding of the results of our inquiry has made a real difference to how leaders lead change, and how this change in their practice has led to new,

sustainably different outcomes. We have therefore also written this book *to help adapt practice*, and not just influence thinking, in the field of leading change. And when we use the word ‘change’ we are not talking of a project, or a task force, or a programme. We are talking about leading change in the performance of an entire organisation. Typically, this kind of change is of high magnitude and complexity; it requires the alignment, commitment and energy of many people. Given the stakes at play in such big change, how can it be better understood, led and implemented?

A key finding emerged from the early days of our inquiry: leaders who see change as an *ongoing process* that occurs naturally around them all the time, when compared to leaders who see change as a one off event, a thing to be managed, or a programme with a beginning and end, were more likely to be successful in realising the desired change outcomes. Hence the double meaning of our ‘*is change changing?*’ research question. At one level, it is a question about how the dynamics and challenges of change are changing in today’s world, for example an increase in its pace, scale, and complexity. At another level, it is about *substituting* the word ‘change’ with the word ‘changing’. Just put a comma in the question

‘is change, changing?’

and the meaning shifts. It asks us to reframe the subject of change as ongoing movement, not a once off episode. If we believe that the world around us is never static, and that there is the potential for change in every moment, every encounter, every conversation – if we so choose to see it and act on it –

then how can leaders harness this perpetually available energy in the communities and organisations that they serve?

This book explores the nature of ongoing change, and primarily the type of leadership it takes to harness its continuously available energy. We hope the findings from our inquiry will challenge assumptions about the purpose of leadership, and what good leadership looks like – especially with regard to leading ongoing performance change in organisations. Much has been written, over millennia not just centuries or even the last two decades, about the role of a ‘leader’ in our social, spiritual, political and economic institutions. Today’s wisdom about the subject sits within a world that is becoming increasingly socially fragmented yet globally interconnected. The resultant complexity makes it less easy for charismatic, ‘heroic’, leaders to individually dictate and control what has to happen. The world has become too big and individual factions within it too powerful. In this context, the growing paradigm about the fundamental purpose of leadership is one that suggests that the leader can only set the overall purpose and framework for what has to be done; then build insight, capability and ownership for the change around them; and finally leave space for others to step in and become jointly responsible for making things happen. This means, as Jim Collins has described ‘Level 5 Leadership’ in his book *From Good to Great*, a leader giving up one’s own illusion of power and control over others, and moving to a less ego-centric mode of leadership.

One leader we recently worked with expressed this paradigm succinctly. She said that the more senior she became in her

organisation, the less able she was to exert any direct power over its outcomes, and indeed, as CEO, she ended up hardly making any decisions at all (save a few big ones). 'Quite frankly, I controlled nothing'. This move away from a more 'command and control' style of leadership, to a less directive one, can be very challenging. At times it goes against the very grain of how we have been taught to exercise power and influence. Our egos are often wrapped up with a story that requires us to have personalised and visible power over others. Our inner voice says 'take charge'. Creating space for others can be seen as a soft option, an easy way out. Yet the giving up of one's sense of individual control over outcomes, and 'empowering others', is not simply about issuing one or two directives, and then sitting back and seeing what happens. It entails the leader paying constant and dedicated attention to what is happening in the organisation around them, and it requires intense investment in the building of new capabilities. This is hard work. It requires a combination of dedicated effort, humility, and resolve.

Through this book we'd like to join the prevailing debate about the changing role of leadership. We have certainly found – as change practitioners, researchers, and leaders ourselves – that leaders who are able to reframe their role *away* from being one of personally directing outcomes, and being a constantly present 'champion', *to* being one of setting an overall mandate and then building capability around them, are more likely to succeed in implementing high magnitude change. Indeed, it can be the biggest determinant of success.

Yet in our own practice we were regularly noticing how leaders and organisations can get 'stuck' when trying to

implement significant change – even when they think they are making significant progress. We came across very well intended and dedicated leaders trying their hardest to ‘drive change’ through their organisation. Their efforts typically went like this. After some initial diagnosis, study, and reporting, the case for change gets created – spiced up with juicy hard hitting facts about the competition, financial results, employee opinion data and operational performance. To these leaders it was obvious what had to be done to improve performance – the tricky challenge then lay in convincing other people. So, the top team create a vision of a new future, set against today’s reality, and then engage the organisation in working out how to move from today’s reality to this new future. Once the change plan is created, it is launched to the organisation and various project teams and steering groups are set up to make sure implementation happens. The top team are encouraged to ‘role model’ any new desired behaviours, and they go out to the organisation to engage people and get commitment.

After a while, and with usually an inordinate amount of investment and effort expended, people start to wonder why the change ‘is not going fast enough’. Perhaps the top team need to sell the case harder and convince better? Should the resistors and people who are not ‘getting it’ be taken out? Maybe the top team need to put even more measures and tracking mechanisms in place to get greater accountability and ownership, and receive earlier warning signs about the speed of implementation? Doubt starts to creep in, and despite all the projects and programmes that have been launched, people now think that they were not designed or delivered well enough. The steering group then plan to roll out more

initiatives, while the organisation is still figuring out how to implement those launched last year.

We had witnessed (and been party to) the above scenario many times. You the reader might have done so too. It feels like a lot is being set in motion yet somehow the cogs are not connecting. And yet we had also experienced examples of large scale change that had been very successfully implemented, leading to sustainable changes in performance. When we reflected on our own practice, some of our consulting interventions in change with leadership teams had worked very well, others, quite frankly, had delivered little impact. What made the difference? We got curious about this, and what's more the leaders we worked with were also keen to get answers and insights to this question. It was as much their energy that led to our inquiry, and their stories of struggles and success are woven gratefully into this book. The original intent of our inquiry was not to generate long lists and 'how to' recipes for leading change, however it has resulted in statistically grounded insights into the relationship between certain change contexts, performance outcomes, and leader behaviour. To our knowledge we have not yet seen this level of rigour in the field of change leadership research.

Our first round of research revealed that there were significant differences in how organisations were approaching and managing change, despite the fact that the choice of change approach was hardly ever a conscious or explicit one; and that some organisations were more successful than others. When we dug deeper into the findings, what struck us was that it seemed to matter how leaders were leading the change – *in fact what leaders did was the single biggest reason explaining*

why some changes we studied were successful, and others were not. In this book we will share the original round of research as context, and then focus on our most recent inquiry which was intended to surface with more specificity the leadership practices that made the difference. The resulting framework we have called ‘Changing Leadership’, as it describes the practices that are needed for ongoing change, or changing.

Our research process throughout has been conducted in close partnership with practising leaders. We hope this book speaks to you and your leadership. It is primarily intended for those leaders who are faced with the challenges of leading significant performance and/or paradigm change in their organisations and communities, *and who recognise that their own behaviour and practice is a key determinant in being able to bring about this change.* We will share the insights, frameworks, and practices that we have found can lead to greater success. We do recognise that the problem with writing about leadership is that its practice can be made to sound too easy, and therefore do not want to over simplify the subject. However we do want to help leaders learn, adapt their behaviour, and guide others – and we feel we have some pointers to help inform that. The challenge of change often requires leaders to reach out for the help of trained coaches and leadership development professionals. This book therefore is also intended to appeal to those who are helping to coach leaders and leadership teams in implementing significant change.

The book is structured as outlined below. If you are a practising leader you may wish to skip Part I and go straight to Part II, which illustrates our findings about the necessary practices

to lead big change. If you are a leadership coach, change consultant, or leadership development professional, you may wish to start at the beginning in Part I, which surveys the landscape of change and leadership, describes our research process and outcomes, and connects these findings with other theoretical fields. Part III is about how to practically work with our frameworks and findings, which should hold interest for all. As we were writing the book we did have a dilemma about its style. As co-authors we span the spectrum of academic-consultant-practitioner. Should we on the one hand adopt a scholarly and detached style that conveyed the conceptual rigour behind our work? On the other hand, should we write in a personal and more engaging way that brought relevance to the day to day, and moreover reflected the essence of our consulting practice and our personalities? We decided to take a 'both-and' approach – so while Part I might feel a bit more scholarly we adapt our style through the book to appeal more directly and personally to you the reader.

Part I: Defining Changing Leadership

Chapter 2: Is Change Changing?

This chapter sets out the different approaches to change that organisations can adopt, and shares our research findings about how these different approaches are correlated to success, or otherwise, in different contexts. Our findings have challenged the predominant 'programmatic' approach to change, that assumes change is linear, predictable, and can be 'managed', and instead support change approaches that assume complexity, non-linearity, and the need to view change as an

ongoing process that cannot be broken down into simple and separate parts.

Chapter 3: Are Leaders Leading?

This chapter shares our initial findings about the pivotal role that leader behaviour has in determining change outcomes. It traces the overall context for changing views about leadership, proposes a framework for understanding how leader behaviour can impact outcomes, and shares in detail three different ways of leading change that we uncovered from our first stage of research. As with change approaches, we share our research findings in this chapter that reveal how these three different ways of leading change are differentially correlated with success.

Chapter 4: Changing Leadership – A Framework

This chapter introduces the essential leadership practices that we have found from our most recent research are highly correlated with success in implementing big change. Based on the findings from the initial leadership research, where we had such illuminating data about the practices that either helped, or hindered leading significant change, we created a more specific set of practices that were subsequently tested and refined. These practices are defined in this chapter, which concludes with an examination of other theoretical fields that might explain why these leadership practices, both individually and in combination, relate so strongly to leading successful change.

Part II: Seeing Changing Leadership

Chapters 5 to 8: Changing Leadership Illustrated

These chapters take each one of the four leadership practices in our framework and, through illustrations and in-depth change stories, share what it is that leaders practically do to create more successful change. These chapters bring 'Changing Leadership' to life. They also illustrate how there can be a 'dark side' to each of these four practices, which leaders can easily fall into if the intent behind their behaviour is more about satisfying their own ego needs and wants, rather than acting in service of others and the wider context.

Part III: Working with Changing Leadership

Chapter 9: Linking Changing Leadership

Our research identified that those leaders who can display all four 'Changing Leadership' practices are those most likely to produce highly successful, sustaining change. We describe how the four practices are interrelated, and all required in balance within a change process. We share the key strategies that leaders adopt in combining all four practices in order to avoid any one of them becoming either 'over', or 'under' done, and show with some illustrations how the practices can be linked in what we call 'multi-hit' interventions.

Chapter 10: Developing Changing Leadership

Can these practices be learned? This chapter explores the underpinning orientations and beliefs that we have found leaders need to hold to be able to practice Changing Leadership with any degree of authenticity and success. We then share in some detail, for each one of the four 'Changing Leadership' practices, the learning strategies we have found to be helpful in developing the capability to master them. This chapter will enable you to reflect on your own strengths and development needs in Changing Leadership, and provide some practical guidance on how you might go about building your capability to lead big change.

Chapter 11: Where next?

We conclude with a reflection on the insights generated in writing the book, and set out the big questions we still hold in relation to 'Changing Leadership' that merit further inquiry. We have discovered that our inquiry is an ongoing process. Just as the word 'change', can be moved to 'changing', to reflect the ever present ever evolving nature of change, so should our research effort move to a 'researching' one. In this chapter we invite you to join us in this continuing journey.

It has been said that 'we move in the direction of the questions we ask' (Margaret Wheatley). Questions such as 'is change changing?' do not just seek to clarify; they create movement, and movement in a new direction. That small question certainly took us on a big journey. We are grateful

for the questions that have emerged along the way, since they have all served as 'tipping points' that helped us take the next step. We are also grateful for the enormous assistance, energy, challenge and enthusiasm provided by so many of our collaborators on this journey. This book is our offering back to those leaders, and to you the reader, based on our own small steps to discover what makes great leaders of change.
