Designing Change

Freeman and Oxford University philosopher and scientist James Wilk says major corporate transformations can be catalyzed with precision...

Change, in organizations, is hard, slow, stubbornly resisted, time-burning, uncertain, expensive, and takes years; or the selfsame change can be easy, effortless, certain, meet zero resistance, cost nothing, and be completed in weeks or days. It all depends on how well the change is designed—one hundred percent.

When you look back on your hard-won successes in your personal life or in your career, you can often identify one key thing you did—one lunch, phone call, or tiny shift in how you did or looked at something—where, if you'd only done that one small thing at the start, you'd have been spared 90% of your struggle and got there much sooner. The game-changer would be to pinpoint these catalytic actions in advance.

Any change can be easy, effortless, certain, meet zero resistance, cost nothing, and be completed in days.

Many of us in the Company know the impact on the world a few lines of code can have—work hard over a weekend, and you've the basis for a commerce-changing eBay, a viral meme, or a WhatsApp. Large organizations, geopolitical crises, global markets and the growth of businesses are no different. You also know how changes and major advances, especially in the tech world, result from breakthroughs, but what if such epiphanies could be designed to order?

My first experiment in designing change on a large scale involved an ordinary glass coffee pot. I asked the beleaguered CEO of a big organization in turmoil to move the pot fifty centimeters, from one side of a wall to the other. My scientific analysis had suggested this would be sufficient to transform the organization's intractable culture and functioning overnight. It worked. The experiment was a success and the coffee pot that saved the day became an icon for designing change.

Remember the Butterfly Effect from Chaos Theory? A butterfly flapping its wings in China altering the weather over England? Turn it around! Suppose you could figure out in advance, *which* butterfly, on *which* Shanghai gatepost needs to flap its wings at *what* time, at how many beats per second, *how long*, to guarantee a beautiful August Bank Holiday Weekend on the South Coast? Call this, "reverse butterfly."

Suppose you could do a "reverse butterfly" at will—in business, society, or the development of new technology or applications, and it worked every time? Fortunately, there is now a rigorous, analytical technology for doing just this and designing change to order. The scientific theory behind it owed nothing to Chaos Theory, or complexity theory, or behavioural ('nudge') economics, but owed much to other areas of science, notably cybernetics and biosemiotics. The art and science of minimalist intervention is merely one of the first fruits of a revolution in ideas that started less than a century ago.

Suppose you could design change to order, catalyzing a precise outcome with a reverse butterfly?

Now the upshot of my scientific work, as my colleague Esko Kilpi once mused, was that I'd "managed to reverse-engineer causality itself." In reply, I shrugged, saying that that was after all no big deal since the concept of causality was already back-to-front! Basically, all that my scientific colleagues and I had done was to reverse the concept of causality, and then spend a few hundred man-years deducing the empirical, practical consequences. We scrapped the 17th Century view that took persistence to be the status quo and which sought to account for any change causally. Instead, we viewed the photographic negative of that, and expected to find random flux as a constant everywhere in the universe. So now what needed explaining was not change, but persistence. To change any pattern we would need to pinpoint the constraints in place making anything else impossible. The implications are huge.

Suppose that for any desired change you could pinpoint the smallest action you could take *now* to flip the situation from the existing to the desired state in the shortest time, with fewest resources, least risk and no undesired side effects? Suppose you could design change to order, catalyzing a precise outcome with a reverse butterfly?

Suppose a CFO freed his corporation from an onerous legal battle, saving it tens of millions of dollars at a stroke . . . with a carefully phrased, seemingly innocuous remark at a golf outing, uttered casually at the fourteenth hole . . .

...or a company threatened with the catastrophic loss of half its revenue, instead maintained that revenue, prospering and growing rapidly . . . through a chain of events triggered, just as predicted, by a carefully crafted, 37-word message . . .

...or if the CEO of a financial institution pulled off the company's largest acquisition in 150 years, making Wall Street history and catapulting the

company from 12th to 4th largest in its market, . . . by making inquiries about the schools in the area . . .

This is not science fiction, but science fact. Those three reverse butterflies and the coffee pot are examples from my own casebook of "minimalist intervention": pinpointing the smallest action creating the greatest desired change. They were not flukes. They are but three among thousands of such examples. All succeeded by pinpointing trivial-seeming interventions. In this way, we instantly resolved over 750 mission-critical corporate issues each valued in millions or billions of dollars. Some were catalysts that transformed entire industries.

Most reverse butterflies don't make snappy, dramatic headlines like the ones I cited, and are so subtle, trivial-seeming, technical, boring, that even the change agent can hardly believe they'd make much difference (a phone call instead of an email, or person A asking questions instead of B).

But so little is needed because the desired change is already present in the existing situation—always—and needs merely to be released by pinpointing some small action. It rarely requires more than a subtle, single communication, often delivered to only a few individuals, or even one. The result is an all-or-none flip from the existing to the desired state, transforming in days what would otherwise take months or years.

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Change is never caused or brought about. It cannot be managed. It is only ever released, and steered. We release the desired change swiftly and with precision by pinpointing which constraints need to be lifted, and which ones inserted to flip to the desired state.

> **Doing stuff takes time, change doesn't; just as running a marathon takes time, but winning doesn't.**

Desired change is instantaneous when we lift and insert the right constraints at the same time. Whereas before only the existing state was possible, now, all of a sudden, only the desired state is possible. That's why, properly designed, change happens all at once. Doing stuff takes time, change doesn't; just as running a marathon takes time, but winning doesn't.

So we can forget about how things got this way. There are no causes, "root" or otherwise. It is all irrelevant to releasing change. Throw away the explanations, the narratives. All narratives are wrong and misleading, because objective reality is not narrative in structure. There is no linear narrative that accounts for the success of moving the coffee pot. Don't try and model the complexity of your situation. Instead, filter it. Find the constraints that keep things as they are. Reveal the contexts that would naturally elicit the desired state. Find the key to that context, by pinpointing the critical context-markers, and all else follows.

These rules of thumb are of course but a starting point. The theory and methods have already been highly developed, refined over many years, into a rigorous analytical technology, tried and tested, and now capable of being massively scaled commercially. My Interchange think-tank team and I have just embarked on a programme to undertake that scaling, which will need to be in partnership with a global management consulting firm. I believe that, as management consultants, we have an unprecedented opportunity now, as an industry, to redefine, radically, what is possible for our clients, beyond all our previous imaginings, and theirs. To do that, however, we will need to think again.

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