

## **An Overview of Change Paradigms**

*Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak*

### **Introduction**

A search for the underlying values of the word *change* results in a whole range of meanings and different rationalities. There is often a world of difference between them. As a result the practical applications in terms of change strategies or approaches vary widely. Conceptual clarity is desired to better express the various meanings of the word change for several reasons:

1. It facilitates clearer communication between the people involved. For example, communication between and among managers, consultants and academics. Misunderstandings and conflicts can and do arise for instance when change strategies are discussed in a management team between people who believe change is essentially a power game versus people who believe it is a rational endeavor. A new shorthand language for this complex subject matter creates the possibility for shared interpretations and meanings.
2. It can be used to characterize dominant paradigms in groups or organizations, serving as a diagnostic tool for characterizing different actors involved in a change effort. Moreover, the paradigms themselves represent different views of the organization and its problems. Such different viewpoints help paint a more complete and complex picture of organizational life.
3. It provides a map of possible strategies to deal with organizational issue. The idea is that not 'anything goes'. It is relevant to know what kind of approaches are available as well as to have some sense of indicators that facilitate a choice of what approach is more fitting given a certain situation than others.
4. It offers change agents a tool for reflection: What are your own assumptions? What is your (key) competence for bringing about change and what are your limitations? It can assist change agents in delineating their area of expertise and their professional development.

In this article we touch on a meta-theoretical concept, the colors, that has been developed the last five years and has been extensively applied in both in management education and change practice in the Netherlands. More recently it is being applied in English speaking arenas. It has proven to be both robust and versatile. The choice for 'colors' as labels is based on the need for some type of shorthand that would not stress any specific order between.

### ***Yellow-Print Thinking***

Yellow-print thinking is based on socio-political concepts about organizations, in which interests, conflicts, and power play important roles (e.g. Greiner and Schein, 1988; Hanson, 1996; Pfeffer, 1981). Yellow-print thinking assumes that people change their standpoints only if their own interests are taken into account, or if you can compel them to accept certain ideas. Combining ideas or points of view and forming coalitions or power blocks are favored methods in this type of change process. Change is seen as a negotiation exercise aimed at feasible solutions. Yellow-print thinkers believe that getting everyone on the same wavelength is a change in itself. In this view, enabling change requires getting the powers that be behind it, be it power based on formal position or informal influence. It is thought that resistance is built in if you do not get the key players on board. Facilitating communication, lobbying, negotiating and third party conflict resolution are much-used interventions. Stakeholder analysis is crucial. Sticking to and realizing the outcome of these processes (in terms of goals, the policies or programs) is a huge task because the socio-political context is and stays dynamic. Consequently, the result of change is difficult to predict because it depends on the distribution and shifts in standpoints and influence of the most important players. What is more, for a change agent, the process is difficult to plan and predict.

The change agent is a facilitator who has an independent position. Such facilitators guard their power base carefully. It is based on their experience, reputation and connections but can be augmented by specific mandates. They have a good sense for power structures and balances.

Self control, diplomacy, stability and flexibility are important attributes of such a change agent. The foremost consideration of the yellow-print change agent is: always bear in mind the conglomeration of interests, parties, and players and strive for agreements and policies. We call this way of thinking “yellow-print thinking”: yellow is the color of power (e.g. symbols like the sun, fire) and the type of process (“brooding and coalition formation around a fire”).

### ***Blue-Print Thinking***

Blue-print thinking is based on the rational design and implementation of change (e.g. Hammer and Champy, 1993). Scientific Management (Taylor, 1913) is a classic example. Project management one its strongest tools (e.g. Wijnen and Kor , 2000). In blue-print thinking it is assumed that people or things will change if a clearly specified result is laid down beforehand. Controlling (managing, planning, and monitoring progress) the change is considered feasible. The process and the result are deemed, more or less, independent of people. Management is able to compel and effect the change. Both outcome and process are planned down to the last detail. Change is considered to be a rational process aimed at the best possible solution. There is continuous monitoring based on pre-determined indicators to check whether the activities are leading to the desired result as planned. If not, adjustments are made to achieve that which has been agreed upon within the frameworks of time, money, quality, information, and organization. Other interventions are analytical endeavors such as SWOT analyses, benchmarking, business process redesign, total quality management, restructuring and so on. There is a wide array of well defined methods. The subject of the change (the project leader) and its object (the target group) are often different people or entities. The approach is rational (planning) and empirical (indicators). Think first (define and design) and then do (implement) is the maxim. Naturally this lends itself best to ‘hard’ aspects of organizations: structures, systems, strategies. The change agent is an expert with regard to the content of the change effort. They take full responsibility for implementation and monitoring when mandated to do so. Result orienta-

tion, decisiveness, accuracy and dedication are necessary attributes for such a change agent.

The foremost considerations of the blue-print changer are these: plan and organize first; use all possible expertise and don't let people's individual ideas and preferences interfere; and never lose sight of the intended result. We call this way of thinking "blue-print thinking": a blueprint is the (architectural) design or plan that is drawn up beforehand and guarantees the actual outcome.

### ***Red-Print Thinking***

Red-print thinking has its roots in the classic Hawthorne experiments (see Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger, 1941). McGregor (1960) developed the tradition further. In more recent times, Human Resources Management (HRM) has been an expression of this approach (e.g. Schoemaker, 1994). Change in this way of thinking equates with people changing their behavior. This is accomplished by stimulating people, by making it appealing to adjust behavior. Thus a key concept is barter: the organization hands out rewards and facilities in exchange for personnel taking on responsibilities and trying their best. On top of this however, management's care and attention are also important. Red print thinking strives to develop competencies and making the most of people's talents. The aim is a good "fit" between what individuals want and what the organization needs. Red-print thinking makes abundant use of HRM tools. People are rewarded (salary, promotion, bonus, a good evaluation) for desired behavior or "penalized" (demotion, poor evaluation) for undesired behavior. Career paths, assessments, recruitments, out-placements, work design (task enrichment and enlargement) and employee wellness programmes are all relevant interventions. Management gets up on a soap box, gives speeches and seduce people into embarking on a change. Social activities and team building are used to create a positive atmosphere and social cohesion. The outcome of the change (the result) can, according to red-print thinking, be thought out beforehand, but it cannot be fully guaranteed because it depends on the response of the 'victims'; the desired outcome might change some-

what as a result. Monitoring takes place, but, for both ethical and political reasons, there is a limit to how forcefully the process can be adjusted along the way. Change agents are good at motivating people and at devising systems and procedures that facilitate this. They are 'people managers' who manage by walking. They can also be HRM experts who supply people managers with HRM tools. Carefulness, steadfastness and loyalty are relevant attributes of the change agent. The foremost consideration of the red-print change agent is that the human factor plays a vital role. People make changes happen if you guide them in the right direction. The color chosen here refers to the color of human blood. The human being must be influenced, tempted, seduced, and stimulated.

### ***Green-Print Thinking***

Green-print thinking has its roots in action-learning theories (e.g. Kolb, Rubbin, & Osland, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1978). It has been expanded enormously in the more recent thinking on 'learning organizations' (e.g. Senge, 1990). Changing and learning are conceptually closely linked: the terms *change* and *learning* have very similar meanings. People are motivated to discover the limits of their competences and to involve themselves in learning situations. They are provided with means for learning more effective ways of acting. The aim is to strengthen the learning abilities of the individual and the learning within the organization. If people learn collectively, the organization learns and as a result different organizational behavior results and change is a fact. The process is characterized by setting up learning situations - preferably collective ones as these allows people to give and receive feedback as well as to experiment with more effective ways of acting. Monitoring is not meant to adjust the change in the direction of some predetermined outcome, but just for planning a follow-up that is in line with what the people involved regard as the most relevant learning goals. Green-print thinking is concerned with allowing and supporting people to take ownership of their learning. Typical interventions are coaching, simulations, survey feedback, open systems planning, action learning,

feedback and leadership training. The change process takes time: you can't force learning. It is a fluctuating process of learning and unlearning, trial and error. The change agents play a facilitating role, not a controlling one. They design learning situations, give feedback, support experimenting with new behavior, structure communication and are learning themselves in the process. Thinking and doing are tightly coupled, not sequential (as it is in blue-print thinking): all involved are frequently reflecting on their actions. Empathy, creativity and openness are important attributes of the change agent. The foremost consideration of the change agent is: motivate and support people to learn with each other and from each other in order to establish continuous learning in collective settings. The color green is chosen because the objective is to get peoples' ideas to work (with their motivation and learning capacity), giving them the "green light." But it also refers to "growth," as in nature.

### ***White-Print Thinking***

White-print thinking arose as a reaction to the deterministic, mechanistic, and linear worldview derived from Newton and Descartes. It is nourished by chaos thinking, network theory, and complexity theory, all of which are based on living and complex systems with limited predictability (e.g. Capra, 1996; Prigogine and Stengers, 1986; Bateson, 1972). Self-organization is a core concept. Stacey (1996) defines it as "The process by which people interact with one another within a system, according to their own codes of behavior, without there being an overall picture that makes clear what has to be done or how it is to be done". The self-organization process encompasses the emergence of new structures and behavioral patterns through developmental, learning, and evolutionary processes. The system finds its own optimal dynamic balance.. In white-print thinking, the dominant image is that everything is changing autonomously, of its own accord. Where there is energy, things change. When this is the case, 'the time is ripe'. Complexity is regarded as the enriching nature of things, not as disruptive chaos. Influencing the underlying dynamics is a favorite approach. White print thinkers try to

understand where opportunities lie and searching for the seeds of renewal and creativity. Sense-making plays an important role in this, as does the removing of obstacles and explicitly relying on the strength and soul of people. In a way white-print change agents catalyze the emergence of more white print change agents. They call on people's strengths, self confidence, inspiration and energy. Whereas interventions that take away obstacles can seem to be of a very different color (e.g. delaying the organization), interventions that tap people's energy are more easily identified: e.g. open space meetings, appreciative enquiry, dialogue, search conferences, self steering teams. The inner desires and strengths of people, both individually and as groups, are the decisive factors. Outside influence, whether from a change agent or a manager, can be of only limited effect and then only if this is welcomed by the ones who are changing welcome it. The above does NOT equal doing nothing or laissez faire. On the contrary; it demands in-depth observation, analysis of underlying drivers, and often confronting interventions. Change agents must be capable of making sense out of complexity, often looking at historical patterns and psychological mechanisms. Honesty, authenticity and self confidence are relevant attributes of such change agents. The foremost consideration of the white-print change agent is: Observe what is making things happen and change ; supply meanings and perspectives, remove obstacles, get initiatives and explorations going, and empower people while giving them sufficient free rein. The belief that "crisis provides opportunity" applies here. The color white reflects all colors. But more important, white denotes openness: it allows room for self-organization and evolution. The outcome remains somewhat of a surprise.

### **Expansion of the model and search for a metaparadigm**

Is this a complete overview? The colors do seem to cover most of the steady stream of experience, research and publications that we are aware of. Nevertheless, the overview is probably never fully complete. Since we put forward the concept of ' colors of change ', we have found that people easily attribute lots of characteristics to the colors in addition to the ones men-

tioned here and summarized in table 1. *INSER TABLE* These are characteristics like: output criteria, diagnostic models, glossaries and typical sayings, bodies of literature, styles of communications, norms and values of change agents, ways to deal with contracting or with resistance, typical pitfalls and ideals, etc. We are addressing these in separate publications (see e.g. de Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003).

There is also a (meta)paradigm behind the five-color classification described here. The description of five ways of thinking emerges from a meta-paradigm that posits a need for distinctions in diversity and a search for professional insights and values based on these (de Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003b):

1. We start to suspect that any strong color dominance in organizations is unwanted. In order to survive in the long run, organizations seem to need qualities of each and any one of the colors. Organizations need to deal properly with power and different interests (yellow), must effectively and dependably get results and maintain organizational hygiene (blue), must take the irrational human being into account and insert care and perspective in organizational life (red), have to create spaces to learn and cooperate (green) and need to align themselves with the times they live in and the people they live with and innovate accordingly (white). The different colors have conflicting principles: that means that a balanced or sound organization has to cope with the paradoxes that result from these conflicting principles. This reinforces the need to diagnose organizations from the different colored viewpoints in order to be aware of imbalances.
2. A foundational (color) focus in terms of change strategy is needed, especially when problems are deeply rooted as different colored approaches can interfere considerably with one another. For instance, trying to create a learning environment (green) while not keeping power games at bay (yellow) or downplaying the predictability of outcomes (blue) means that the learning is bound to be superficial. Each color has its strong and weak points. The kind of organization, the issue at hand, the kind of resistance, the style of the change



agents, the time pressure and other circumstances all are factors that influence what change strategy, in terms of color, can best make a difference. This is not to say that a change strategy has to be restricted to one color, but does imply that interferences between colored actions should be taken into account when intervening in organizations. A relatively easy way of dealing with interferences is to space different color interventions in time or have different people involved. More challenging is to maintain one constant underlying color tenet while allowing for more superficial other colored contributions.

3. The color of the change agent should match the change effort: incongruence frustrates change. It makes little sense to embark on a yellow endeavor with an analytical expert who strives for the best solutions (blue) rather than what is feasible given the balance of power. While change agents might be able to at least intellectually grasp that all colors are equal, when it comes down to it most change agents have more narrowly defined beliefs/intentions and these should match their role in order for them to be believable. This is not to say that change agents can be branded in single colors and remain as they are over the years. Change agents may be able to handle different approaches to change but not to their full potential. They may change colors but take many years to do so as each color brings with it a whole body of knowledge with many interventions, competences, diagnostic viewpoints, etc.
4. Lastly, we posit that dialogues in organizations based on a multi-paradigm perspective (such as the colors) enhances organizational vitality. “The difficulty for change is not in the development of new ideas, but in escaping the old ideas, that determine our thinking” (Wierdsma, 2001). Seeing (too) many things through green glasses and applying green interventions will give a lot of reflection but a lack of action, results, and consensus. Moreover, organizational change is a collective effort and, more often than not, involves people with multiple perspectives on organizational life and multiple definitions of reality. Instead of narrowing participation to reach easy consensus on issues, the inclusion of multi-

ple perspectives not only can create the kind of richness that does justice to the complexities of the social systems but also the kind of ownership that is instrumental in addressing such complexities. When problems are simple, single minded viewpoints might suffice (e.g. building a house with a blue paradigm only). But for ambiguous problems involving people with many different backgrounds, understanding and intervening in organizations is best based on collectively taking multiple realities and corresponding paradoxes into account.

## **Bibliography**

Argyris, Ch. & Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational learning: a theory of action perspective*.

Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine

Caluwé, L. de & Vermaak, H. (2003). *Learning to Change. A Guide for Organizational Change Agents*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications, Inc.

Caluwé, L. de & Vermaak, H. (forthcoming 2003b). *Transformational Conversations about Change*

Capra, F. (1996). *Het levensweb*. Kosmos-Z&K, Urecht

Greiner, L. & Schein, V. (1988). *Power and Organization Development: Mobilizing Power to Implement Change*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley

Hammer, M. & Champy, J. (1993). *Reengineering the corporation: a manifesto for business revolution*. London: Nicholas Brealey

Hanson, E.M. (1996). *Educational administration and organizational behaviour*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon

Kolb, D., Rubbin, I.M. & Osland, J.S. (1991). *Organization behaviour, an experiential approach*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall

Mayo, E. (1933). *The human problems of an industrial civilization*. New York: Mac Millan

McGregor, D. (1960). *The human side of enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power in organizations*. London: Pitman

Prigogine, I., and I. Stengers (1986). *Order out of chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature*. London: Flamingo; publ. by Fontana paperbacks

Roethlisberger, F.J. (1941). *Management and morale*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Schoemaker, M.J.R. (1994). *Managen van mensen en prestaties. Personeelsmanagement in moderne organisaties*. Deventer: Kluwer Bedrijfswetenschappen

Senge, P.M. (1990). *The fifth discipline; the art & practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency

Stacey, R.D. (1996). *Complexity and creativity in organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Taylor, F.W. (1913). *The principles of scientific management*. New York: Harper and Row

Wijnen, G & Kor, R. (2000) *Managing Unique Assignments: A team approach to projects and programmes*. Gower, UK: Aldershot/Brookfield.