

BRINGING ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE



AN INTERVIEW WITH
ALASTAIR OLBY

Q: So, Alastair, what do you know for certain about bringing about change in organisations?

A: Well, No. 1, that there's so much change going on in organisations, and unfortunately much of it doesn't stick. Many organisations don't consider the whole system, and so end up doing something in one area, which results in negative consequences in another, and from what we experience, a lot of people working in organisations are getting fed up of feeling that change is done to them – they become the subjects of change and because it seems to be so ongoing, they become change-weary – and so become less engaged, less aligned.

Q: Could you explain what alignment means for you?

A: Well, alignment for me is about everyone moving forwards, as a system, towards mutual goals. Let me give an example of a lack of alignment. I've worked with some organisations where they've got very clear functional goals without truly realising the impact of achieving these on the rest of the system. That, to me, does not demonstrate alignment – and very often it comes about because leaders are so keen to move the business forward quickly. They've got pressures

from shareholders/government/donors and they need to make an impact – but because of the way they go about this, there's often a lack of understanding of the impact that it has on the rest of the system – and so you'll often find that there are some fantastic inroads into product development for example, but that these have a massive impact on the experience of the customer, after receiving the product – because there are all sorts of things that just haven't been thought through. People aren't communicated with, aren't trained, and they often don't have the skills they need to follow up on the promises that have been made to customers.

So, for me, when an organisation gets aligned it means that every part of it is able to see the whole value chain, and their impact in it – and typically, that's not common in large organisations.

Q: Are there organisations that you could perhaps cite as being aligned?

A: Well, perhaps one that does demonstrate good alignment is Harley Davidson. They were on really rocky ground some time ago and potentially facing extinction. But they turned themselves around and



Much of what we do is linked to what we now know about quantum physics: based on relationships, emergence, patterns and iterations.

Q: One of the things that you're interested in is generating an internal mass momentum in change - rather than the purely top down style intervention. What are the potential downsides of moving away from the traditional top down approach?

A: Well, there are quite a few, and I'm not suggesting for a moment that it's always the most appropriate way to bring about change. The context of change is so, so important. If you look at two very different ends of the spectrum - for example a nuclear energy plant at one end of the spectrum, and say, a specialist marketing company at the other end, the degree of control you want at the energy plant is going to have to be very much higher than the marketers. The marketing people would feel very constrained if you had the same amount of top down control. So, first you need to understand the context.

I think the challenge that people face in moving away from top down control is that sometimes they move to the other end of the spectrum: completely random, complete chaos, zero controls - and of course that's not desirable either. There is a continuum between top down control and complete chaos in which you end up with a self-organising organisation - and that's the balance that we focus on achieving with the majority of our clients.

Q: So, how do you know where to start?

A: Well, diagnostics. Finding out what has worked in the past, and what hasn't. Many clients that we work with experience frustration with change - so they've been trying stuff out for years sometimes - and some of it has worked and much of it hasn't. And you see turnover in management and leadership positions, people bringing in their own best models, and they barely get the chance to embed those models before

it's turnaround time again. Either they get ousted, someone else comes in, or there are new pressures because of the external world changing.

So, knowing where to start, for me, is all about looking at what has worked well in the past, understanding where the frustrations are, and doing a bit of a temperature check around all levels of the organisation to find out what different people are saying needs to be done. I always find it surprising, whenever I do diagnostic work, that so much of the data I get leaders don't know about. Everyone is so busy doing their day job - very focused on achieving specifics which often means that they don't have the quality time to surface things that are important to people. It's a great privilege to have that opportunity.

Q: Before you'd work with a client on change, what are the kinds of things that must be in place?

A: Well, there are quite a few things. I think a diagnostic for starters and access to people. Without these, you're really shooting in the dark. The other thing is true commitment from leaders to really explore new ways of working. One of the things that often gets in the way, in our experience, is that leaders have got where they are by operating in a certain way, and they can sometimes feel threatened by new ways of operating - which are often potentially about letting go of control. It might seem strange, but in many customer facing contexts these days, in order to increase control you have to let it go.

Q: So, in a world that is changing, how do the proven, tried-and-tested methodologies stack up?

A: I think they stack up very well where there's an emphasis on needing to bring about something specific quickly. The downside is that these changes are not necessarily sustainable in the long-term, and very often

they have an impact on the organisation as is, around the levels of engagement, staff and customer turnover, attrition and so on.

So, in my view, the world of work (and indeed the world we live in) has changed so massively from the world in which many tried-and-tested methodologies were created. If you think back to societal change, it was very much societal changes that drove changes in technology - like the printing press and so on. And the time-scales, the gaps between significant changes were quite far apart. But now, that's getting shorter and shorter - and indeed, I'd say that societal changes are now being driven by technological change. It's a completely different world in which we're living now.



And so, in my opinion, when working in large complex systems, solely using tried-and-tested methods is no longer where it's at. It's time to do something very different, which is much more around self-sustaining, self-organising systems, and that's quite new for most industries. I'll give you a couple of examples that really

highlight the impact of this.

A team of people that needed to do some teamwork development, you know, working out how they could best work together – were split into two groups. They were given exactly the same resources to build a raft to cross a river. You know the sort of thing. Well, one of the teams was told that they had to develop this raft following all the company's standard operating procedures for product development. The other team were



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just allowed to get on with it.

They had exactly the same amount of time and, you guessed it, the ones that followed standard procedure ended up sinking very quickly – and actually experienced a lot of conflict within the group. Whereas the other group that were allowed to be innovative, creative, to develop their own ways of working – they created a fabulous product, they achieved the task, and they got on really well as a team. I think that's a lovely illustration of the two very different worlds that I'm talking about.

Q: I know one of the things that you're getting very excited about is Cause and Effect and how that relates to change. Can you say a little bit about that?

A: Sure. I suppose if you think back to older ways of thinking, we used to believe that if you did something, that had an effect, and that the relationship between them was one way: the cause brings about the effect. Now, with what we know about complex systems, with what we know about quantum physics, social systems and the work of David Bohm, for example, we know that the cause brings about the effect, which then has a loop back to the cause.

And if you think about this at a deep level, ultimately, so many of the challenges that we experience today in the world of change are about our thinking. We think we have a problem, so we go and do something, and that has an impact on the system which impacts on our thinking. For example, we use a Newtonian, linear model for change where we go “Here's where we're going. Here are all the steps we need to achieve that, OK organisation, let's push you through it.” And guess what frequently happens? Push-back. Disengagement.

So what do we do? We ramp up the energy to try to re-engage people. But this is just going in the wrong direction. If we analyse the thinking that was bringing this about, and change that thinking, we'd end up with a completely different result – which would enable further different thinking.

Q: So, how would you identify an organisation that was ready for that kind of evolutionary approach?

Well, I think one of the things is that there needs to be sufficient desire to change. People need to be feeling, “What we're doing is not working and we need to do something different.” So this underpins a sensibility to do some new thinking. Now, I'm not worried if it's not there 100% at the start, but we do much prefer to

be working with organisations that are starting to feel a strong need to change. “We've been working so hard, everybody is working so desperately hard, we've got too much on our plate, we don't have time to do what we think we need to be doing to bring about change. Help!”

And second, as I mentioned earlier, the importance of leaders being truly open to exploring new ways and, in particular, where leaders are more used to being quite controlling in their methods, the commitment to freeing up some of that control; to allowing some of it back down to front line staff.

Q: Some people will be very excited by this 'loosening of control', and be more engaged - but for the cynics who believe that their voice won't be heard; who have, for 20 years, been in a system where there has only been top down control, this would be a completely different prospect for them? What would you do there?

A: Well, it's a great question, and something that I often come across. Sometimes there's an element of 'learned helplessness' among the people working in the organisation. That does happen. Indeed I've worked with some groups where when I've asked them “What's the unique contribution that you are going to make in this particular team?” And they're at a loss, they have no idea – and I'm blown away by that, but I acknowledge it does exist.

Equally, after numerous changes and perhaps some flirting with giving more control to front line staff, only for it to be seized back again (often by a new incoming leader or leadership team) there can be a high degree of cynicism: “What makes you think it will be different this time round?”

So, I think there are a number of things here. One is, first of all, let's do the temperature check to work out where are they coming from, and what's the step that's palatable – that's achievable, manageable, doable – given the context and where they are coming from. We can't always change the world overnight, these things emerge with time. It's quite exciting though to see just how often a few small steps can suddenly bring about radically new ways of thinking and working which result in very positive changes.

The impact of leaders is so important here too. What I've found in organisations where there has been very top down control, perhaps people have always bowed to that – and just got used to being told what to do – but it's not until the leader makes a really firm commitment, public declaration, and follows it through with action – that people start to reduce their cynicism.

So, where it doesn't work is where leaders say, "Yes, this is what we're going to do", and then they just don't. They find it too hard to give up that control, too hard to demonstrate the sorts of behaviours that are needed in bringing about the changes they want. Or they simply switch focus onto the newest urgent issue, and while they say they're supporting the original direction they'd communicated, their actions belie that.

Q: Isn't stating it publicly enough?

A: No, it isn't. Walking the talk is crucial – otherwise people are very quick to see the differences between what leaders are saying and doing.

One organisation made very significant improvements on safety at work, and to start off with the message from the top was "Safety is paramount. Whatever you do, make sure you do it safely." When they started seeing productivity take a bit of a hit, the message was quickly changed to "Safety is number one, not forgetting productivity." Then customer service started taking a hit, so it was quickly changed to "Safety is number one, not forgetting productivity AND keeping our customers happy." Now I should add that they did successfully bring about a completely transformed (safe) way of working, and have remained 100% committed to this since, which is a fantastic achievement, but you can see that from an employee's perspective it can get a bit confusing at times: "What do you really want from me?"

Schwarz has done fabulous work, building on Argyris and Schön's work, about our theoretical mental models (what we say we do), and our theories in practice (what we really do) – and our theories in practice often differ significantly from what we say we would do. That's always very interesting to explore, particularly with leadership groups.

Q: Al, is there anything else that you wanted to add?

There's one thing I would like to add and it's this:

Essentially, it's a message to organisations that haven't tried this way of bringing about change – the more self-sustaining, self-organising way of bringing about change... The first is the importance of focusing on the NOW, and what we need to do now to move just one step closer to where you want to be. Not all the steps – just the next step. Many senior leaders that I've worked with in multinational organisations have found that simply doing that has had such a powerful impact for them. Previously, they've spent so much time thinking about all the things that need to happen and essentially becoming paralysed into inaction through



thinking too much about what needs to happen.

Of course, as soon as they take the first step, the whole world changes because it is such a complex system in which they're working. They cannot possibly anticipate all the impacts. So certainly, focusing on that first step is really crucial, and if people only did that they would notice a significant improvement.

The other is how much easier change can be. With one organisation I've been working with there are multiple change interventions going on, and we're supporting just one of these. The only intervention that is being sustained is the one we're working with them on. The others have all floundered, partly because they are top-down driven. And what managers are saying about the change we're working on is "This is so much easier than what I'm used to," and "I'm not having to do anywhere near as much hard work as I thought I would – wonderful!" Just a tweak here, a little tweak there. But so much less input compared to what they normally experience.

And that has a massive impact on them, their time and ultimately the quality of their work life. It sustains itself – fantastic!



More about Alastair Olby

Alastair works with leaders, facilitators and coaches who are committed to raising their game and to making a positive difference to their organisations and communities.

He is at the forefront of developing ways for organisations to get their people more engaged, and has a track record of supporting large change projects and developing transformational leaders across the globe.

Alastair is an expert in bringing about powerful shifts in mindset that help people achieve more of what they want. A CPF (Certified Professional Facilitator) certified by the International Association of Facilitators, a NLP Master Practitioner and Trainer, Alastair is best known for developing the people needed to bring about transformation in organisations.

People describe working with him as “enlightening”, “inspiring”, and “life changing”.

Recent clients include Standard Life, Motorola, NHS, IOM, WHO and EDF.

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