

Liberating the change within

Sam Wells and Josie McLean's research helps organisations to shift culturally and to improve employee engagement and productivity, and the capacity to exercise leadership in complex environments

SAM WELLS & JOSIE MCLEAN



Why do the majority of initiatives focused on organisational change fail to meet their objectives?

Received wisdom, entrenched in the literature and in consulting practice, centres on identifying and implementing the right steps, in the right sequence, which can drive an organisation from point A to point B – that can make change happen. These linear models of change are products of seeing the organisation as a kind of machine. But it seems that organisational culture does not submit readily to that perspective. Our work explores change as seen through a very different lens – through the lens of what we refer to as 'living systems'.

Do you investigate the role of complexity in such systems?



Complex, adaptive, self-organising living systems are uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable environments, whose behaviour does not reflect a simple, linear causation. Seen through the lens of complexity, organisational change ceases to be a controllable object imposed on the system, instead becoming an emergent property of the system itself. Change is the systemic response to external and internal stimuli – ongoing and continuous. The challenge is not how to create or 'manage' change, but how to work with and influence the emergent forces already at work in the organisation.

Rather than creating a corporate 'vision statement', your work centres on self-organising forces. Could you explain the benefits of this approach?

As we learn how to engage with the self-organising forces at work in a complex,

Changing lives

Most mechanistic organisational change management programmes fail. Two researchers from the **University of Adelaide** Business School in Australia have developed an holistic approach that supports profound change towards a sustaining organisation

IT HAS BECOME increasingly clear over recent decades that business organisations cannot operate in a vacuum, ignoring the complex economic, social and natural systems in which they are embedded. How they engage with their social 'ecology' is fundamentally important if they are to succeed 'sustainably' in a dynamic and increasingly interconnected world.

While organisations look to 'change management' as a way forward, organisational change management initiatives are generally spectacularly and comprehensively unsuccessful. Sustaining cultural change and its fruits – improvements in productivity and performance, employee development and satisfaction, relationships, decision making, action taking and innovation – are seldom achieved.

EXPLORING A NEW PARADIGM

In fact, 70-90 per cent of change initiatives fail to deliver their intended outcomes, according to Dr Sam Wells, a senior lecturer in the Business School at the University of Adelaide, Australia. With his colleague, Josie McLean, who is

undertaking doctoral research in the Business School, Wells carries out 'action research', often through McLean's consulting business, and informed by the 'abductive' dialogue between theory, thought and practice, into the dynamics of organisational and community change. Wells and McLean's central premise is that the old 'Newtonian paradigm' that has dominated management thinking and change consultancy throughout the industrial age – treating change management as a tangible construct that can be rolled out across an organisational structure through a set series of steps controlled and communicated by management – inevitably fails. This is because contemporary organisations are much more than the sum of their parts, much more than machines: they are living systems within living systems, and therefore complex, unpredictable, self-organising and adaptive.

From their experience and research, Wells and McLean have now developed a new approach, reflecting the principles of the emerging paradigm of complexity and complex systems, that understands change as an emergent property of the organisational system, and

seeks to facilitate or 'midwife' change towards a sustainable and 'sustaining' organisation.

CONNECTION THROUGH SHARED VISION

In the course of developing a change framework for an organisation, Wells and McLean gather narratives or stories, rather than more quantitative analyses, about how employees really want to experience their working environment. These are then combined to form a shared, co-created vision. Idealistic and rich in values, this vision creates a container or cradle for the change process, and provides a continual point of reference and orientation as subsequent decisions are made and actions taken.

Organisational power structures play very little part in how the shared vision is shaped; people's stories invariably describe an environment that is sustaining, in that it honours connectedness and wholeness – it liberates the best in each individual and enables them to actualise their full capacity in the service of the organisation, while sustaining both themselves and the organisation. Wells and McLean consider that

uncertain organisational environment, how do we maintain a sense of orientation? One way to supply orientation is through a co-created, shared vision of how we want to experience working together in our organisation – a vision of the organisational culture. Such a vision is not a top-down creation, but the result of bringing the whole organisation together to co-create. And it is not a one-sentence description of some concrete future state, but a shared, values-rich story that captures a desired present – how we really want to experience the workplace.

In addition, the process of co-creation, emerging as it does from a whole-of-organisation conversation, is central to the facilitation of change. It enables everyone in an organisation to recognise and express the heartfelt values that reflect the culture they want to experience, and those shared values remain at the heart of the change process.

How does 'systems intelligence' contribute to your methodology and change rationale?

One of the most fascinating and thought-provoking features of our envisioning research is that the shared stories emerging in response to questions that deal with

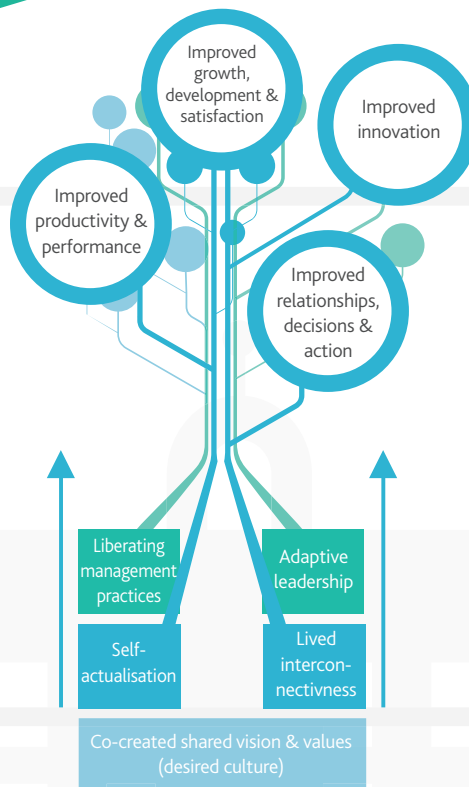
the readiness with which very disparate groups and individuals articulate such stories reflects the notion of 'systems intelligence', which proposes that people are inherently capable of navigating complex systems and environments.

ITERATIVE LEARNING

"To flourish, an organisation must be able to learn continuously and to adapt," Wells states. Wells and McLean hold that trial and error are important parts of the change process, while the process itself should be viewed as an endless cycle of action, observation and reflection. While they can help an organisation to describe its desired values and culture, and then assist managers and leaders to adopt practices that cultivate an environment conducive to achieving that shared vision, if authentic change is to emerge, actions emanating from the vision need to be treated as experiments and opportunities to learn: "This is 'change management' as used by a gardener – learning how to align actions with the powerful, natural, self-organising forces already at work in a complex system," McLean adds.

Wells and McLean have found that the co-creation of shared visions and values can nourish the development of adaptive leadership, self-actualisation and liberating management practices; it also enhances community interconnectedness. The researchers are now delivering programmes for personal, professional and organisational development designed to liberate the inherent strengths and qualities of all participants. They are also

how we really want to experience the future together invariably seem to describe a 'sustaining' organisation – an organisation that is sustained by and sustains the complex systems that are embedded in it and in which it is embedded. There appears to be an almost universal and spontaneous appreciation of connectedness, wholeness, authenticity and liberation, and a level of comfort with the emergent, unpredictable nature of complex environments. *Prima facie*, it would appear that this is one expression of what Professors Raimo P Hämäläinen and Esa Saarinen have called 'systems intelligence' – an innate capacity to make sense of and act effectively in a systemically complex world, born of aeons of human evolution shaped by the everyday experience of connectedness and complexity. The possibility of learning how to connect with and operate at this level of awareness, organisationally, is very exciting indeed, because it means that we do not need to teach this capacity in order to liberate it.



The dynamics of profound organisational change.

developing interventions that address specific organisational 'leverage points': "As one would expect in research of this kind, there is no one-size-fits-all solution – no mechanistic formula that can be rolled out in all organisations. The cultural path towards the sustaining organisation emerges from within the complex social system itself, and we are still learning about the deftness of touch required to influence that process of unfolding," observes Wells.

INTELLIGENCE

THE NATURE, DYNAMICS AND FACILITATION OF PROFOUND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE: THE PARADIGM SHIFT TO A 'SUSTAINING' ORGANIZATION

OBJECTIVE

To explore the dynamics of organisational change, and the theoretical and practical benefits of viewing change through the lens of living systems, rather than the mechanistic or Newtonian lens that dominates contemporary organisational practice.

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SAM WELLS completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford in 1983. After one year lecturing in his undergraduate History Department in Adelaide, Wells spent 18 years in corporate human resource management and organisational development. In 2001, he established his own consulting business and in 2005 became Senior Lecturer in the Business School at the University of Adelaide. He currently teaches in the Adelaide MBA, which is building a reputation for expertise in an holistic or systemic perspective and the exercise of leadership for change in complex environments.

JOSIE MCLEAN's corporate experience includes corporate strategic planning, financial analysis, and management positions in the automotive and financial industries. She founded The Partnership in 1999 as an executive coaching business, which has developed into a boutique organisational development consultancy. She is internationally recognised for her qualities as an executive coach and as one of the founders of the professional coaching industry in Australia. She is completing doctoral research into the nature and dynamics of the profound organisational change required to form sustaining organisations.



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