

let's talk about change

by stuart wilkinson

Right thinking

- Often the principles of human psychology are replicated as principles of organisation psychology. It helps to simplify some of the complexity of organisational change projects and challenges if leaders look at the organisation in human terms.
- It's crucial to engage in 'deep listening' – getting to the core of why people are focussed on an issue or problem, and what is really behind their motivation and behaviours.

The inescapable truth is that most people look for stability. It's a fundamental human need, and change in some way looks to threaten that stability. They immediately think that this change is going to shake up their world.



People with an interest in organisational change, strategy and leadership, often have bookcases with volumes offering the 'secrets', the 'code', the 'how-to', the 'paths to success', the 'winning game plan'.

This relentless pursuit of a better way to a better outcome has been going on since Ancient Greece, when Heraclitus stated that humans were simply blind to what was around them, and couldn't understand the universal flux in which they lived.

Heraclitus wasn't your go-with-the-pack thinker, preferring his own take on most things, even when it ran against many of his celebrated predecessors.

I like to think there's merit in his approach, taking my own individual path to Right Lane Consulting. I led a large company corporate strategy function, but I spent many of my formative years in Papua New Guinea. I have considerable consulting experience with leading firms focussing on organisational effectiveness, but I also have extensive experience in mediation and dispute resolution, and taught negotiation at Melbourne Law School.

I hope I add some different dimensions of thinking to what is already a diverse team at Right Lane, and I find myself drawing on a broad range of experiences and interests when it comes to talking about change, which is the underlying sub-theme of the vast majority of business and 'business of life' conversations.

So if the constancy of change has been recognised since Heraclitus produced his memorable quote in 500BC, why does mankind still find it so difficult to see and embrace change?

I think the simple answer is that we are just human. We're all different, with our own mix of motivation, needs and values, and all imperfect and irrational in our own way.

If we recognise we now have nearly seven billion very different humans, and accept the reality of all the dynamics that shape our behaviour, then it's inevitable that when it comes to change there's going to be up to seven billion different responses and behaviours.

It gets more challenging when you start to factor in all the permutations that result from different dynamics between different individuals. And then factor in the knowledge that those responses and behaviours can and do change over time, as experience and circumstances change.

Apart from that, it's pretty straightforward really!

But when it comes to change, there are some straightforward realities to be recognised, perhaps in particular by those who don't accept Heraclitus' observation that man is frequently blind, or chooses not to see, what is going on around him.

The inescapable truth is that most people look for stability. It's a fundamental human need, and change in some way looks to threaten that stability. They immediately think that this change is going to shake up their world.

But aren't there people who enjoy the transit lounge of life, where they are neither here nor there, and perhaps thrive in the ambiguity of life?

Even those who might enjoy aspects of a transit lounge don't want the experience to last very long, and the people who best cope with the ambiguity of life tend to become leaders.

There are actually not many people who thrive on change. In fact if I hear of someone who is said to absolutely 'thrive' on change I'd be having a close look at that person, because it might be someone who likes rattling cages but is often not there to share the accountability of what's ultimately left on the cage floor.

I don't want to suggest that some consultants might be rattle and run agents, but I was attracted to Right Lane's track record of having on-going relationships with many clients because it is there through thick and thin, and often helps closely from strategic development to implementation, and with the next strategy too.

Some people are definitely more open to change, and better able to cope with it than others. This may be due to factors such as upbringing, personal experiences, degree of resilience and even their general attitude to life.

Often the principles of human psychology are replicated as principles of organisation psychology. It helps to simplify some of the complexity of organisational change projects and challenges if leaders look at the organisation in human terms.

By this organisation-as-individual prism, I believe that leaders embarking on a change process might find it easier to identify and characterise the organisation's mood and capacity for the change, and address some basic questions.

Does the organisation have the energy levels to embark on change? Is it still recovering from some bad experience with change? Is it capable of doing what is being asked? Will it need some support or tools, or even some TLC, to get it done? What's the reward and is it fairly shared? Does it really care whether it succeeds?

We've seen a series of studies suggesting that 70 per cent of change projects fail, but

it may be that 70 per cent of the projects, or a fair number, are being undertaken in organisations that are not really open to change.

Perhaps those organisations did not have a heart and head engagement on the mooted change. To create a mood for change people need to see clearly what the change is, have a clear sense of why that change is required and understand how that change will impact them. They must also be certain their position is not going to be negatively impacted in some way.

And if organisations expect their people to be honest, transparent, accountable and innovative, then the organisation has to reflect and lead those traits. How many times do we hear executives and other leaders acknowledging they have made a mistake? Or actively tolerating innovation and learning from failure?

Organisations and individuals need to ask better questions and listen better to the responses.

I am a strong advocate for 'deep listening' – getting to the core of why people are focussed on an issue or problem, and what is really behind their motivation and behaviours.

Whether it's in matters of mediation or disputes, or facilitating workshops on strategy, or driving strategic change, there's a constant need to really hear people, sometimes by listening hard, sometimes by observation.

Change is difficult when people have cause to be concerned about the impact on them personally. So we need to ask things like why they are uncomfortable? What lies behind that feeling? Is it because it doesn't align with their needs? Is it a rational or irrational view? How might it be resolved?

The lessons from disputes and mediation is that when people come out of it, you can pretty well kiss goodbye to that relationship, and they are probably both unhappy with the outcome. You want to work very hard to ensure a change process doesn't have any walls of dispute

or resistance, because it will likely end in tears.

Many large organisations invest heavily in techniques to ensure they have an optimal mix of people types, as well as skills, around their boardroom or executive team table, trying to avoid domination by any particular mindset or any of the big five personality traits (introversion or extroversion, narcissism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness), but invest less in ensuring they have the right mix of people on the bus, and the right mix of leadership, on projects.

I would be disappointed if any organisation still thought discussion about human and organisational psychology, personality traits and hierarchies of needs as topics were confined to couch therapy sessions. That would merely reinforce the Heraclitus view of human blindness to reality.

They are organisational capacity issues that can and should be measured, through tools such as surveys, to provide data-driven assessments and decision-making, especially when change is desired.

It's the data and dynamics, the art and the science, that I like to draw on as I'm talking to – and listening to – Right Lane clients.

It's an ancient, and also modern, way of approaching change, which is a very human and natural part of life, a natural ebb and flow of beginnings and ends and the opportunities that present along the way.

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want to know more?

If you want to know more about how Right Lane can help your organisation have better conversations about change, contact **Stuart Wilkinson**:

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