

CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT CHANGE: HOW DOES VIRAL CHANGE™ WORK?

By Leandro Herrero

Under certain conditions, a small set of behaviours has the power to create significant and sustainable change in the organization. This statement - crucial to understanding the type of management of change that I have labelled Viral Change™¹ - is based upon three premises:

1. Life in the organization is not linear. What do I mean by this? In the organization, we see things every day that show a disproportion between what we consider cause and effect. Take trust, for example. It usually takes a lot to build. It looks like a slow growth curve. Suddenly, something happens (an event, a reward, acknowledgement of error and show of honesty at the top ...) and trust levels rocket. It may stay like this for a long time. Then, something else happens - perhaps only a relatively small breach, in the broad context - and trust is quickly eroded, slipping down the curve and often leaving behind a strong sense of injustice and feelings of unfairness. The reality is that, whether we like it or not, small interventions ('disruptions') sometimes have a big impact or huge repercussions. This non-linear context, in which we work every day, is vital to understanding change in organizations. However, most of the 'change management' frameworks we are familiar with - and most planning and implementation processes for that matter - assume the opposite, i.e. linearity: big problems need big solutions, big changes need big interventions, big goals need a big number of

strategic objectives and a big number of actions and implementations.

2. Let's go deeper into change. Many experienced managers would agree that there is no real change unless we see change in behaviours. We can map new processes and systems, design new structures, create massive communication plans, train people and then call it change. But if people continue working like before or if their behaviours have not changed much, then all we have is the illusion of change. The problem is that the main assumption -

“We can map new processes and systems and call it change. But if people’s behaviours have not changed much, all we have is the illusion of change”

tacit or explicit - behind 'processes and change' is a flawed one: that is, behaviours will follow as a consequence of change in processes. We had A, we changed to B because it is better; people will behave accordingly. As many people know, that doesn't happen ... at

least, not all the time!

The above assumption is wrong. Behaviours are misplaced in the equation. New processes and systems do not create behaviours in a sustainable way. Even an initial peak of positive reaction is often followed by fading interest and low adoption. Simply reactive change in behaviours following the implementation of a new process or system is often unsustainable. On the contrary, we need to have those behaviours in the organization first in order to sustain a new process! Let's look at an example. Imagine that you are introducing 'collaborative software', a system that enables people to share information, create common repositories, share ideas and plans, continuously update customer data, etc. The new system will not create

¹ Herrero, Leandro, 2006, *Viral Change: the alternative to slow, painful and unsuccessful management of change in organizations*, meetingminds, UK

collaboration per se. It will not convert individualistic people into gregarious collaborators. It will not make people input data into the CRM (customer relationship management) system just because they can. Collaborative behaviour needs to be pre-existing in the behavioural fabric of the organization. Then the 'collaborative software' will facilitate collaboration in a sustainable way. The software needs the process first, the process needs the behaviours first ... so, behaviours must come first.

3. To paraphrase Margaret Thatcher ('there is no such thing as society'), I would say that there is no such thing as culture, there are only behaviours. Behaviours create culture, not the other way around². Culture is not a closed container of things such as beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours and logos. Intellectually it may be stimulating to use all these terms - they make for good conversations - but pragmatically, other than the visible logo (as a shortcut to 'a culture'), the only other observable things are behaviours. A culture of accountability, for example, does not exist in the same way as an HR department or a Performance Management system does. Seeing people doing A,B,C (taking responsibility for actions, keeping promises, reacting to problems quickly and being rewarded for clear outcomes) - thereby behaving in a specific manner - allows us to label that culture in such a way. The same applies to any other 'culture'. 'Culture of innovation' is a good, appealing and engaging, but otherwise not terribly effective operational concept beyond the language itself. What we see is people doing innovative things,

“Culture is not a closed container of things such as beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, and logos. Intellectually it may be stimulating to use all these terms but pragmatically, other than the visible logo the only other observable things are behaviours”

² Herrero, Leandro, 2005, Article: *Forget culture, change behaviours* (Can be found and read at www.thechalfontproject.com/ideaslab.htm)

improving the way they solve problems, coming up with new ideas, routinely asking themselves 'can we do this differently', etc. It is precisely because of the collective existence of these behaviours in a particular organization that we allow ourselves to label it 'culture of innovation', not because there is an 'innovation container' where these things reside. You may argue that if these behaviours do exist, it's surely because the place must have processes, systems, rules, etc. that allow or facilitate people to behave in those ways. This is true, but those processes, systems and rules have been created by individuals; they are the output of their behaviours. Some people create the rules for other people to be able to do innovative things; other people follow them. In both cases, we are talking behaviours.

These three premises: (1) the non-linearity of the organization, (2) the need to focus on behaviours to create and declare 'real change' and (3) the understanding of culture as a concept which only makes sense through visible behaviours, allow us to establish the fundamental basis for an alternative, modern approach to management of change. This is Viral Change™, which I have introduced before with the statement that 'under certain conditions, a small set of behaviours has the power to create significant change'.

The next question must be the 'how'. To answer this, we have to start by questioning how we could define that small set of behaviours. Let me say upfront that any behaviour needs reinforcement (reward, recognition) in order to become stable. Put differently: if behaviour A is there, it is because it's being reinforced (whether we know what or who is reinforcing it or not). So if we need to reinforce the behaviours belonging to that small set, we need to define them at a level that can be easily reinforced. What level is this? It is rather detailed and concrete with unequivocal meaning for all people involved. Let's look at an example. Collaboration is certainly a behaviour, but left at that conceptual level, two people may easily have different interpretations of what it means. And even worse, they may not double-check their understanding of the meaning and tacitly assume that they are both talking about the same thing. This high level concept - which I have called macromolecular, to use a biological

analogy - is not very helpful in terms of reinforcement. These two people may be rewarding different or even opposite things under the same collaboration banner.

If we try to be more specific, people may come up with some further translations. For example, for X, collaboration is the sharing of information between teams and for Y it's the spontaneous sharing of resources when needed. This level is now beginning to look more susceptible to reinforcement, because I am bound to see whether the information and/or the resources are shared and which people do so. I have called this level 'molecular'. The same people discussing this - now perhaps having gained a better understanding of this challenge - may want to go even further and say, for example, that the real behaviours they would like to see are people from team A sending a weekly email to all members of team B with updated information on customers, and that the leaders of A and B meet every Monday to 'lend resources' to each other. I call this level of behaviours 'atomic'.

This atomic level, viewed out of context may appear trivial, particularly to anybody who is not part of the exercise. But within the greater context - that is, having the atomic behaviours that create molecular ones and molecular behaviours that create high level macromolecular concepts - these atomic behaviours are far from trivial. The test of the validity of atomic behaviours is simple. It only requires management judgment and imagination. The question to be asked is: *"Imagine that everybody did (atomic behaviour here), that it became the norm, a routine; what kind of organization would we be building?"* This 'imagine if' test is at the core of the way we need to map this small set of behaviours. Depending on the circumstances of the organization or indeed the goals of the 'change management programme', you - perhaps with some guidance from people with a

strong behavioural sciences background - will come up with a list of potential behaviours, all of them passing your 'imagine if' test.

The next step is choice. My words are used carefully. I don't say prioritization, although this is certainly one way of choosing. The difference, however, is relevant. In our traditional prioritization process, we perhaps define what is achievable or not, or what can be done with the resources available. Narrowing down the choices often entails abandoning all those good ideas that are 'not under our control' or would be too costly. Unfortunately, this approach means that in many cases, the ones that could make the biggest impact slip through the net. These considerations may be important but in my experience, people dismiss ideas on this basis too often and too quickly. With the behavioural focus - as opposed to the process focus - there is a lot one can do even without direct control of some resources.

In Viral Change™ mode, we invite management to exercise judgment and choose behaviours mainly driven by the 'imagine if' test. In my consulting experience with organizations, a small set of four to six behaviours defined at atomic level and passing the 'imagine if' test is all we need to create big change.

“Imagine that everybody did (behaviour here), that it became the norm, a routine; what kind of organization would we be building?” This ‘imagine if’ test is at the core of the way we need to map behaviours”

Still in the 'how', we need to add another principle: that is, the organization *is* a network of connections (flow of information + influence). This is hardly a groundbreaking statement. However, most management practices and 'change management process' pay lip service to it, whilst focusing energy and attention on a concept of the organization that resembles a 'plumbing system' with leadership at the top and a flow of goals, guidelines, rules and data percolating down the pipes through all management levels. This rather mechano-hydraulic - input at the top, output at the bottom - concept of the organization includes the existence of groupings

of people with common goals, called teams. In fact, the default concept of the organization is one of being a teamocracy³. We have been taught that teams are the natural form of collaboration, and management practices have internalized this fully to the extent that we happily and more or less unconsciously equate collaboration and team.

However, the modern view of the organization is more one of an often loose network of connections between individuals. Yes, some of those connections have been designed and manufactured in order to achieve performance (teams, committees, task forces) but these may only account for a quarter of the total. It is like visiting a new city and jumping on a bus tour. You see the monuments, the buildings of the institutions, the main streets and parks and some curiosities. This hardly gives you a profound understanding of city life. In reality, many citizens may spend their entire productive city life without stepping into any of those buildings, streets or parks. The bus tour of the organization shows us teams and structures, but there is a lot more going on. Informal conversations, spontaneous collaboration, tapping into intellectual capital outside the borders of 'my team', asking questions, starting a conversation on a common worrying issue, venting emotions (including whinging, frustration, incredulity or admiration), etc. occur in the networks of individuals, the real highways of the organization. Some of those connections are 'strong ties' (close, frequent) and others are 'weak ties' (distant, loose, occasional), as defined by sociologists. Most - but not all - of the strong type groupings are represented by the teams. These are the designed and visible spaces of collaboration. But perhaps up to three quarters of the organizational life is only understood in the context of those highways of looser and perhaps invisible connections where 'conversations happen'.

Today, we know quite a lot about how networks work, thanks to a captivating convergence of social sciences and computer sciences. There are remarkable similarities between those networks, whether they are ones providing the connections on

³ Herrero, Leandro, *Competing on collaboration: teamocracy and its discontents* (to be published by meetingminds)

“Perhaps up to three
quarters of the
organizational life is only
understood in the context
of those highways of looser
and perhaps invisible
connections where
'conversations happen'”

the worldwide web, computer networks, or social networks such as the ones that truly represent the organizational life. I believe that three characteristics of those networks have fascinating consequences for the management of the organization and the management of change.

First of all, the network is not terribly democratic and egalitarian. A few nodes (individuals) have loads of connections and most of the other nodes (individuals) have fewer connections. It is far from the usual Bell curve or normal distribution that constantly comes to mind when we ask ourselves any question about performance of people in the organization. In fact, it is better represented by a power law or logarithmic distribution. Incidentally, this characteristic - well-demonstrated both in the e-world and the social-world⁴ - should hardly be a surprise for people working in organizations. The fact that a relatively small number of individuals, not necessarily high in the hierarchical ranks, seem to be very well connected is a 'street observation'.

The second characteristic is even less egalitarian. Those nodes (individuals) with a high number of connections tend to acquire even more; and those with fewer connections tend to stay like this or even have progressively less (unless some sort of 'personal mutation' happens). Again, this is unsurprising; another formulation for 'the rich get richer (in connections, power, influence) and the

⁴ The connections between websites, the connectivity of blogs, how quotations in scientific papers aggregate (and science expands), the structure of head-less terrorist organizations, individual social networks and networks of influence both at micro and macro social levels ... all amazingly seem to share the same 'power law': few have loads, most have few.

poor get poorer'. I have called this the Matthew effect of networks⁵.

The third characteristic is that at some point in the life of those nodes, some of them will stop behaving as individual nodes and will adopt a collective single unitary behaviour. A tipping point occurs and a new entity or phenomenon appears. This is a complicated way of explaining how water molecules turn to ice at zero degrees - phase transition in physics. Extrapolating with some liberty to social life, the individuals of a team may stop being individuals with differentiated thinking, only to see one, single, unified, strong and internally cohesive reality. We call it 'groupthink'.

If we put these three characteristics together – power law, Matthew effect and tipping points - and then apply them to the organizational life, a fantastic and enlightening picture appears. Effectively, a small group of individuals hold the power to influence the rest of the organization, but they can hardly be represented by the hierarchy shown on the organization chart. This group or sector of the network will grow in their influence over time (although their membership may change). If these highly connected, highly influential people took on board the spread of that small set of behaviours that passed the 'imagine if' test, endorsed them, practiced them, encouraged others to do the same and reinforced those behaviours when they saw them (peer to peer) then, at some stage of that progression of influence, a 'social-phase-transition' (tipping point) will occur and those behaviours would become established as a new routine. We may not see the transition, in the same way that we do not see the water molecules 'becoming ice'!

"Change takes the form of an internal epidemic of new behaviours, a true social infection, not a cascaded down 'training' or communication programme with a series of presentations and workshops"

People who have been influenced, can now influence others - with a power consistent with their degree of connectivity - and again at some point, some clusters of individuals will have enough critical mass to 'tip' and establish a new routine or behavioural norm. Change under these circumstances takes the form of an internal epidemic of new behaviours, a true social infection, not a cascaded down 'training' or communication programme with a series of presentations and workshops.

So, who are those 'powerful people'? How can we find them and ask them for help? There are many ways - with different degrees of sophistication - at our disposal to identify those people. The academic, social sciences way is to use tools to perform what is called a 'social network analysis' or mapping of those connections, which can be done via questionnaires or other means. My 'practitioner's way' is to simply ask people! In my consulting experience, if you ask senior management for a

particular profile of individuals - highly connected, great influence, people listen to them, what they do matters and is sometimes imitated, may be in lower ranks, etc. - they are able to write down names almost on the spot. It is a less sophisticated, more pragmatic way to 'find' those people, who will be asked to help in the spreading of new behaviours.

The mechanisms for that spread are well-known in social sciences: imitation, social copying, role modelling, etc. In practical terms it means Joe having a conversation with Lisa in terms like this: *"You know, I think it is about time we take this seriously and keep our promises. I am certainly going to start. At the next meeting, I am going to propose that we check with each other for any broken promises. What do you think? I am all for it."* This may be a small and simplistic example, but in Viral Change™ mode all starts with initial

⁵ *"For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."* (Matthew XXV:29, KJV). The 'Matthew effect' is a term originally used in sociology to describe how often scientific credit is given to people already famous even if the work was done by other collaborators.

“In Viral Change™, a small set of behaviours, spread via internal networks of influence, by a small group of people, creates behavioural tipping points”

“A model of ‘distributed leadership’ emerges and suddenly the organization becomes ‘leader rich’ with its champion community”

endorsement and role modelling from that small set of highly connected individuals, which I tend to label ‘Change Champions’ or ‘Change Agents’.

Whilst at individual and micro-social level, the main vehicle of propagation is imitation, social copying or conformity with ‘a new rule’ established by somebody (or a group) one trusts, at macro-social level (still within the organization) the main vehicle is the story. What has worked or not, how a team overcame a bureaucratic barrier, how another group bypassed the ‘lack of data’ in order to act, what John did in Scotland with a sceptical customer, how meetings have completely changed in that Unit by adapting the agenda to the new required behaviours, how people in that group in Cornwall systematically pick up the phone and ask peers in East Anglia for input or ideas, etc. ... these are the kind of things people remember and tend to imitate or ‘bookmark’. It may sound as the practice of ‘Best Practices’, but it isn’t. ‘Best Practices’ is often project focused and rather static, only reviewed annually or at planned times. Stories flow every day and can be spread at any time producing a constant stream of ‘things that are now happening and that weren’t there before’.

We can now see how Viral Change™ is very different from the standard ‘me-too change management programme’. In the standard, conventional way, a big set of actions, communicated to all, more or less at the same time, at all management levels, is expected to reach every corner of the organization and produce

change. In Viral Change™ mode, a small set of behaviours, spread via internal networks of influence, by a small group of people, create an internal infection and behavioural tipping points leading to sustainable changes, further spread by stories.

Three further characteristics of Viral Change™ also need to be taken into account:

(a) The measure of success is not done via the usual set of milestones and deadlines. In fact, a metrics system needs to be created from scratch and tailored to the organization, including those elements of the ‘imagine if’ test that the organization wants to ‘see’. With the traditional ‘me-too’ programme, everything is mapped upfront, timetabled and ‘predicted’. With the Viral Change™ approach it is appropriate to construct fit-for-purpose metrics once the process has started and the champions themselves can play a big role in that mapping. The metrics system may contain some quantitative data but it is likely to be constructed mainly on a qualitative basis, based upon the flow of stories. This is not the usual way that heavily process-driven organizations ‘measure things’ and it may need some effort to understand and adjust management’s mindset. As Einstein said, *“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”*

(b) Viral Change™ challenges leadership models in the organization, since what’s required here is backstage support to the champions’ community in their spread of the infection. In fact, a model of ‘distributed leadership’ emerges and, suddenly, the organization becomes ‘leader rich’ with its champion’s community. Top-down leadership must facilitate, support and enable the hidden work of the champions. There is no command and control involved with this community. In fact, if you push me in terms of defining a hierarchical line, the champions community report directly to - and have a mandate from - the top leadership team, regardless of where the individual champion sits in a particular line management structure of the ‘plumbing system’.

(c) The word “hidden” in the paragraph above is not trivial. Viral Change™ occurs in a rather informal and invisible way, like an infection. There are no workshops where line managers brief the champions or a myriad of PowerPoints cascaded down. Champions may want to meet with people, but that will be on their own initiative and it will be informal. (Again, leadership needs to facilitate this by removing barriers or enabling some resources) There are no big declarations of ‘a new programme’ or anything that looks/may look like ‘another corporate initiative’⁶. The more visible and more formal Viral Change™ becomes, the less likely its success. Invisibility doesn’t mean secrecy. The aims can be well stated by the top leadership as a one-off, but afterwards the less we talk and the more we act the better. Also, informality doesn’t mean chaos. It means allowing informal conversations and facilitating the non-formal, non-structured life of the organization. In fact, the greatest risk to Viral Change™ is the almost inevitable tendency to formalize it more than needed; something that sometimes occurs spontaneously in the management ranks due to our learned way of doing things.

This is not to say that with Viral Change™ there is no structure or organization involved. In fact most of the things described here require some planning and a small team backstage, coordinating and facilitating the optimum environment. For example, champions need to be identified and called in to help; they need to be gathered and presented with the ideas, the new behaviours and the way we propose them to work. Periodical gatherings of this community are needed to extract stories and track progress. Line management needs to be briefed on what is expected from them and, more importantly, what is not expected - such as directly managing the champions in their divisions, etc. So there is still a fair amount of social engineering required, but not on the scale of the traditional cascade down ‘the plumbing system’ type.

In summary, Viral Change™ provides a different framework for the creation and spread of change

“The greatest risk to Viral Change™ is the almost inevitable tendency to formalize it more than needed; something that sometimes occurs spontaneously in the management ranks due to our learned way of doing things”

which is sustained by both theory and practice. On the theoretical side, it has solid foundations in social sciences, behavioural sciences and modern network theory (the latter in itself being built from computer sciences and complexity theory). On the practical side, we have significant experiences of this approach working in practical terms. For example, a collaborative environment, created in three to six months, still established and sustainable after three years.

Let me finally update the original premises at the beginning of this paper and summarize the key ingredients of Viral Change™, both premises and distinctive actions:

1. The organization is not linear, so it makes sense to look for small interventions (‘disruptions’) with potentially big impact
2. Behaviours are the only real currency for change
3. A small, reinforce-able set of those behaviours needs to be chosen
4. The spread of those behaviours occurs via internal networks of connections - mostly rather invisible - and through the initial influence of a small set of individuals (champions). These are the dimensions that I referred to at the beginning when I used the terms ‘under certain circumstances’
5. New behaviours travel via stories and change takes place as an internal epidemic of success
6. Measuring success is an ongoing effort through qualitative data and tailored

⁶ Herrero, Leandro, 2006, Article: *New initiative? Sure, whatever* (Can be found and read at www.thechalfontproject.com/ideaslab.htm)

- metrics designed in part by the champions' community
7. Leadership is distributed across the organization, with formal leaders and managers playing a role of support and facilitation, not one of command and control
 8. Viral Change™ as a process must be fairly invisible and informal for it to work. However, that invisibility and informality need to be crafted. These characteristics are counterintuitive to the traditional organization and management may need to adjust their mindset
 9. The main risk of failure comes from too much structure and the natural tendency to revert to a standard 'change management programme'
 10. Beyond the obvious objectives of Viral Change™ in the creation of specific cultural changes, this framework provides us with an opportunity to question our concept of the organization itself, our leadership practices and the capacity of leaders to navigate through levels of ambiguity that are necessary for a more agile enterprise. One with less command and control and where life is a constantly emerging discovery of possibilities beyond what is formally written, planned, measured, communicated and celebrated.

Dr Leandro Herrero is the CEO of The Chalfont Project Ltd, an international firm of organizational architects (www.thechalfontproject.com). He is the author of several books including *Viral Change*, *The Leader with Seven Faces* and *New Leaders Wanted: Now Hiring!*