

Introduction:
Changing the
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A small set of rules, particularly a small set of behaviours, has the power to create significant and sustainable change in the organisation.

This statement - crucial to understanding the type of change management that I have labelled Viral Change™ - is based upon three premises:

- 1.** Life in the organisation is not linear. What do I mean by this? Every day in the organisation, we see things 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 feeling of unfairness.

The reality is that sometimes, whether we like it or not, small interventions ('disruptions') have a big impact or huge repercussions. This non-linear context, in which we work every day, is vital to understanding change in organisations. 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 dig a bit deeper into change. Many experienced managers would agree that there is no real change unless we see a change in behaviours. We can design new structures, create massive communication plans, map new processes and systems, 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 - 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. The fact is that 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 organisation 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 may not create 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 somehow needs to be pre-existing in the behavioural fabric of the organisation. 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.

These days, new Web 2.0 technology, such as social networks, blogs or wikis, has more capacity than any other previous technology to trigger new behaviours. Facebook, YouTube, SMS... they all *generate* behaviours, so the above relationship between process, technology and behaviours has even become a bit more complex. For the first time we have technologies that are 'simple' and 'pervasive' and, above all, training-less. If people within the firm have the ability to communicate on an internal blog and they can grasp the benefits almost on the spot, then a minimal critical mass of adopters may suddenly appear to be creating a true 'behavioural tipping point' where blog-communication has become the norm. In that sense, technology (the blog) created the behaviours (fast communication and fast participation) and a new process for collaboration (real time fluid discussion without email) was born. However, two things need to be taken into consideration here:

(a) Some sort of collaborative behaviour was already present in terms of needs. The existence of

the blog per se was not going to change the behaviours of people who weren't interested in sharing any idea.

(b) Even if collaboration was triggered (because people 'needed' it and jumped at the opportunity), sustaining it would soon be dependent not on the continuous availability of the technology (it will still be there), but on the reinforcement of the behaviours, that is, the benefits associated with the behaviours of people communicating in that way.

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 around. 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 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. 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 concept, but beyond the language itself, it's not a terribly effective, operational one. What we see is people doing innovative things, 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 organisation that we can allow ourselves to label it a '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 organisation, (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 opposing 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 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 judgement and imagination. The question to be asked is: "*Imagine that everybody did (insert atomic behaviour here), that it became the norm, a routine; what kind of organisation would we be building?*" This 'imagine' test is at the core of the way we need to map this small set of behaviours.

Depending on the circumstances of the organisation 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' test.

The next step is choice. My words are used carefully. I don't say prioritisation, although this is certainly one way of choosing. The difference, however, is relevant. In our traditional prioritisation 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 much we can do even without direct control of some resources.

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

Still in the 'how', we need to add another principle: that is, the organisation is a network of connections (flow of information + influence). This is hardly a groundbreaking statement. However, most management practices and 'change management process' do nothing more than pay lip service to it, whilst focusing energy and attention on a concept of the organisation that resembles a 'plumbing system' with leadership at the top and 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 organisation includes the existence of groupings of people with common goals, called teams. In fact, the default concept of the organisation is one of being a teamocracy. We have been taught that teams are the natural form of collaboration and management practices have internalised this fully to the extent that we happily and more or less unconsciously equate collaboration and team.

However, the modern view of the organisation 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 organisation 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 organisation.

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 organisational 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 the worldwide web, computer networks or social networks such as the ones that truly represent the organisational life. I believe that three characteristics of those networks have fascinating

consequences for the management of the organisation and the management of change.

First of all, the network is not terribly democratic and equalitarian. 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 organisation. 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 world - should hardly be a surprise for people working in organisations. 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 poor get poorer'. I have called this the Matthew effect of networks (*"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 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 organisational life, a fantastic and enlightening picture appears. Effectively, a small group of individuals holds the power to influence the rest of the organisation, but they can hardly be represented by the hierarchy shown on the organisation 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' 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) would 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 turning into ice! 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 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 organisation) 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 organisation 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 organisation, including those elements of the 'imagine' test that the organisation wants to 'see'. With the traditional 'me-too' programme, everything is mapped up front, 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 organisations '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 organisation, 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 organisation 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 reports directly to - and have a mandate from - the top leadership team, regardless of where the individual champion sits in a particular line management structure within 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'. 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 organisation. In fact, the greatest risk to Viral Change™ is the almost inevitable tendency to formalise 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 organisation 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'.

In summary, Viral Change™ provides a different framework for the creation and spread of change 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 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 introduction and summarise the key ingredients of Viral Change™, both premises and distinctive actions:

- 1.** The organisation is not linear, so it makes sense to look for small interventions ('disruptions') with potentially big impact. This book provides you with 30 different 'disruptions' to choose from! 10 of them have been categorised as structural, 10 as process based and 10 as behavioural. You don't need all 30. In fact, you must choose the ones that, when combined, can create the organisational change you're aiming for. The way to make those choices is simple: imagine! Imagine your

organisation once the chosen disruptive structure or process or behaviour or combinations thereof have been implemented! As mentioned in the prologue, each chapter has a few paragraphs inviting you to imagine and literally picture if this is where you want to go. Those paragraphs are there as an illustration and invitation to you to embellish the picture with your own imagination.

2. Behaviours are the only real currency for change. The book provides you with 10 of them as a suggestion, taken from my experience because of their capacity to introduce change in a significant way. But remember that the 10 (disruptive) structures and the 10 (disruptive) processes are de facto hiding other behaviours. When you choose Structures or Processes you must do so by imagining what the organisation (culture) would look like after those structures and processes have been implemented, in terms of how people would behave differently. In other words, Structures and Processes are here to create change and - if there is no change unless there is a change in behaviours - then those structures and processes must have the capacity to trigger, induce or facilitate behaviours, because behaviours are the only thing you will be able to see/reinforce. As we said before on the example of collaboration, if people have no interest whatsoever in collaborating, you'll need to engineer a way of inducing 'a taste of it', so that the behaviour is visible enough to be reinforceable.

- 3.** A small, reinforceable set of those behaviours needs to be chosen. In the end, you may perhaps need five or six or eight... Some of them may come from the list of 10 behaviours and others may have been 'discovered' as underlying to some of the 10 structures or 10 processes. The short 'Imagine' section in each of those chapters will point you in the direction of some behaviours. So, for your organisation, you may for example be choosing 2 ideas/rules from 'structures', 3 from 'processes' and 2 from 'behaviours'. Now you have your dynamite! You will implement the new 'structures' and 'processes' in a way that will seed, trigger or 'create' some behaviours. I have said before that processes do not create sustainable behaviours per se, but they may trigger them and then they will need to be reinforced. So simply implementing the 2 new structures and the 3 processes without looking at the behaviours behind them will render your dynamite inexplusive in no time.

- 4.** The spread of those behaviours occurs via internal networks of connections - mostly rather invisible – and, more effectively, 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 term 'under certain circumstances'. I strongly recommend you to consider the champions model if your chosen combination of structures + processes + behaviours requires changes that need to be spread

across the organisation. (See my book, *Viral Change*, for a description of how the champions' model works.)

5. New behaviours travel via stories and change takes place as an internal epidemic of success. Spend time describing how the combination of whatever number of structures, processes and behaviours you chose, made any difference and spread those stories as much as you can.
6. Measuring success is an ongoing effort through qualitative data and tailored metrics
7. If you choose the champions model of Viral Change™, leadership is distributed across the organisation, 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 needs to be crafted. These characteristics are counterintuitive to the traditional organisation and management may need to adjust their mindset. I strongly suggest that once you have chosen the combination of structures, processes and behaviours, you do not create a massive communication programme about them but make them spread via imitation. This is where a champions' community, even if small, can help a lot.

9. The main risk of failure comes from too much structure and the natural tendency to revert to a standard 'change management programme', in which we talk a lot about the programme and spend less time making sure that changes are happening. To achieve success, you must choose your combination of ideas from within the 10+10+10 and 'just do it'!

10. See the opportunity of creating specific cultural changes through the 10+10+10=1000 rule as an opportunity to question your concept of the organisation itself, your leadership practices and the capacity of your leaders to navigate through levels of ambiguity that are necessary for a more agile enterprise. An organisation 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.

