

Understanding and creating positive change

We were asked to facilitate the development of a cadre of change agents in the services function of a multi national corporation. The tradition was one of approaches to change that had delivered some way short of expectation such as business process re-engineering. The brief was to bring some different perspectives to their work.

Working in partnership with an internal consultant we designed a two-day event supported by a learning set approach to ground the theory in practice. A reading list of books and articles was assembled, which illustrated two different approaches to understanding and working with change. One strand represented the linear change programmes familiar to most organisations whilst the other represented the emerging participatory worldview complete with complexity uncertainty and possibility. These were circulated a month before the event with an invitation to choose a title, which captured the interest of the individual participants.

In choosing this design we multiplied the duration of the event in terms of time spent in engagement with notions of change. We also overtly shared responsibility for the success of the event with the participants by involving them in the content preparation.

Following an initial framing each was invited to share what they had read and the key impressions they were left with. Each piece stimulated conversation and debate, which formed an initial inquiry into what we each understood by organisational change. Then, the pressing issues of the organisation itself were revisited in light of the new perspectives and small groups explored how they understood change using visual representations.

We did not seek to promote one right way of understanding change but an appreciation of the variety of ways it is possible to make sense of what we all experience. The ideas they choose were the ones that worked for them, at that time, in those circumstances. We resisted any temptation we felt to steer them in particular direction.

In a planning session toward the end of the event we noticed a pattern of bullet points emerging, which were characterised by the use of third party terminology (we, they, etc). We observed the pattern and asked for the commitments to be made and owned in the first person. The shift in intensity became palpable as people brought their whole selves into the room for the first time and in doing so recognised that in everyone of them lay both the potential for good and for bad that had been projected onto 'others'.

Whilst this intervention was unplanned and the resulting conversation messy and difficult it was extremely powerful in helping people engage in a way they had not done before. The value lay in noticing behaviours which when repeated in the organisation would amplify the message that someone else was responsible for the mess and some one else again would clear it up. In a very real sense, the meeting *is* the message.

The ensuing learning sets worked with new engagement and openness to their own impact on those around them.

