
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Changing for the better? Living with the inherent paradox of change

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Humans have a fascinating, albeit paradoxical, relationship with change.

Many of us desire improvement, growth and development. Queue the stream of New Year resolutions, which infer dissatisfaction with the status quo and a commitment and promise to self-improve, change, alter some aspect of life, or develop a quality, attribute or capability, ultimately translating into better jobs, relationships, health, education, income, benefits, or simply a richer or better life. The resolutions imply recognition of inadequacies, or perceived underachievement, and a dedicated commitment to overcome or improve such shortcomings, at a convenient landmark, such as the upcoming New Year. Such resolutions are entertaining to make, following reflection on past performance, but often prove hard to keep and maintain beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm. The attitude is aptly embodied by Oprah Winfrey's acknowledgement: 'cheers to a new year and another chance for us to get it right'.

But there is also the other side of change: When a potential change is about to be imposed, the afflicted change consumers appear to resist any attempt to alter existing conditions, often fighting, blocking and undermining the imposition of new circumstances, regardless of the potential value or improvement on offer. Indeed, English novelist and essayist Mary Shelley (1797-1851) noted that 'Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change, whilst US president, Woodrow Wilson quipped that 'if you want to make enemies, try to change something'.

It would thus appear that change has the potential to invoke promises informed by clear illustration of benefits emerging from a great desire to improve. However, change can also engender strong feelings, resistance and protests against the intention to implement new measures.

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers, click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

Reconciling change

Psychologists and psychiatrists have also been fascinated with the concept of facilitating and introducing change. A long-standing debate tries to determine if individuals remain relatively constant over their lifetime, displaying a tendency for stability. The alternative view implies a degree of malleability and psychological plasticity allowing for change through adjustments. In this view culture, events, experiences and conscious decisions can play a part in effecting a change in people.

One of the fascinating perspectives comes from the tradition of Gestalt Therapy and has resulted in the development of the paradoxical theory of change. The basic concept is associated with the thinking of psychiatrist Fredrick Perls, implemented throughout the life and work of his disciple, Arnold Beisser.

Beisser was an extremely talented tennis player (ranked 17th in the world) and qualified MD when he was struck down by polio at the age of 25, a mere months before the polio vaccine became widely available. Suddenly, the active young man found himself plugged into a negative pressure ventilator (iron lung) enabling him to breathe after losing normal muscle control. The change was particularly hard as he found himself, in his own words, 'transformed from doctor into patient and from champion into cripple'.

Despite his paralysis, Beisser was able to re-build his life and become a leading psychotherapist who influenced the lives of a multitude of patients including many athletes and sports personalities. Beisser developed an influential theory of psychological, mental and emotional change by analysing his own journey to function despite his sudden and life changing disability, allowing him to practice and formulate the principles of the paradoxical theory of change.

"Briefly stated, it is this: that change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is -- to be fully invested in his current positions." – Arnold Beisser

Stated simply, change begins when one ceases trying to be what they are not, and begins instead to be what they are.

Beisser himself, took time to accept the change in his circumstances. Entering the rest of his life in a wheelchair first meant recognising that things were different. The great insight is that the purpose of the therapy, intervention, or reflection is to allow the subject to be.

With that in mind, sessions can be dedicated to becoming comfortable with being. When the subject is comfortable with their state of being, there are obvious changes and adjustments that can take place, as the surrounding environment around them continues to change. In order to remain true to themselves, they can continue to change in response to external changes to the world and other people and systems

around them, thereby reflecting the dynamic transaction between the self and the environment.

Psychiatrists have since expanded their scope of interest beyond the individual self to encompass social change, and the wider need to reflect the interaction with shifting society, moving and transforming at an even faster pace.

Paradoxically, the implication to practice is that while changing may be the motivation for an inquiry into current conditions, one does not change by trying to change. Instead one changes (gradually) by being; as change only follows not changing.

So how do we manage change?

Arnold Beisser noted that 'By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible'.

In his view, the therapist's role is not to act as a change agent as his strategy is simply to encourage the patient to be. Change does not happen following trying, coercion or persuasion. Even insight, interpretation and other analysis-based approaches are not needed. The therapist eschews the role of 'changer' to support the patient in being where and what he is. The purpose of therapy is therefore to become comfortable enough with being, so that you can respond to changes with change of your own. By not pursuing a change agenda, it becomes possible to change in a natural and adaptive way.

Change is clearly a complex, and traumatic process. The insights from psychoanalysis imply a lesser focus on the imperative for change. They also suggest avoiding a coercive perspective which leads to enforcing change and managing its implementation.

Out of recognition that most change efforts fail (see for example, Kotter), behavioural scientists increasingly emphasise the leadership angle through supporting behaviours and designing environments that foster such behaviours. New ideas in systems thinking and complexity theory enable the understanding of emergent relationships and interactions and facilitate the analysis of holistic impacts of actions. Contemporary thinking is thus shifting from a focus on managing towards a softer recognition of the need to lead, or even to facilitate change actions. This implies a significant change in the perspective and the approaches applied while dealing with change.

Rethinking business performance

The sustainability and growth of organisations depends on their ability to embrace change, adapt and continue to thrive. Indeed, English philosopher and physicist John Locke (1632-1704) observed that 'things of this world are in so constant a flux, that nothing remains long in the same state'.

Management guru, Peter Drucker considered it a clear opportunity to thrive by exploiting change: “The entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity.”

Yet, the challenge of how to organise and build for sustained engagement with change remains. Greek author, Nikos Kazantzak, noted that ‘since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality’. As practitioners we often need to find the pair of eyes that we can adopt to begin to be, or even to see afresh.

Such a fresh perspective is offered by the guest article, which is focused on the role of change management in transformation efforts. The article was written by Sankaran Ramani and developed from his book *Improving Business Performance: A Project Portfolio Management Approach*, published by CRC Press. Ramani acknowledges the crucial role of people and culture. His work notes that successful change initiatives rely on the development of integrated eco-systems of organisational portfolios, programmes and projects, so that the change initiatives become the delivery mechanisms for implementing the strategy of the organisation.

Rather than focus on a single level, or on projects in isolation, Ramani’s work is concerned with the integration of the different change efforts to facilitate alignment to strategy and accommodate on-going change. While it places portfolio management at the apex of change initiative management, it also considers the integration of programmes and projects to facilitate the wider interactions across diverse change initiatives, thereby offering the essential infrastructure for adaptive and responsive change, supportive of benefit realisation.

Is it time to re-think change?

Many organisations are ill prepared for change. US Management guru Tom Peters observed that ‘excellent firms don’t believe in excellence – only in constant improvement and constant change’. The challenge for many organisations remains to embrace such change and thrive and prosper under such dynamic and volatile conditions.

So, do we get to manage change?

Well, not really. We engage with change constantly, and adapt and respond in its wake. We can try and work with those impacted by change and create organisational structures, such as the mechanisms proposed by Ramani to address some of the influences. Other means are also available: Introducing agile infrastructure, for example, could allow us the flexibility and luxury of adjusting, responding and adapting.

Kurt Lewin observed that in order to truly understand something; you need to try to change it. Recognising that individuals cannot be coerced into change initiatives may require new methods of conceiving our own roles, our state of being, and the ultimate relationships to change. It will also impact the ways we approach stakeholder engagement, relationships, expectations and communications, and

should also be reflected in how we think about and measure benefits, and in how we consider the usage of planned new assets (potentially leading to the ultimate attainment of benefits and through them of overall value).

US businessman, film producer and financier, Ryan Kavanuagh commented that ‘the key is to embrace disruption and change early. Don't react to it decades later. You can't fight innovation.’

Timely adjustment and co-existence are essential. In adopting new ways of facilitating and guiding change, we may need to consider developing a keen understanding of individual beings, of organisational and communal intentions, and re-grasp the role of opportunity. Arnold Beisser provides a significant role model who was able to reposition his life and transform his aspirations from sportsman, to psychoanalyst, and later in his career, when his health and energy failed him, from active teacher to author. Throughout his work, Beisser maintained the power to influence and transform, even from the confines of his wheelchair. His theories and practice re-invigorated psychoanalysis, especially as he was able to draw on his own personal transformation. Whilst there were difficult periods and unexpected decisions, Beisser remains an inspiration to the power of humans to change for the better, even against unimaginable adversity.

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*Editor's note: Editor's note: **Prof Darren Dalcher** is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles authored by Routledge book authors; the above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Routledge author. [To see recent project management books published by Routledge, click here.](#)*

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Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

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