CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE-OUT

After more than three decades of working with organizational change, I have developed tremendous faith in the effectiveness of change from within. Such change is not only effective from the perspective of human resources, offering much greater job satisfaction, fulfillment, optimism, hope and motivation than any other business strategy of which I am aware. It also effective from the standpoint of organizational resources, offering wise and economical use of capital investment as well as investments in training and skills development, resulting from a workforce attuned to focus on the work at hand and using internal and external assets with common sense and practicality.

Again and again, in diverse settings, in organizations large and small, I have seen the remarkable resiliency, creativity and effectiveness of groups of people who realize their own power to have ideas that transcend the limitations of their previous thinking, to build relationships that are sustainable and productive regardless of situations that arise, to find certainty and faith in their own ability to know what to do, what to say, and how to proceed to continually evolve a vibrant organization in service to their common values, vision and mission. When groups find this power, every skill they are taught, every technology they are presented with, every opportunity that arises comes to life for them and they are able to engage their skills and knowledge appropriately and to discover new ideas effortlessly, as they are needed.

This paper is a simple and basic introduction to those who are curious about the inside-out change process.

What is the Underlying Message?

The underlying message behind inside-out leadership and change is: There is a one-to-one connection, in the moment, between people's thinking and their experience. Thus, each person is ultimately and solely responsible for his/her experience and the **only** true change agent is the individual thinking differently. In that respect, people are all the same. The lowest common denominator of the human experience is the ability of each person to think continually, and to see whatever thoughts come to the mind at any moment as the "only" reality one can know -- in that moment.

Here is a simple example of that:

> *Two people in the same department are sitting side by side,*
> *confronted with similar stacks in their in-boxes. Person A looks at*
> *the stack, and the thought occurs to her that she is going to have a*

really productive and fulfilling day because there is so much interesting work to do. Person B looks at the stack, and the thought occurs to her that she is overwhelmed, that no one understands how much she has to do, that she is already exhausted and she hasn't even made a dent in the stack. Which person is most likely to get through her work and feel fulfilled at the end of the day? Can Person A persuade a person who is looking at the reality Person B is looking at that everything will be fine? What would it take for Person B to see things more hopefully? Isn't it just as likely that Person A might, at some other time, have had the same discouraging thoughts as Person B?

We would say that Person B will not see "workload" differently until she sees that her thinking, not the stack, is the source of the "reality" she is seeing in that moment -- and in any given moment. We would say that Person A will not be "protected" from the potential of discouraging thoughts at some other time until she knows that different ideas come and go within people's minds, regardless of the presenting circumstances. If Person A and Person B both become aware that a continual flow of thoughts is a natural fact of life, and that every thought delivers a momentary "reality", they are untroubled and unaffected by their own opinions, good or bad. They simply accept the flow of thoughts as the creative process of life and no particular thought has power over them.

This message is, understandably, upsetting at first to all of us, who have been accustomed to looking to our circumstances; our past, our "bad" or "good" bosses, friends, relatives, colleagues; our life situations; our popularity; our financial conditions, our measurable successes -- any external things -- to explain our thoughts and feelings. Thus most people honestly feel, when they first hear the message, that those sharing these ideas simply don't understand the difficulty and the power of their circumstances. Some people tend to say that the person delivering the fundamental message is "pollyanna" or "uncaring" or "aloof" or "living in a dream world" or "nice but misguided". Some people tend to want us to see the need to "fix" external things from the outside, to expect others to "give" them answers or ideas because that, honestly, looks like their only hope. And they honestly and truly feel that what they've made of their circumstances is self-evident and should be clear to all others. Until ...

At some point during the learning experiences, through reflection and individual insight, it occurs to people that the power they give to circumstances, the very indulgence of their thinking about externals, the very idea of blaming or attributing their experience is **a thought they are having that looks real to them as long as they are having it.** When they see that, they are onto themselves as the thinkers, the creators of their own experience. They are able to change, to transcend their circumstances, and they feel the power, responsibility and actual creative energy they have as human beings to live life from the inside out. This is the ultimate

human freedom -- the freedom that emerges from realizing the power each person has to create his/her own life. This fills and energizes people with a sense of their own health and well-being.

When people see the beauty and energy and resiliency the power of thought provides, as soon as they see that the **content** of their thinking, regardless of how important it looks to them, is momentary, they know that their thoughts can and will change, that new thoughts are always coming to mind. And when people see that the quality of their moment-to-moment thinking is "recognized" through their ability to feel one way or another, they see that their feelings are internally generated, too. No one can "make" someone else feel mad or sad or bad or good -- a middleman, the person's own thoughts, must be engaged in order to generate feelings.

This, then, provides people with an internal guidance system. When our feelings are negative, or harsh, or tight, or unpleasant, or stressed, or unhappy, we have the internal resources to wait out that experience. We don't have to deny it, acknowledge it, express it, or fight it. We simply see that it is thought-related and acting on bad feelings is likely to sustain the thinking and the feelings that we don't, personally, find pleasant or productive. People in negative feelings have never solved a "real" problem -- only exacerbated a perceived problem.

Thus, the "advanced" message is that people have to take responsibility not only for their thinking and what they think is real, but for their feelings as well. People see that they are responsible for using their feelings as an internal guide to when it makes sense to act and when it makes sense to reflect. People discover that there is no benefit to them as individuals to act on bad feelings or to "react" when they are feeling insecure or off-balance because it perpetuates their own distress. They see that it is within them, and natural to them, for these feelings to change and for common sense and calm to return.

Here is an example of this:

> *An executive gets a threatening letter from a dissatisfied customer of his company, filled with personal accusations and personal insults. In the moment he reads the letter, he is hurt and outraged because of the unfairness of it all. He starts thinking about how hard his company has worked to please that customer, and how much he has truly cared about customer satisfaction with all customers. He feels compelled to respond with an angry, defensive and equally threatening retort.*
>
> *Isn't it likely that such a response will create a huge mess? Yet people who do not take responsibility for their own feelings will act in haste and repent at leisure, as the saying goes. If that executive has recognized that it is normal for reactive thoughts to go through his mind and for all people to experience a whole range of feelings and emotions as their thinking changes moment-to-moment, he can use his angry, defensive feelings on his own behalf. He knows that he should wait a while, look at the situation again later, after his thinking settles and he feels calm and confident again.*

Later in the day, he may see that the customer just did what he almost did, too, and he may have the humility to realize that all people sometimes act on their worst feelings. When he comes to peace with the humanity of the situation, he will reflect and find some way to resolve the problem with the customer through good will and understanding. He is unlikely to create a huge mess, and highly likely to find a simple, direct way to put the issue behind both him and the customer.

The message of the inside-out nature of our experience, of the link between thought and our moment-to-moment experience of reality and thought and our moment-to-moment feelings is so ordinary, so close to the bone, that once realized, it looks like nothing. People normally have some difficulty even relating to the way they were before they saw the link between thought and experience. Seeing ourselves change from within is as subtle as watching our children grow day to day. At some point, we see that the "old" clothes don't fit -- but we can't imagine how that happened.

Often, this causes people to "devalue" this learning experience or discredit those who share it, because once people have the insight, the understanding is internal to them and is part of them. No one can "put" things into people; insight is an inside-out experience. Yet an insight about the nature of thought is profoundly freeing to individuals and groups who have previously lived as victims of circumstances. It dawns on them they have simply lived at the mercy of their own thinking about circumstances and they have the freedom to see their thinking come and go, responsively, rather than get hooked on any thought and fight it or cling to it.

What are the implications of this message?

The implications are powerful. First of all, the message flies in the face of "prevailing views" that many of us have held dear and have had reinforced by others for years, so it is surprising. Yet, when people actually look within, all of us can see that "prevailing views" are just the collective thinking of a group or culture, and that, over time, they change. The prevailing views have no power; they are not imposed on us; they are created by people, given how they think and what they agree to think. When things change (the Berlin wall comes down; law enforcers decide that torture is inhumane and stop doing it; doctors recognize the need to sterilize instruments and operatories, people realize the earth is not flat, etc.) the prevailing views shift. People scarcely notice it when a shift occurs because **we are the instruments of the shift**; we change our minds.

In institutions, a shift from an outside-in view of life to an inside-out view of life has tremendous impact. First, empowered people who understand the capacity they have to create their work life together make good decisions and bring about constructive change naturally. The pressure on others or on the organization to meet their needs, to spend money on external fixes, to provide more stuff, to give them tools and techniques and answers fades away. Thus a lot of internal costs diminish. People see that they have answers, that their answers will occur to them

in the moment, and they can and will see the most direct, simple and immediately responsive ways to do things as they need to. When a decision is made to invest in something, it is a decision that makes sense and will produce the most general benefit and the most cost-effective result.

In addition, when people start to value calm and appreciate their own access to wisdom and common sense, hidden costs disappear. Those are the costs in time, energy and less than optimal work product that result from people complaining, getting behind in work because of distraction or feeling overwhelmed, drawing others into negative conversations that drain heart and enthusiasm out of the organization, organizing protests or setting up warring camps or politically motivated cliques, etc. People are actually engaged and productive because what they have on their minds is what is appropriate, in the moment, and they simply enjoy the flow of their day. One sign of this change, often, is that long hours and overtime diminish. People find they can get their work done in a work day and look forward to going home. Their lives come into balance and continue to improve.

So a first sign of internal institutional change is often a change in the bottom line. As people become calmer, more reflective, more creative, more satisfied and confident -- day to day, moment to moment, thousands of tiny decisions and actions change in quality and the result is a more cost-effective and profitable enterprise being created situation by situation without anyone imposing external controls or directions. It comes from people just seeing things with greater clarity, working more effectively and productively, making fewer mistakes, having fewer needs extraneous to the actual demands of the moment, being less emotionally reactive and stressed.

I can truthfully say that no corporation that has approached the leadership and change process by looking to understanding the inside-out nature of it, regardless of the internal politics or the opinions people held before, has been "immune" from this change. They all start making more money and wonder why. It has nothing to do with with tools or techniques or methodology. They have simply looked in a direction that showed them how to release the genie from the bottle. **They** are the wonderful creators of their own best work, best ideas and best outcomes. As soon as they see the inside-out nature of life -- they have the power to find what they need from within. They become certain and sure that they will always have good ideas.

Thus, ultimately, learning the power and source of change from within, creates sustainable, long-term, highly energized organizations that continually have the capacity to see what to do and lose their dependency on outside answers or quick external fixes that normally waste resources and leave people feeling dispirited and powerless.

A second implication is that there could be fall-off. That is, blame or attribution starts making little or no sense to an increasingly large number of people in an organization, so those who have formerly built a power base by manipulating circumstances become frustrated and upset.

Here is an example of this:

I worked several years ago with a company whose senior team had "run through" so many managers and secretaries that there was almost a total changeover in the administrative and middle management levels every 18 months. So the company was in constant turmoil and confusion. When the senior team recognized the inside-out world, they were faced with taking responsibility for creating that turmoil and confusion. They, for the most part, stopped blaming "industry conditions", "poor work force," "not enough money to pay good people," "the market" and other factors for their problems. And they stopped looking outside themselves for the one missing thing that would solve all their problems -- just the "right" person or technology. They began having new and different ideas that led to new and different ways of working with people.

Some members of the senior team could not relate to that change. Saying that their colleagues were "nuts", they expended a lot of effort trying to garner support to blame their colleagues and show others how "irresponsible" and "stupid" they were not to see how bad things were. But things had settled down sufficiently, and the company had stabilized and started doing well sufficiently, that these people could not really build a solid base on negativity. People who were feeling happy and confident about their work just could not take them seriously. So they left.

This could, however, have happened in reverse. That is, I have seen situations where a small group changed and, rather than swimming against the tidal wave of negativity in a company, they left and formed something new, starting fresh. That is why we talk of "critical mass" -- what happens largely depends on whether the "critical mass" is looking from the inside-out or from the outside-in.

A third implication is that the "focus" of leadership changes. For example, when we talk about "leadership from within" or "servant leadership", we are talking about setting free the internal capacity of everyone, at every level of an organization, to "lead" in the moment, contribute at their highest level of ability, "take ownership" and feel "connected" to the organization and its vision and all the people in it. This is a bit of a rough ride during the transition in organizations that have been strictly hierarchic and in which there have been centers of control with total power **over** certain groups. Until the "control" people feel "connected," rather than in charge and totally responsible for everyone else, there are often difficulties. When we talk about the power **to** that arises from connection, rather than the power **over** that arises from separation and focusing on differences, this is a profound internal change, what is called a sea change.

This is often where things could fall apart. But they don't have to. The only reason they fall apart is that the people with perceived power become frightened and they don't see that very fear as a thought that will pass if they allow themselves to reflect, look deeply within, and use their own creative power to create a fresh and new vision.

Fear is the enemy of reflection because, when we are feeling fearful, or stressed, or insecure, of off-balance, or disempowered -- whatever word we choose to use -- we do not want to look to see what we don't know. We are afraid of the unknown because we worry that we will become more frightened or insecure; thus we temporarily feel disconnected from faith that there is an intelligence behind the power of thought and that "not knowing" always brings answers that take us back into the moment and fearlessness. This is where faith comes in. Faith is strengthened by experience that new ideas will continually come to mind, that there is a wisdom in the process that generates solutions and resolution and resolves things. But it takes a leap of faith to start having that experience.

What kind of vision emerges from this message and its implications?

Every person finds his/her own vision for life initially. When people see their own creative power, they are unafraid to dream, to look beyond what they thought were personal limitations, to imagine a new future, to take risks, to find renewed hope and trust in their own ideas.

Work groups and organizations become aligned around a common vision through connected discussion of a direction that appears obvious to them, that makes sense to them, that inspires them, and that each one can express in his/her own words, simply.

I can speak for myself here as an example. I have a vision for health care because that is the field that I love. My vision is that health care institutions could become exemplars of the fullest expression of the human potential and the power of the human spirit and the creative mind. I believe that health care institutions could foster the natural ease of graceful life and death, the highest quality of our expression of creating human life from beginning to end. I believe that health care institutions could become exemplars to ALL institutions of society of how realizing the power of thought can eliminate greed and politics and negativity and stress and alienation. I believe they could demonstrate how people functioning at their best in a state of love and connection and faith and certainty produce good results -- financially, emotionally and spiritually -- that do not take a toll on the human experience, but rather enrich it.

When I work with others in health care, this vision takes many, many different forms because each group is different, each setting is different, each moment is different. The vision is the philosophical viewpoint that energizes specific discussion. It keeps me, personally, exhilarated about my work. And when I am working with others, it comes to life in different ways, responsively, as the discussion proceeds.

What matters most, in any moment, is the feeling of hope, connectedness and faith in the future that draws people closer and continually fosters new ways of working together in harmony.

When people work together, or institutions work in partnership, a vision is something they have to cherish and continue to create together -- or decide not to create. Things arise via thought and things come to an end via thought. That is, if people stop thinking about their vision, that vision disappears from their reality, and whatever else they are thinking takes its place. And things progress via thought. That is, when people continue to look in a direction together, and that direction continues to be real and promising, their thinking continues to evolve.

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