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Change leaders can either create solutions or help people find their own

0 comments

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"Truth loves its limits, for here it meets the beautiful", Rabindranath Tagore

Too much wasted effort in change ends up in busy action — launching lots of initiatives that create more work and never seem to stick — or fail to crack the nut of changing behaviour. It all feels (very) heavy. To assuage this situation, research and development in the change management field has either been on the skills that leaders need to deliver successful change, or the models and toolkits available to help their change advisors.

In our work, we have indeed found out that the change leader's skills are a critical variable in change success, yet, little attention has been given to what it takes to be a great change advisor – beyond the propagation of change management theories, recipes and toolkits.

In our own research into change and its practice, we have found that these classic ways of developing change capability may not get true change. Indeed, they risk "change management" becoming a separate industry in its own right — divorced from the exquisitely-messy realities of human systems and out of touch with the complexities of the ever-changing, disruptive and interconnected world of today. Change has changed.

So how *can* change helpers, be they internal or external to organisations, make change be both sustainably impactful *and* more effortless for their clients, the leaders they coach who are grappling with navigating today's seismic change? The answer lies within the change practitioner themselves.

Introducing the I.AM change practitioners framework

At Still Moving, helping leaders steward large complex systems through change is our primary task. Increasingly, we are being asked to train other change practitioners in this challenging work too. It helps of

course if change practitioners can model the very skills we have found to be related to success in leading change. But it doesn't stop there. Change practitioners also need to pause and consider their helping stance – the fundamental source from which they operate.

To aid this exploration into source, we have created the Change Helpers' *Intention; Attention; Mode* – or, *I.AM* – Framework (see Table 1). Grounded in both our change research and combined decades of in-the-field experience, *I.AM*, goes to the heart of the matter – the quality of all skilful change coaching/consulting begins with the quality of presence, or inner stance, of the change practitioner.

The I.AM framework is predicated on our underlying premise that most conventional change is led through "action" (stance 1), not "movement" (stance 2). We define action as "the unconscious repetition of past routines". Such action is fine when no dramatic change or new capabilities are necessary, yet, this stance risks using old ways to get to new places and therefore becomes a liability in radically disruptive contexts. The "how" (change process) does not shift to match the new "what" (desired change outcomes). For example, how often are we now seeing our clients make attempts at becoming more "agile" through centrally-led over-programmed change approaches?

Movement, on the other hand, which we define as "the intentional shift in the *source from* which the system operates", uses change and leadership approaches that disturb repeating patterns and enable a system to move to a genuinely different place. For example, building agile skills through emergent and ripe-issues-led approaches — not simply rolling out a Sprint methodology across the whole system. Such pattern-breaking work requires the change practitioner to first alter the level of consciousness, or awareness, of their client system — you can't change what you don't notice. And this catalytic awareness-building work starts with the practitioner and their own process.

Table 1. The Still Moving intention, attention, mode (I.AM) change helpers' framework

	STANCE 1 (Action)	STANCE 2 (Movement)
INTENTION	**Salvation?** ← →	**Revelation?**
Why are you doing the work?	Rescue client with (yr) solution (client as "victim") Head towards a destination Make the learning smooth Put in a lot of effort (push)	Help the client see itself (client as "agent") Hold a liminal state Allow crisis & discomfort Do the least needed (pull)
ATTENTION	**Personalised?** ← →	**Systemic?**
What kind of perception do I bring to my client's system?	Here's a bunch of personalities Resistance is awkward behaviour I see the iron filings I am in the drama What's here is what's here	This group = fractal of the whole Resistance is unaware loyalties I can sense the magnet beneath I wish to stand with distance Bring in ever larger contexts
MODE	**Scientific?** ← →	**Phenomenological?**
How do I approach what I do with the client?	Work with logic, cognition, "being-right truth" – *as it is* Immerse in analysis and detail Bring prior theories & models Run a rational process	Work with images, emotions, impulses, meanings, hypotheses – *as it is perceived* Seek to find the "meta-pain" Examine what's being presented Provide safe spaces for fierce and tender moments

The I.AM Framework © Still Moving Consultancy Ltd

I.AM invites the change practitioner to consciously reflect on three elements of their helping stance:

• Firstly, *intention*: examining their true purpose in relation to the work their client is asking them to do. Is it personally stepping in to solve the client's problems (salvation), or, enabling the client to see its own patterns (revelation)?

• Secondly, *attention*: asking the practitioner to take off the spectacles they use to view their client system and hold them up to inspection — is experience perceived through an **event-led personality lens** ("he said/she said" — personalised), or, by seeing a **deeper and bigger interconnected field** ("what are the interactions between these two representing for the whole" — systemic)?

- Thirdly, _mode_: the conscious consideration of the intervention approach — is the action logic of the practitioner to bring expertise and gather facts to get to right answers (scientific), or, to elicit the client's own sense-making of the situation that maybe yields inconclusive answers, yet catalyses experimental movement to a yet unknown place (phenomenological)?

Within these three elements we have intentionally created stance 1 and 2 as two distinct poles so that the change helper can reflect on their own practice. There is no "right or wrong" here, but we do wish to challenge the perhaps currently predominant helping action logic (that the change helper is there as an expert to point and bring the client to their new destination through the change helper's own ideas and effort), and invite a quite different way of helping (that the change practitioner is there to fiercely yet supportively hold and nudge the client through their own disruptive threshold, enabling the client system to 'do their work').

It's the difference between solving problems and awakening patterns, providing answers and provoking ambivalence, getting busy doing the client work and knowing when to keep out of the way. Which stance might best generate underlying movement in the client system, and not launch just further wasted action?

In Table 2 we invite this shift from stance 1 towards stance 2 as we have seen the dramatic difference it makes to enable the client to work at both depth and speed in change: building broad ownership; releasing necessary truth-telling; shifting fear of failure to freedom to choose a new response; getting rapidly to the really important issues; lifting the weight off the senior leaders' shoulders; seeing and naming the necessary price not just prize of change; and building capacities that travel into one's life, not just one's work.

But doing such transforming work takes an intentional, disciplined and courageous stance from the change practitioner.

Table 2. I.AM change helpers' reflection guide

	STANCE 1 (Action)	STANCE 2 (Movement)
INTENTION	**Salvation?** ← →	**Revelation?**
Why are you doing the work?	Rescue client with (yr) solution (client as "victim") Head towards a destination Make the learning smooth Put in a lot of effort (push)	Help the client see itself (client as "agent") Hold a liminal state Allow crisis & discomfort Do the least needed (pull)
Reflect…. Are you doing more work than the client? What are you being (often unconsciously) pulled into doing, for the system? Can you see your task as provoking irritation, while staying in connection? Can you provide "delicate yet not duvet" support – letting anxieties run their course? Am I getting overdrawn into the suffering of the client's system?		
ATTENTION	**Personalised?** ← →	**Systemic?**
What kind of perception do I bring to my client's system?	Here's a bunch of personalities Resistance is awkward behaviour I see the iron filings I am in the drama What's here is what's here	This group = fractal of the whole Resistance is unaware loyalties I can sense the magnet beneath I wish to stand with distance Bring in ever larger contexts
Reflect…. Do I attribute judgement to behaviour or can I ask, "what is this good for?" Is my "conditioned self" blinding me to what's true for this system? Can I catch my own vanity and see myself as "just one brick in the wall"? People show a lot of what organisations are "doing" with them – do I spot this?		
MODE	**Scientific?** ← →	**Phenomenological?**
How do I approach what I do with the client?	Work with logic, cognition, "being right truth" – *as it is* Immerse in analysis and detail Bring prior theories & models Run a rational process	Work with images, emotions, impulses, meanings, hypotheses – *as it is perceived* Seek to find the "meta-pain" Examine what's being presented Provide safe spaces for fierce and tender moments
Reflect…. Am I able to purely work with direct, lived experience – including the somatic? How can I move beyond right/wrong (truth-seeking) to what is useful here (way-seeking)? How can I empty myself and show up to the client without memory, intention, judgment? How can I be a promoter of ambivalence, diminishing my status into mutual not-knowing?		

I.AM Framework's reflection guide © Still Moving Consultancy Ltd

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Notes:

- *A second part for this blog post will be published next week.*

- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*

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Deborah Rowland created the Still Moving change consultancy, helping CEOs and their teams around the world and offering Still Moving change practitioner programmes. She is also a member of the Archbishop's Review Group into leadership development in the Church of England. In the 2017 Thinkers50 Radar, Deborah was named as one of the new generation of management thinkers changing the world of business. She is the co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008), and now, *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley, 2017), Deborah is a leading global thinker, speaker, writer, coach and practitioner in the field of leading large complex change. She has personally led change in organisations including Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo. She has pioneered original research in the field, the latest efforts of which were accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management, and the 2019 European Academy of Management.

About the author

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Deborah Rowland is a speaker, writer, and coach in the field of leading big complex change. She is the co-author of three books, including Still Moving Field Guide: Change Vitality at Your Fingertips (Wiley 2020). She has personally led change at Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo, and pioneered original research in the field, accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management, and the 2019 European Academy of Management. 2017 Thinkers50 Radar named Deborah as part of the generation of management thinkers changing the world of business, and 2021 HR Most Influential Thinker list.

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