

Deborah Rowland

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Change and obliquity: how to achieve complex objectives through indirect means

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“Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness... aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way”

– John Stuart Mill

How come so many change efforts in today’s unpredictable world fail to achieve their stated objectives – be they corporate turn-arounds, public-sector reform, or wider societal flourishing? I have contended through my practice and research over the past three decades that the reason lies at the very feet of leadership: we choose an overly-managerial, programmatic approach to “**change management**”; and, we externalise the change target – failing to realise that our inner-world is the **primary fulcrum** through which to change what we seek around us.

And so we continue, notwithstanding good intentions, to launch effortful and costly change programmes and initiatives onto others, that are tightly directed by top-down targets, getting people caught up in busy *action*. What if we were to consider subtler, humbler yet far more potent ways of achieving the same goals – inside-out ways that lead to deeper, genuine and more sustainable *movement*?

I was therefore intrigued recently to come across the notion of “obliquity”. A term originating in astronomy, describing the angle or tilt of the earth’s axis of rotation, obliquity in the human world is generally used to mean the deviation from moral conduct, or, the art of being deliberately vague. Far from these nefarious or slanting-from-the-truth meanings, however, is how the economist John Kay has coined the term obliquity to convey how complex goals are best achieved when pursued **indirectly**.

Put simply, I can write 3-4000 words a day far more effortlessly when I seek to intersperse my writing with long inspiring afternoon walks along the Cornish coast, rather than set myself daily numerical word count

goals. Creative acuity is not the overt goal of my walks, but it is the oblique outcome.

Kay contends that in difficult terrain, purely instrumental and direct approaches to goal-achievement are ineffective. By difficult terrain he means systems or situations that are complex, can only be imperfectly understood, change their nature as we engage with them, whose outcomes depend on multiple interactions with others, and when we cannot tell even with hindsight whether our purposes have been fulfilled – features that surely resonate with any leader of change today.

Thus, companies who overtly pursue profit as a goal, tend to end up the least profitable, people whose sole aim and attention is on pursuing happiness, can end up the least happy, religious institutions that go monomaniacally for discipleship growth, can paradoxically **turn people away from faith**.

Why by going directly can we often end up in the unwanted place? Fundamentally, complex systems – especially human ones – are distributed, messy, move in non-linear ways, and in their holistic interconnectedness are unable to be controlled in any simplistic direct manner. We also know from **neuro-science** that the brain does not react too creatively to what is alien, externally imposed or rigidly sought. Cortisol floods the system and in that state we'll do everything we can to defend ourselves against the awkward and debilitating impact of anxiety – coping behaviour which keeps us stuck in old thinking and routines.

What *can* work? How can we lead complex change in companies, institutions or societies to arrive at new desirable states through more indirect yet more effective routes? It feels so counter-intuitive, especially in unprecedented, high-pressure situations – when an institution's very survival can feel at stake. In such situations, the understandable default tendency is to set the pace with clear focussed

targets and launch change programmes aimed at directly heading towards those targets.

So how to lead change in ways that do not instrumentally and narrowly shape behaviour along direct paths to outcomes yet that neither resort to complete chance and serendipity? Fate shapes yet does not determine our life outcomes. We can nudge it a little.

Here's a clue. Let's take a look at a very counter-intuitive CEO I once worked with, whose change programme of a century-plus aged institution led to the fastest ever IPO in its nation's history. When he was appointed CEO, there was significant time pressure on him to declare the new vision and strategy, using tight targets and direct methods to govern the change. However, while he knew that the future was going to look radically different for his company, and he could set some broad parameters around that given the known rapidly changing market conditions, he set off to pursue this rapid certain change through slow uncertain means. Indeed, when he was briefing me on the change approach, his ask of me was to "help take my leaders into the woods".

What was he doing here? Far from deviating from his ultimate goal – to reinvent his organisation to be fitter for a new world – this meandering walk into the woods (which became a series of largely unstructured transformative leadership experiences looking deeply into self, the outside world, and then back to their system) took his leaders on a profound journey of renewal. By getting lost in uncertainty, they had to find new ways. And far from acting as a distraction to the pressing business change demands, by taking time out, his leaders could see the dysfunctionality of their existing workplaces and routines more clearly. Deviations build newer perspectives than traditional routes.

Moreover, these leadership experiences forged tight bonds of trust and novel networks across the organisation that were to prove invaluable to implementation when the rapid big changes hit – by which time the

culture's default to direct vertical chain of command had dissipated. Calming the stress response of the corporate amygdala was not the overt goal of these leadership experiences, but it was the oblique outcome.

As Kay says, if you want to go in one direction, the best route may involve going in another. Drawing on both my personal experience of leading change and the extensive empirical research I have conducted over the last two decades with my Still Moving colleagues, here are three counterintuitive tips for how to lead change more "obliquely" – and more successfully: the action starts on the inside; create disturbance to build safety, and; structure follows chaos.

1. *The action starts on the inside*: the most startling finding of all from **our research** is that the fastest and easiest way to create movement in what's happening around you is to first become still and notice and adjust what's happening inside you. A leader's inner state fundamentally conducts the rhythm and quality of what they do in the outer world. This can be a dastardly difficult, frustrating and ego-challenging detour, yet our variance analysis indicated that over half the reason why big change either succeeds or fails is down to how skilled leaders are at being able to tune into and regulate their inner emotional and mental response to experience.

It feels so indirect and unrelated, starting inside yourself, and yet it can change everything.

I frequently retell the humbling story of when I realised in one of my leadership roles that the only way I could radically alter the vitality of an important risk committee I was chairing was to change first my own attitude to this committee and its process. No manner of more direct routes such as risk process re-engineering, team target setting, or personnel changes could make a difference. However, when I stopped

to notice what thoughts, feelings and impulses were rattling inside me and then switched my inner state from judgement to curiosity, from frustration to compassion, from negativity to optimism, the risk management team and its process simply flowed and moved with far greater ease and creativity (unlocking movement in the wider change process this committee was serving). All that this outward change took was the switch in my inner state – I continued working with the same people, the same process and the same team targets.

Learning to stand still to notice yourself and then intentionally adjust your response is a radically counter-intuitive move in today's fast-paced changing world. Yet, by hitting this pause button and taking the inner route you will get to your new outer destination more quickly (and with less cost).

1. *Create disturbance to build safety:* in his article Kay cites the example of the Yellowstone National Park firefighters believing that the best way to eliminate forest fires was to extinguish all fires. However, they discovered that an oblique outcome of small fires in the undergrowth in fact led to the less rapid spread of future larger fires, as the consequent gaps in undergrowth acted as a brake on a larger fire's progress through the trees. So, they learned how to protect the National Park from fire destruction by allowing (some) fires. What felt risky was the safest thing to do.

Such an illuminating example of counter-intuition from the natural world holds parallels for our human systems, where, by seemingly doing the opposite – especially that which feels dangerous – you can in fact end up more securely in the place you always wished for.

I was once called in to work with a leader and her executive team to help make it a “less scary” place. Her team members were in fear of her and her intellect, and there was tense inter-team-member rivalry for her

attention, approval and ultimate position. This top team issue was acting as a handbrake on the wider performance turnaround needed in the system.

The most obvious intervention would have been to facilitate a conversation about how to make this team safer. In the end (and well-supervised by a systemic coach who was teaching me that in complex interconnected systems you can change an element by acting on its opposite) I led a conversation about how the team could become the scariest team on earth. This was not without discomfort, and I had to hold the team, in its embarrassment, from wanting to go directly to safe solutions. Yet, the ensuing scintillatingly honest and open conversation had an instant and sustainable impact on calming things down. If I'd have led a comfortable conversation about the need for such things as better listening skills and openness, I would have created a far more dangerous place – as the inflaming undergrowth of truth concealment would have remained.

In leading change, what feels unsafe can be the safest thing to do.

1. *Structure follows chaos:* I have **previously written** about the catalytic power of emergent change. Such an approach to change gives up the notion of fixed destinations and narrowly-focussed objectives and in its place adopts broader more holistic views – setting loose intentions, governing behaviour with just a few “hard rules”, moving step-by-step along a change pathway, encouraging experimentation, and starting this innovation in areas of greatest change need – or where “positive deviance” is most happening – and spreading out the change from these places.

Our research found that, in contexts of high uncertainty and where the change needed is of high magnitude and complexity, this seemingly “laissez faire” approach to change in fact gets you more quickly to your

desired outcomes. That's because you cannot directly leap from one old structure, or way of operating, to a new one – you have to first take a creative and challenging detour into breakdown and chaos. Welcome to the oblique messy unfolding world of emergence.

I will never forget how I once saw a gifted change leader open his annual senior leadership gathering – a critical event in the initial stages of his large complex change programme – with his closing speech. That, and the fact that there was no agenda for the two days, led people to think he had gone somewhat mad. He then asked for 10 brave volunteers to come and, in the moment, design a process for the two days that would get to the outcomes he had set out in his closing speech. In that feverish 45mins, everyone else could take an extended coffee break.

It was phenomenal how in the seeming randomness and out-of-control place (and the first two hours of the conference certainly felt like that and things had to adjust along the way) new transformational patterns of thinking and behaviour emerged – catalysed by the novel group membership of the design team and the task they were given. If the senior leader had started by putting people immediately into new organising structures, they would have missed the deep learning process of figuring things out themselves, using trial-and-error and imperfect solutions.

So, in designing your change process, intentionally build in the open space for movement to occur.

In summary, stop, pause, and notice how you are currently leading the changes you wish to see around you. Do you find yourself going all-out on the most obvious and direct routes? What would it look like if you adopted a more “obliquitous” approach? Above all else, look inside yourself and consider how even a slight shift in the way that you respond to external circumstances could magically unleash what you

most deeply desire in that external world. This seeming detour could become your fastest track.



Notes:

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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**. 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



Deborah Rowland

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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