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How change helpers succeed: pay attention to your own process

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In our [first article](#) in this series, we shared our views on how change helpers can best enable true movement in their client systems, rather than create lots of work and more busy action. We contended that the answer lies *within* the change practitioner, not the change theories or models or toolkits in their repertoire. In a sense, paying attention to their inner presence, or quality of *being* will help them become more adept in what they then *do* in their client systems to support change.

We introduced the Still Moving I.AM Framework that asks a change practitioner to look deeply into the source of their *Intention* (why are you doing the work?), *Attention* (what kind of perception do I bring to my client?), and *Mode* (what is my intervention approach?). Within this framework, we presented two alternative stances – one of *Action* (getting things done but likely to repeat old routines), and one of *Movement* (changing the source from which their client system operates).

Our contention is that the more a change practitioner can operate from Stance 2, *Movement*, the more likely they are going to bring about sustainable and more effortless change in their client systems. This view challenges 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. In its place, we are inviting a quite different way of helping – one in which 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'.

In this article, we get practical and share how we at Still Moving put the I.AM framework into practice, by: taking conscious time and space to attend to our own process; making our process transparent with our clients; acknowledging that this work takes time and effort – and being prepared to be open and vulnerable about that!

Table 1. I.AM change helpers' reflection guide

	STANCE 1 (Action)	STANCE 2 (Movement)
INTENTION	Salvation? ←	→ Revelation?
<i>Why are you doing the work?</i>	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?
<i>What kind of perception do I bring to my client's system?</i>	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?
<i>How do I approach what I do with the client?</i>	Work with logic, cognition, "being right truth" – <i>as it is</i> Immerse in analysis and detail Bring prior theories & models Run a rational process	Work with images, emotions, impulses, meanings, hypotheses – <i>as it is perceived</i> 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 Reflection Guide © Still Moving Consultancy Ltd

Skilful change practitioners continually attend to their own process

Helping others through change (be that an individual, team, organisation or societal level) is a complex task fraught with

complexity. This is because all kinds of defences and projections from the system in transition onto the change helper (and vice versa) are likely to occur when there is anxiety (change's natural companion). In the client system/change helper relationship, one classic dynamic is that of "learned helplessness" – or dependency – when the overburdened client wishes the helper to solve all their change needs and the helper's ego clicks into unconscious collusion with this, taking on the work that would be more sustainably solved by the client taking its own responsibility for the work, with the helper remaining as a challenging yet supportive **guide**.

Skilful change practitioners don't get caught up in this – or any other – dance. But such meta-level awareness requires them to stop, notice and consider their own inner states, process and intentionality along the way – "what am I being drawn into here and will this be system-changing (movement) or system-maintaining (action)?" They don't just unwittingly plan and execute the overt work requested by their client system – "yes, fine, I'll do that". If change practitioners don't peek into their own routines and its source, they risk staying in well-intended yet autopilot delivery mode – and the client system remaining stuck.

Case

We were 5 months into working with a client undergoing significant transformation. After some successful pilots of working with leaders to help them approach their change work quite differently, we noticed an increased sense of frustration and helplessness within our own team. I (Deborah) as the team-lead had been stepping back from the work and this absence of place was destabilising for others. There was a looseness around setting dates that then couldn't be met and we were doing a lot of the work to try and get dates sorted. We were finding ourselves caught up in lots of conversations about the client and trying to solve their issues ("if I wasI'd do this...") but not actually doing much delivery. There was one client who two of us had got very close to, maybe over-attached. Speaking truth to each other had also become difficult. We reflected – what's going on here? Are we more in salvation rather than revelation, with this client? Can we stand with greater distance from this work and not get caught up in their personalised drama but see better what it is representing for the whole, and therefore be more astute in how we intervene?

It helps to make your own helping process transparent with your client

The task of examining and attending to one's own process can remain within the consulting/practitioner team. However, we have found it powerfully transforming to make our own process transparent and available to our clients. The helper/client are an interconnected system, indeed a fractal of the whole system undergoing change – sticky helper/client relationships may echo disquiet elsewhere. What shows up in the client/helper relationship therefore signals what's going on in the client (and even wider) system at large. By bringing one's own process to the client's attention the change practitioner can help the client to better tune into the wider system they are seeking to change and thereby take up wiser leadership within it.

Case

We decided in the “can't seem to get going” client case above to “down tools” and say “no” to all client requests for doing what we had done before, and in this space, create a “working note” for the client. Drawing from Eric Miller's use of the working note through the Tavistock Institute, the purpose of a working note is to engage the client more actively in the diagnosis of their system by presenting to the client the practitioners' experience of working with them. Very often, what the client is unable to see/face about their own dynamics will get split off and projected onto the consulting team. What a rich source of data therefore the consulting team's dynamics can be to show the “shadow” of the client's culture! When one's shadow is seen and integrated, then movement can occur. In our working note to this client we named what we had been experiencing as difficult in our work with them, and offered hypotheses as to how this might be a parallel to what is being experienced in the client's own system, viz the hierarchy not taking up its place and accountability for the change work, how unsafe it was felt to take up radically different leadership behaviour in the absence of senior level sponsorship, how our own overwhelm and frustration could be a consequence of the absence of any clear “holding frame” for our work – change seemed to be split from the business, and how difficult it was to be able to speak truth respectfully and clearly. The working note had a dramatic effect on our work with the client – from which clear sponsorship in the business for the necessary change now flows.

Staying in 'movement' as a change helper takes effort and courage

Changing the source of a system to create genuine movement in its repeating patterns requires changing a system's level of consciousness

– all change begins in awareness. This is deep work that requires the practitioner to help their client notice, voice and work with both denied unhelpful patterns as well as buried joys and longings.

Such work might not be what the client originally signed up for, though. Indeed, most change help is about providing expert solutions and running traditional change programmes. If the change practitioner doesn't go against the grain, how can they expect their client to do so too? This stance matters. And sometimes we have to hold quite fierce resistance to it – how long can you hold the potential discomfort?

This work also requires ongoing dedicated attention to one's own helping routines. While this takes time and effort, it can also be liberating. Too often as change practitioners we can be taking on the work for the client unnecessarily, and this can be exhausting. But it can also be confronting: systemic work for sure challenges our vanity as it makes us "smaller" when we view the whole system and the wider forces at play, and realise that, at times, we need to acknowledge fate and that which we cannot personally change. It is also intellectually demanding. Being able to at the same time empty your head of any prior-recognised models *and* tune into the 'data in the room' as it is presented, offering hypotheses about what is going on in the client dynamics in language that is clean and recognisable, is quite some task.

Change consulting can be an impossible service! We hope in this article that we invite change practitioners to first consider their own stance in this work and make any necessary adjustments there. In so doing we might just bring wiser and more effortless change to today's world.

For further details of Still Moving's change practitioner programmes, either contact Katie@still-moving.com or visit our [website](#).



Notes:

- This is part 2 of a series of 2 articles by Deborah Rowland on the I.AM framework. You can read part 1 [here](#).
- 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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