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Lead like an anthropologist – and lead change well

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In a previous article, I defined change as “**the disturbance of repeating patterns**”. And it is nigh on impossible to do this skilfully unless you can see, acknowledge and deeply respect the purpose that our cultural patterns and taken-for-granted routines serve. This requires going to source. The problem is, not many of us are able to cleanly see the causal lenses that shape our perceptions and habits, let alone take the brave and humble steps of being able to adjust them.

And so, we try to get to new places through old routines. Only recently I was with the executive team of a large industrial company who, after a fair bit of ‘tough observational love’, could see that they were trying to

become more agile and devolved in their decision-making via a change process that was perfectly engineered to control from the centre. We end up in 'busy action', not 'still movement'. And that's so wasteful.

Making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar

This neat encapsulation of **the task of an anthropologist** pretty much nails the core task of a change leader. Just as anthropologists question, turn things upside down, take interest in the everyday things where culture gets expressed, so do great change leaders become present to and curious about the familiar day-to-day routines in their system – and make changes to these, how work gets done, rather than launch grand (and effortful) cultural change programmes.

I once worked with a CEO whose most transformative intervention at his annual senior leadership event was to simply remove the hierarchical role label that got put alongside his leaders' names on their event badges. His grand plan for his business was a complete shift to new forms of energy production more in keeping with dramatic societal change and new technological advances. This required an unleashing of innovation, at all levels. Yet to accomplish this, and to accomplish this quickly, he knew he needed to remove the cultural 'power-distance' that existed between organisational levels which was negating junior people feeling they could contribute new thinking.

So, if that was the change goal, why was it necessary to keep people's job titles and rank on their name badges? That would have been 'system maintaining', rather than 'system changing'. But I tell you, it took him three attempts the night before the conference opened to get these hierarchical titles off the badges. The conference organisers kept putting them back on again (and this familiar default routine was done with good intention – to clearly mark out who was who in a large crowd). In the end, the CEO had to Tippex out the titles himself.

“...taken-for-granted familiarity makes it hard to see fresh perspectives. We can become too intimate, too caught up in our story of how the world is, and should work.”

This story is instructional in showing how, on the one hand, leading change can be so simple, yet at the same time, so irksomely difficult. Making what has always been familiar (knowing who is who in rank) now strange (why would we need to do that?!) can provoke anxiety and its accompanying defensive routines – to stay doing what we’ve always done. Making what seems strange (won’t people be offended if their job title is not evident?!) now the most obvious thing to do (of course, I just need to show up in all my humanity), can provoke a fair bit of disturbance leading to people thinking you the change leader are a little foolhardy if not totally mad.

So, let’s take these two moves – making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar – and examine how change leaders can play them well. And I use the word “play” here intentionally – leading change in today’s turbulent world is for sure not a game, but it is a disciplined practice that requires intentional and continual effort.

Making the familiar, strange

Familiarity serves a purpose. I find my routines secure and comforting – without them I’d have to think too much about what I am doing in any moment and therefore be unable to accomplish the many other things I like to do. I like walking in familiar landscapes – be that the outdoor cliff walks I continually take in Cornwall, or the welcoming bosom of my family and friends. In familiarity with our routines, places, and faces, we belong, we know our place, we can comfortably use shorthand.

The thing is, such taken-for-granted familiarity makes it hard to see fresh perspectives. We can become too intimate, too caught up in our

story of how the world is, and should work. Novelty on the other hand jolts the brain into adaptation and learning.

Sometimes obtaining such self-awareness requires drastic action. Check out the brilliant [Overview Effect](#) film of the Apollo 8 mission to the moon – fascinatingly the astronauts thought they were going to the moon to learn more about the moon. No, the biggest thing their trip to the moon taught them was to view our familiar planet earth differently. While hovering above the earth, they couldn't stop staring down at its mystery, seeing it afresh in all its interconnected beauty, unity and fragility, for the first time. This startling revelation gave them profound insights into what they needed to appreciate, and do differently, when they got back down to its secure shores.

While we don't all need to go to the moon to rediscover earth, we can, at any time, simply stop to notice our routines, our default emotional and mental responses to what we experience, and hold them up to compassionate yet fierce inspection. What are they serving? How do they resource us, and, how (especially in changing times) might they be disabling?

“Bringing systemic perception to what we normally experience can be intellectually demanding and ego-confronting, but boy can it bring about a startling re-interpretation to the familiar way of seeing things.”

In our research at [Still Moving](#) we discovered two essential skills highly correlated with success in leading high magnitude change. One is an inner quality of 'being' – the capacity to *tune into the system* and perceive a deeper causality behind what we see on the surface. Bringing systemic perception to what we normally experience can be intellectually demanding and ego-confronting, but boy can it bring about

a startling re-interpretation to the familiar way of seeing things. The second core skill is an outer quality of 'doing' – the practice of *edge and tension leadership*, where leaders can speak cleanly and unambiguously about current reality, and, in particular, name and challenge commonly held assumptions and behavioural routines. Making what is familiar, in effect, a little disturbing.

The 'name-badge-story' CEO used both skills, together. He didn't harangue the conference staff when they repeatedly put the job titles back onto the name badges (it's so easy to personalise experience and see it as an attitudinal or skill issue). No, he rather interpreted this familiar routine as a systemic signal as to the underlying culture that still required shifting. This then enabled him to visibly deploy *edge and tension* with great sensitivity. He opened the conference the next morning with the name-badge story, clearly highlighting what still required changing in the culture – and asked every leader present to look inside themselves and recognise the discomfort that comes with upturning hierarchy, 'how does this name-badge story play out in *your* day-to-day leadership, too?'

It was a corker of an opener. Such a big impact to come from a little opportunity to make the familiar, strange.

In addition to using the leadership skills of *tuning into the system* and *edge and tension*, here are some practical steps to 'make the familiar strange' that I have also found useful in orchestrating whole system change:

- Train up and use internal 'observers'. Too often we rush through our working days in busy action autopilot from one meeting to the next, never stopping to notice what patterns we are caught up in – at least, not until we have that gin and tonic at the end of the day. Training up internal leaders to act as detached and impartial meeting observers – forceful mirrors to the culture, who can 'hit the pause button' from time

to time in a meeting and share their observations about what they are noticing and hypothesising about the 'culture in the room' – can work wonders to shift routines *in the moment*.

- Take people out of their familiar walled cities to contexts in which the future is already emerging. With one organisation, we called these visits to the outside world “foraging” expeditions: groups of leaders nominated organisations or places in society they felt held the clues to their own future (and the more different or felt-challenging these were, the better), and they then went to visit them. When they reported back, as like the astronauts, these visits to the periphery of their system had taught them so much about how to see their own culture in a new less attached light. And in led to much innovation.
- Harvest the insights of externals and new-joiners. I once heard it said that “corporate culture is what you stop noticing after being somewhere three months”. After that time, what has seemed strange when you arrived has now become routine, and what’s more, you can’t even notice that. So, I always encourage leaders to invite newly arrived consultants or hires to jot down what most seems bizarre about their culture, and to play these observations back to them – by the very latest two months and thirty odd days after they have arrived!

Making the strange, familiar

In addition to questioning day-to-day cultural routines and holding them up to curious impartial inspection – making the familiar strange, anthropologists are also trained to make what might seem totally bizarre to us about a different culture, perfectly normal – making the strange, familiar. All thought and action can make perfect sense when seen through the eyes of the culture that created it. So, how can change leaders bring in the new ways of thinking and acting without the 'native' culture rejecting this effort?

“... find and cultivate your first followers.”

In my own work in organisational change I enjoy working with Jonno Hannafin’s insightful notion of the “PWI”, **Perceived Weirdness Index**. If people feel the change intervention – or indeed the change agent – is too high on the PWI, then this might be rejected out of court (“she’s too whacky and clearly hasn’t ‘got’ our culture”). If, however, the felt-PWI is too low, then you’ll end up getting what you’ve always got – it’s likely you will be falling into the trap of using comfortably familiar old routines to get to new places.

And of course, the same change intervention might have a high PWI score in one culture, but a low one in another. I’ll never forget transitioning in my career from PepsiCo to Shell (a 180-degree culture shock that for me at the time was akin to moving from “un-thinking action” to “un-actioned thinking”) when I learned that the edgy practice of having stand-up huddle meetings of no longer than 45’ was seen as tantamount to the October revolution in my new employer.

It becomes very important therefore to judge where the current system is starting from, and to learn just how much further you can take the culture to its point of acceptable discomfort (which my osteopath does quite magnificently with my body when I have a bad back, rocking me on the table, knowing just how much manipulation will take me to a new place, without causing damage). I’ve heard it said that great change practitioners can “irritate yet stay in connection” with the system they are seeking to transform. So how then can this be done, in practice, and with great leadership skill?

For one clue, check out this great film of the **“First Follower: Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy”**. You will see someone at a music festival breaking out from the crowd and doing a completely strange dance, all by himself, and no-one going near him – “he’s totally weird!” Yet, after a

while, one other person goes across to join him. As soon as *that* person joins the dancer, well, then it must be cool, and the original dancer is no longer a weirdo, but a trend-setter, and very soon the whole crowd moves and breaks into this dance routine – a new movement. What was originally strange has become the new familiar.

So, the message here is to *find and cultivate your first followers*. I recall introducing the transformative intervention of systemic constellations work to a client – a practice in which you diagnose and bring resolution to intractable and stuck issues (such as, a very talented Innovation team seemingly unable to realise any of their competence, or, a leader being unable to move their change at any pace) by using non-cognitive phenomenological data, usually having people standing up and using movement to physically represent the component elements of the stuck issue, live, in front of the case-owner.

This process was at first seen as completely crazy. However, a few brave leaders in this organisation ‘came out of the woodwork’ and said they had heard of this process, or indeed were simply curious and open-minded, and would like to try it out. And they did, and this **strange practice worked** (far more powerfully than what they had attempted to this point), and then it became (just about) OK.

“... two key leadership skills need to be at play here. The first is the inner capacity to acknowledge the whole.(...) The second (...) is that of container leadership, (...) [when] the leader stays curious and non-anxious, even in rocky and edgy situations.”

Our Still Moving research and lessons of experience have shown that two key leadership skills need to be at play here. The first is the inner capacity to *acknowledge the whole*. Leaders who have this capacity are

able to give a place and a purpose to all of experience, and particularly that which feels most difficult, strange and disturbing. By non-judgmentally and non-reactively normalising what is uncomfortable (as, what change comes without any discomfort?) they skilfully enable people to get used to the non-familiar. The second accompanying skill is that of *container leadership*, a practice in which the leader stays curious and non-anxious, even in rocky and edgy situations. If the leader is not secure with the strange, then no-one else will be. What's more, they create psychologically safe spaces where people can speak up about difficult and hard-to-name thoughts and feelings that inevitably arise when deeply unexpected and unprecedented experiences arrive.

A few additional thoughts on the practical steps you can take in change to 'make the strange familiar', and thereby increase your chances of your organisation embracing and not rejecting change:

- Present the new as a natural evolution from the old. It has been said that when the great inventor Edison discovered and launched electricity in the US, he designed his new electrical lighting system along the lines of the previous gas lighting systems – especially the visible lamp fixtures, so that people would not reject what was new and possibly dangerous.
- Start small and then build momentum. Bring in the new in the pockets of the organisation facing the 'ripest issues', where there is energy, urgency and appetite to try out radically new solutions. Use rapid prototyping, experiments and simulations in these ripest issues – interventions that iterate and walk your way into new attitudes and routines.
- Go hunt down the “**positive deviants**”: in any community, there will be people whose uncommon but successful behaviours or strategies enable them to find better solutions to a change challenge than their peers, despite being in the same context and with the same resources.

The strange can always feel more familiar when you realise it's already working to good effect in your own system.

While the core task of an anthropologist is to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, one of its key leading lights of the last century, Ruth Benedict, has **stated** that its core purpose is to “make the world safe for human differences”. This is a noble calling – and one needed in today’s world even more so. While in leading change we need to seek alignment on direction, great change leaders know that this can only be accomplished when our differences have been tenderly seen and given a respectful place. Difference brings more, not less. And making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, is a powerful way to deliver this purpose.



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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, *Quest Group*, *BDO Worldwide*, and *DevoCo*, and pioneered original

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