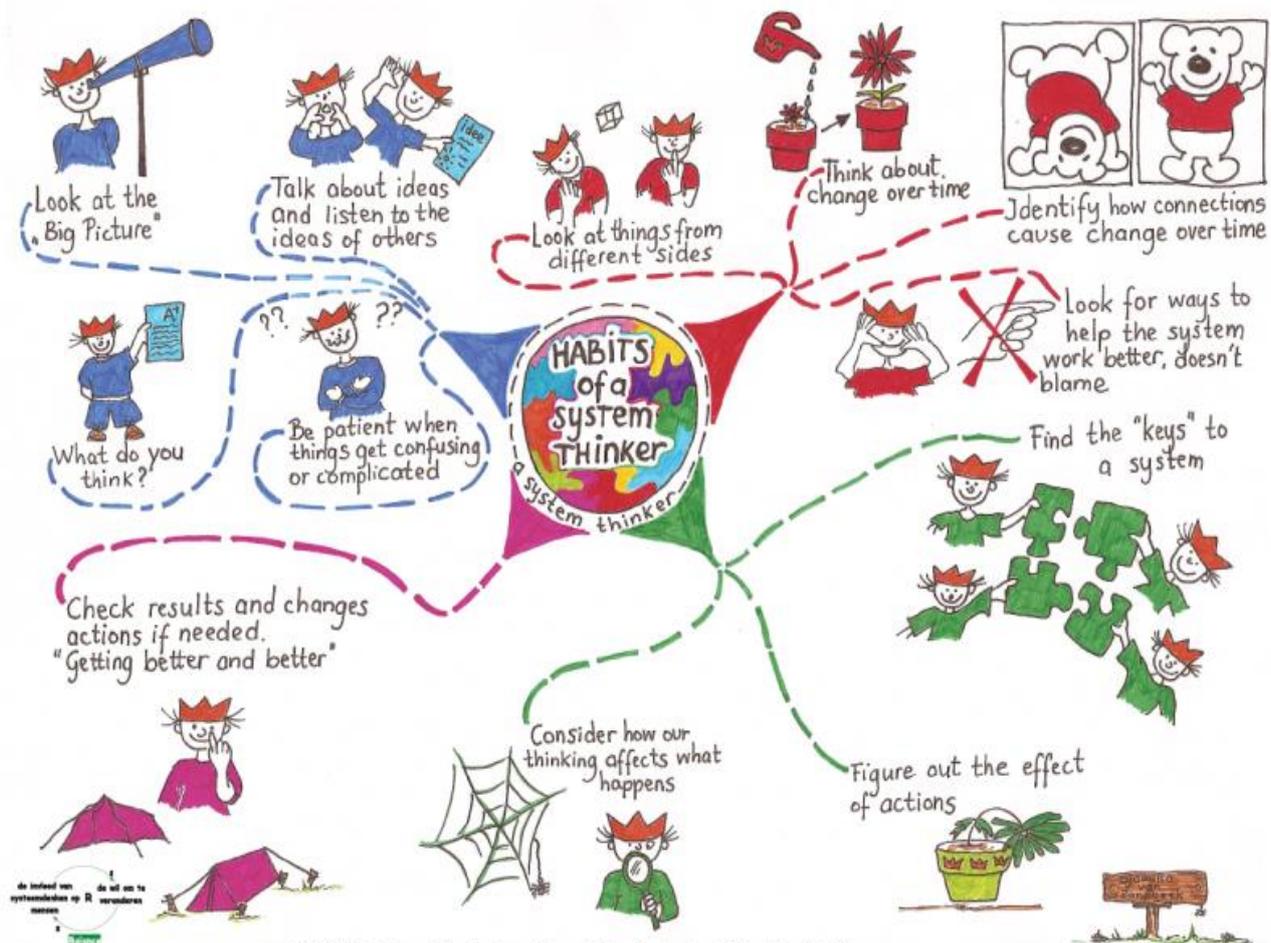




Achieving Change

(which works and which doesn't come back to haunt you!)

Top Learning Points – 22 tips for 22 years!



Introduction

“Excellence is not an act; it is a habit” (Aristotle)

All transformational change / improvement programmes, regardless of the scope and nature of the programme, lead to the same challenge – the biggest challenge of the whole process – the need to translate thinking, reviews, new techniques and good intentions into tangible change in the way the organisation or partnership operates. This means people in the organisation collectively adopting new habitual behaviours. For example, developing outcome frameworks is not in itself an improvement; using the vision to trigger a continual, cyclical innovation process based on customer insight is.

As we all know, this is much easier said than done!

Whack-a-mole!

Have you ever wondered why the same problems within our organisations and partnerships (and society) keep reoccurring? – you deal with one, only for it to pop up elsewhere at a later date (a bit like playing a game of organisational 'whack-a-mole'!)....and why do so many of our biggest challenges appear to be resistant to solutions?....and isn't it fascinating that many of yesterday's solutions seem to have become today's problems!



Despite our positive intent and our use of various tools and techniques, the changes that we put in place often don't last, make little difference, or even make things worse in the long-term! No one is to blame for this: our traditional education and training system (including management training) has not equipped us very well to achieve successful long-term change.

So, what can we do?

Increasingly we need leaders (of organisations, partnership, communities and governments!) who understand *System Thinking*. This way of thinking and working involves understanding how results are caused by a complex network of interactions, which are usually separated by time and space.

If we can apply this thinking to our change programmes we have a chance of **resolving problems and making significant improvements in way which achieves positive outcomes for all stakeholders, whilst reducing the risk of negative unintended future consequences**'.

The following learning points reflect recognised *System Thinking* and behaviour change principles and best practice. They are based on our direct experience of trying to implement change within large and small organisations and partnerships over the last 22 years – 22 tips for 22 years!

The Learning Points

1. Always “begin with the end in mind” (Stephen Covey)

One of main reasons why change is not effective is that people are often not entirely clear what they are trying to achieve! This includes using very specific language to agree what will be different when the change has been completed and what this will achieve for all stakeholders. These ‘change goals’ need to be as clear and compelling as possible.



The goals should be revisited at the start of every structured discussion about the change. People’s clarity and desire to make the change need to grow throughout the process.

Without this clarity and desire, the change action either wanders or doesn’t happen at all!

2. “Come on, we can do this if we all believe!”

Contrary to what you sometimes hear, you cannot change your organisation simply by setting numerical targets, rewarding or punishing people, telling or motivating people to work harder, inspiring people through clever slogans or requiring people to be more “positive”! You have to grow the capability of the people and the system in which they work.

3. There is no blame (NLP presupposition)

Blaming individuals for a gap between actual and desired performance or for a lack of change is both unfair and counter-productive and has no value. The cause of areas for improvement lies with the system; they are rarely caused simply by the independent choice of individuals (although we can choose to take action!).

Your whole change process should be underpinned by data trends and observed practice, rather than the views and feelings of managers! You don’t need to be either negative or positive about the need for change; it is neither “a problem”, nor “an opportunity”. It is a “performance gap”, which can be closed if you develop a shared understanding of the reality and address the underlying cause.

4. Documents cannot act!

In the strange world of organisations, we sometimes think that ‘change’ means a new mission statement, values document, strategy document, policies, procedural manual, performance management spreadsheet, etc. Although these mechanisms might be part of the process of achieving sustainable change, they are not the change itself! We must avoid the temptation to stop the discussions about the changes once a document has been produced. If we do, this is simply “perfuming the pig”!

It is also a mistake to think that we can produce a document relating to the change and then ‘implement it’. Ideally the documentation emerges from the discussions. The way that organisations often approach strategy is a good example of this. The strategy isn’t the document; it is the shared direction which emerges from group discussions.

5. “People like change; they just don’t like being changed” (Tom Peters)

You cannot change someone else’s long-term habitual behaviours (actually, you can only change one person...you!). We change when we have a compelling reason for doing so and when we want to avoid something unpleasant, when we are able to influence the nature of the change and when it is made as easy as possible.

Therefore, the people who are affected by the change need to be involved and engaged in identifying and planning the way forward; the change has to belong to them, not to the organisation.

As a leader, the key to achieving this is to be clear about which aspects of the change cannot be influenced and which can, provide opportunities for co-creation and develop your ability to ask open, non-leading questions, rather than just giving the answers.

6. The phrase “we must change our culture” has little value and (oddly) doesn’t help our organisations to change!

Oh how we like to arrive at this conclusion during improvement / change planning sessions! The trouble is that the word “culture” is complex with various meanings; even if we know what we mean this is rarely shared by our colleagues. Any shared meaning is likely to be woolly – how does this help us to know what action to take? Perhaps this is why we use the term so much: it gives us an excuse to avoid agreeing any tangible action!

We need to think clearly about the collective behaviour that we want to change and the specific underlying causes of this. Then we can start to identify solutions. It’s tempting, but the phrase “change our culture” doesn’t help us to do this.

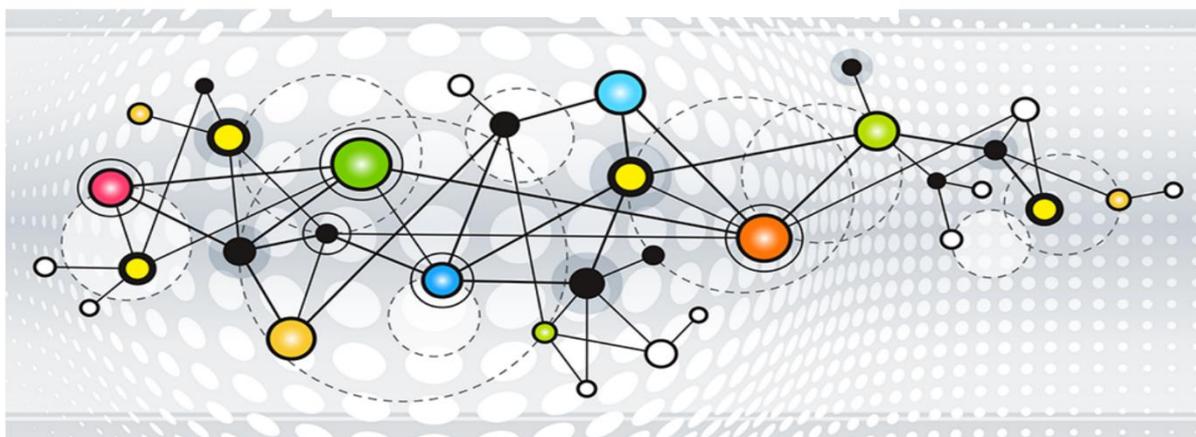
7. Achieving significant change involves changing the system

People's behaviour (and often our perception of their competence) and the results that they produce are caused by the web of interactions within which they exist and which they are all part of (i.e. 'the system'). These interactions are complex and dynamic and it can be difficult to see them from within the system. Normally people's intentions are positive; however, like in a family, the web of interactions often creates unintended consequences. Successful and sustainable change, involves taking a step back and working on redesigning these interactions.

In practice, this could include changing the reporting arrangements, the nature of the roles, the departmental structure, the relationship between teams and with external partners / suppliers, the way that individual and collective performance is managed, reviewed and improved, the service development and delivery processes, the nature of personal development planning and the leadership style.

These are all elements of the system. The point is that they all affect each other; therefore, changing one element of the system is unlikely to have the desired impact unless other elements are altered to match. So, changing your organisational structure is unlikely to have the required impact without also changing people's skill sets, the service development process, the way that performance is reviewed, recognise and rewarded and the leadership style. Similarly, if you decide to introduce an innovative new service, this will need change throughout the system to ensure it is delivered effectively and continually developed (service innovations are only effective on the long-term if they are accompanied by a new or improved service innovation process).

Some organisations and partnerships seek to make a difference to broad social, economic, environmental or health-related outcomes. It is only possible to achieve this if the wider system is changed to achieve greater collaborative working and collective innovation. The wider system will include a variety of organisations, bodies and groups from all sectors involved in supplying or supporting services and creating demand. Such system change can only be achieved through an organic change process which evolves and grows gradually without centralised control.



8. “Cause and effect are not closely related in time or space” (Peter Senge)

The system comprises many cause and effect loops. To achieve effective change, we need to work out the causes of the areas for improvement and then plan actions to address these. This is easier said than done! We tend to use very simplistic and linear thinking to work out cause and effect (especially in the Western World).

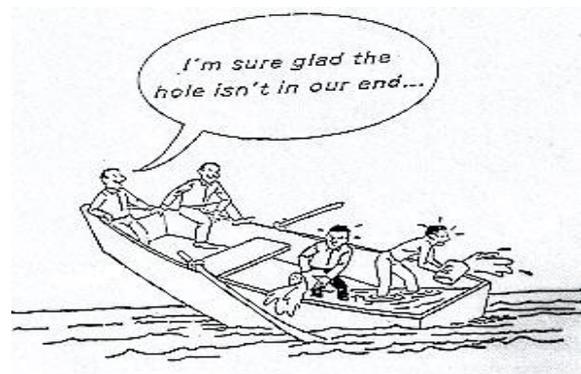
Like a leaky roof the causes of performance gaps are often not where they surface; the cause could lie in another part of the organisation or partnership or in what happened some time ago (e.g. education and training programmes from years ago in different places interact with current organisational performance management processes to create a certain behavioural response). Often, cause lies at the interaction between functions (e.g. teams, sections, divisions, directorates, etc) and organisations (e.g. partners, funders, customers, etc). Unfortunately, we tend to break up work activity into functional and organisational silos; this doesn't help us. We have to set up teams which can look at the whole instead of the parts.

The other challenge is that cause and effect relationships are not linear; they are complex and cyclical (e.g. a affects b, which affects c, which affects a and so on). So, seeking the underlying cause is a pointless exercise! Instead, we should try to find the leverage which will break the cycle.

We need to take the time to study and understand cause and effect patterns, learning from the past to inform the future.

9. ‘Out there’ is really ‘in here’

We have a tendency to think that our organisation, department or service area is independent from other bodies around us. This can lead us to think that we can only focus on what is ‘in here’ and that we should leave alone what is ‘out there’. Not only that, when change doesn't work we tend to blame what has happened ‘out there’!



In reality, ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ are part of the same system. The change process will affect – and will be affected by – people ‘out there’. So, during our change programmes we have to find a way to answer the following questions:

Who, outside of our organisation, department or team, will be affected by the change? Who, outside of our organisation, department or team, will influence the success of the change? How can we engage these people in the change process?

Without this thinking and action, the chances of negative unintended consequence increase.

10. We tend to get what we ask for! – the significance of performance management

This element of the system deserves a special mention. The way that organisations measure, review and seek to improve individual and collective performance has a significant impact on behaviour.

When we apply a sub-system of performance targets, objectives, performance appraisals, inspections and associated carrot and stick, this triggers a fascinating behavioural response. Like the Genie in Aladdin, we tend to get exactly what we ask for – no more, no less! The bigger the carrot and stick, the more this happens! The trouble is that it is very hard to reflect what we really want and need in our performance targets and objectives. Most of the characteristics and outcomes that we want and need are “unmeasurable and unknowable” (Dr Edwards Deming). The consequence of this are...



- a. People and teams work hard to achieve specific things which in themselves add little value and even have an adverse effect in the long-term (e.g. writing a strategy document within a set timeframe)
- b. People and teams ignore the targets and objectives and find ways to fake results when appraisals or performance reviews come around – a time-consuming and demoralising practice
- c. People and teams adjust what they do simply to hit the targets (they ‘game’ the system), which tends to adversely affect the service
- d. People waste time trying to measure the unmeasurable

You need to design your performance review and improvement approach which supports your change goals and the other elements of the new system (e.g. a team-based approach, rather than an individual approach, or a focus simply on continual personal development and team improvement, rather than on any output).

11. You can’t solve a problem with the same thinking which caused it!” (Einstein)

The nature of the system is caused by the mental models and thinking of the people who created, influenced it or allowed it to emerge in the first place! Significant and successful long-term change is only achieved when the thinking which created the system and caused the collective behaviour in the first place changes.

12. Too much too soon

Organisations can only work on a limited number of significant change activities at any moment in time. Think about the challenge of creating positive collective change in habitual behaviour...it is a “wicked” issue (i.e. it often appears to be resistant to solutions). This challenge grows as the organisation or partnership becomes bigger and more complex. Most organisations struggle to work on more than one significant change project at any one time. When we try to work on more, we tend to just tinker with the challenge (or produce a document!).

13. “The cure is worse than the disease” (Peter Senge)

Many traditional organisational solutions tend to involve an element of centralised control, prescription and downward enforcement of the new way of working (e.g. inspections, instructions, targets, rewards, punishments, etc). Over time, people can become dependent on these



mechanisms. If this part of the solution is ever removed, the behaviour reverts back to its original state with less chance of future improvement than existed before the solution was implemented (central government’s approach to local authority performance is an example of this). Sustainable improvement arises when people within the system decide to change for themselves.

14. You can’t simply ask people to become different

To achieve effective behaviour change, people usually need enhanced individual and collective capability (i.e. competence x capacity). Normally, we need support to help us to improve our capability. This is often completely missed, or given insufficient attention.

It is not enough simply to put people on training courses. All members of the team, including volunteers, should be given the opportunity for one to-one coaching session to enable them to identify their personal development needs and plan action which will enable them work effectively within the new system. A variety of learning and development support should be made available to enable these needs to be met, including mentoring, work shadowing, informal training, self-learning and experiential learning.

15. “Faster is slower” (Peter Senge)

Often the reason that change is unsuccessful is that people don’t give (or are not given) enough time to think it through and plan it thoroughly. Not only does this interfere with the impact of the action, but it eventually makes it slower! We need long-term thinking and action, rather than short-term fixes.

16. “Behaviour grows better before it grows worse” (Peter Senge)

One of the reasons why people move too fast with change programmes is that they often appear to be working! A combination of factors cause this, including refreshed motivation, the value of something new, the positive effects of study and enhanced self-awareness. Also cause and effect often takes time to happen; so negative impacts can take time to appear.

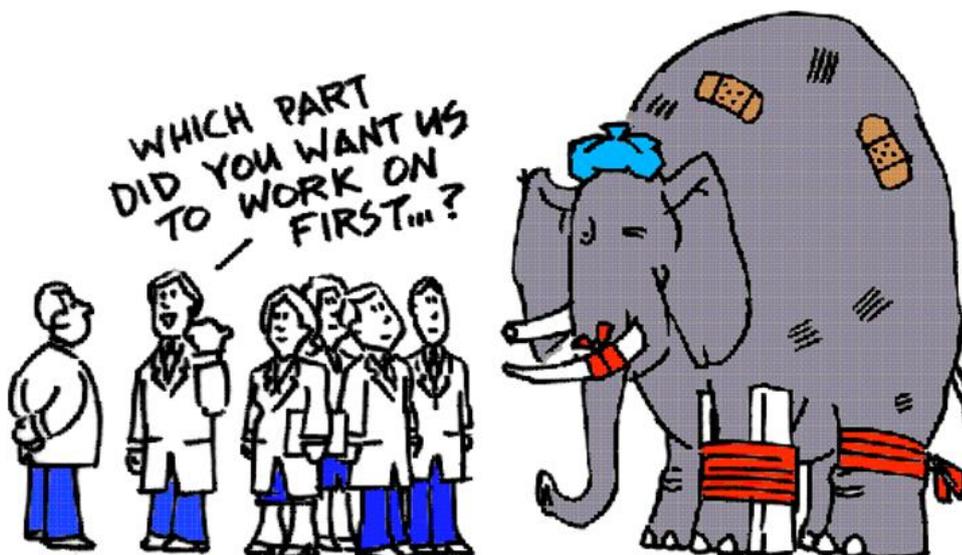
We learn best from experience; however, we rarely directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions. The most critical decisions made in organisations have system-wide consequences which stretch over years or decades. Cycles are particularly hard to see and thus learn from if they last longer than a year or two. Traditionally, leaders divide organisations into components, which means that the breadth of the impact is also hard to see and learn from.

To achieve effective change, we need to understand complex cause and effect patterns over time.

17. “Dividing an elephant into four doesn’t create four small elephants” (Sufi saying)

We tend to work on our change projects as if they are *independent* – in isolation from the rest of the organisation or partnership, or separate from each other. Sometimes we think that areas of improvement relate to specific functions: e.g. we act as if people development, communications and marketing areas for improvement are the responsibility of the HR department, the comms team or the marketing officer! We create separate work streams and action plans which are built into the individual work programmes of our people and the service plans for sections.

These are all examples of our tendency to try to improve the whole by breaking it down and working on the parts. When working on change projects, we need to take a holistic view, so that we can understand desired outcomes and work on the interrelationship between projects, parts of the organisation and other organisations.



18. “If all you have is hammer every problem looks like a nail!” (Maslow)

People often try to apply the tools that they know and love to every change challenge. For example, implementing new strategy, developing new values, documenting procedures, setting up staff training, imposing a “tough” new performance management regime, taking away money, giving rewards or even changing the structure, regardless of whether these relate to the causes of the required change. The key is to think creatively about all of the possible solutions.

19. Why do we think that resistance to change is such a bad thing?

When people or teams resist change, we tend to become very critical of them, assuming that this reflects badly on their character, and think that it causes a real problem for the change process.

Why do we think like this? It is a fundamentally flawed way of thinking.

Firstly, it is one thing being positive about change when we are in control over it; it is quite another being positive about it when it is imposed on you (see 5). Anxiety, worry and stress, and therefore resistance, are perfectly natural responses to perceived threat. We all react in a similar way. Over time, with the correct level of engagement, communication and support, these feelings will change.

Secondly, the resistance might be a way of telling us that the change plans are not right. We have to listen to people’s views and feelings, and allow this to challenge our thinking.

Thirdly, many organisational systems have stability built into them; they are designed not to change. This is the organisational equivalent of the concept of ‘homeostasis’: *The ability or tendency of a living organism, cell, or group to keep the conditions inside it the same despite any changes in the conditions around it, or this state of internal balance* (Cambridge Dictionary). We need to recognise this and seek to change the system if we still believe that the change is a good thing! (see ???).

20. We don’t have to be tough all the time!

The key to dealing with change in the workplace is personal **resilience**: *the ability to respond to the various challenges of the workplace in a way which enables you to flourish, at the same time helping your colleagues and the organisation achieve positive outcomes.*



This is not about being ‘tough’; it is about developing a collection of skills, including setting personal vision, values, goals and personal development plans, achieving and maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle, developing and maintaining the mental and emotional states, dealing with the flood of work, influencing, creative problem solving and using mutual peer support.

We can all benefit from support to develop and enhance these skills, especially in times of change.

So find opportunities to support your team...and yourself!

21. Success is stumbling from one failure to another with enthusiasm” (Churchill)

Change programmes do not progress in a simplistic linear way. Some actions will work and some will not; in some cases, whole improvement projects might not be successful. However, it is vital that these situations are not described as “failure”. Whilst the organisation is learning from what works and what doesn’t and refreshing, changing and refining improvement actions, it is always a “success”. Successful change rarely happens without something going wrong.

22. “I have seen the enemy...and he is I” (Pogo)

Before blaming others for lack of change and improvement, remember to think about your own ways of thinking and behaving and how these impact on people’s patterns of behaviour.

We live in a complex, dynamic world where everything is connected to everything else



We need better approaches to study, understand and manage complexity