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Deep Change

Deep change refers to the process of transformation or radical alteration that occasionally occurs in people, groups and organizations. One element of the process concerns leadership. From the study of people in the process of making deep change comes a concept called the fundamental state of leadership (Quinn, 2004). It refers to a psychological state or condition that an individual might enter in order to become the catalyst of transformation in a group or organization. It suggests that to make deep change in an organization, we begin by making deep change in ourselves. The concept of the fundamental state of leadership redefines much conventional leadership thought and also serves as an applied tool for those who seek to stimulate organizational transformation.

Deep Change or Slow Death

Energy is the capacity for doing work and overcoming resistance. From the second law of thermodynamics we learn that all systems tend toward increasing entropy. Increasing entropy means that energy in the system is being dispersed and therefore that the system is becoming more disordered. Less energy is available to do the work of the system. In a parallel fashion both the social structure of organizations and the psychological structure of individuals tend toward increasing entropy. Unless work is done to the contrary, natural processes will take the organizational culture or the individual ego toward stagnation and decay. The pull toward entropy gives rise to a pattern known as the “deep change” or “slow death” dilemma (Quinn, 1996).

The slow death of an individual ego or a collective culture is natural. It results from a number of

tendencies. The first tendency is our unconscious conservatism; we adjust our behaviors and aspirations to preserve the status quo. Behaviors become habits, and we act unreflectively, choosing familiar methods without thinking about why we choose them (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999). Moreover, we normally adjust our goals to match past performance; we judge our current state by comparing it to what we have accomplished in the past (Cyert and March, 1963). The result is that most behavior is conservative and recapitulates the past. The second tendency relevant to the slow death is the desire for control; we need to feel that we understand and shape our lives (Depret and Fiske, 1993). Our self-concepts hinge upon our sense of control. We are uncomfortable in situations that we do not understand or that we cannot influence. The third tendency is for the environment to change. Regardless of our personal desire for predictability and control, the external environment is constantly changing, demanding new responses from us.

Together, these three tendencies combine to create the slow death dilemma. We rely on old behaviors, even though the environment is constantly changing. As a result, we fall out of alignment and receive signals suggesting the need to change. Nevertheless, we need to feel that we are in control; thus, our natural reaction to demands for change is to practice denial. Such denial is a defense mechanism. It defends against the pain of anticipated personal or collective change. However, this denial is a form of closure, which increasingly closes out some aspect of the evolving external world. As we close down, we increasingly lose information, energy, and other resources. We experience slow death.

Although such denial is potentially destructive, it is quite common. Following the natural laws governing physical systems, individuals and organizations travel along the path of least resistance (Fritz, 1989). We do the easy things first. We leave the path of least resistance only when we make commitments, take risks, and move to new levels of performance. We then plateau. At first the plateau is a positive time of consolidation and success, but it eventually becomes a zone of comfort. At that point external signals begin to call for change. However, we react by practicing denial because we want to continue using the

strategies that worked in the past. We choose slow death over deep change.

As a result, most of us normally live in a reactive state (Fritz, 1989). We are trying to preserve our ego or current self. We do this by denying signals for change. To practice this form of denial is to practice self-deception. In this sense we are all hypocrites; there are gaps between what we espouse and what we practice (Argyris, 1988, 1991). We espouse change, dynamism, and learning, but we practice preservation, resistance, and denial. Therefore, it is normal for us to live in hypocrisy while denying that we do.

Because of this hypocrisy, our organizations and social systems, like us, are unconsciously but systematically designed to remain in a reactive state; they ignore change, seeking to preserve the status quo and to maintain order. Consequently, they become systems of fear, orchestrated to deny the need for change. We design them in our normal, reactive state to motivate people who are also in the normal, reactive state; they thus give rise to patterns of slow death.

However, individuals and organizations do not have to experience slow death. The alternative to slow death is deep change. The dilemma that we continually face, both personally and organizationally, is the choice between deep change and slow death, between integrity and hypocrisy.

Individual Transformation

The normal state is a reactive state in which we seek to stay on the path of least resistance, where we seek to preserve our present zone of comfort.. Individuals can leave the reactive state by making fundamental or foundational commitments, by having the courage to face the gap between their performance and what is needed, by ceding their illusions of control. Such commitments create a deep, personal change. Fritz (1989) argues that the most powerful question a person can ask is “What result do I want to create?” Asking that question creates a vision that has the power to draw us out of the reactive state and off the path of least resistance. When we clarify our aspirations and values, when we commit to a higher purpose, we are no

longer focused on the past. We leave our comfort zone and begin to move forward through uncertainty. When we do this, we are no longer reactive. We become more concerned about accomplishing our desired result than we are about preserving our current self. We become proactive.

At the individual level, deep change is a process in which we increase our integrity. It occurs when we stop denying the pressures to change and commit to a result that we truly want to create. Knowing what we want to create and committing to do so means that we have clarified our values and that we are moving into the uncertain world that exists outside our zone of comfort. The movement from the normal state to the fundamental state of leadership is represented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Normal State and the Fundamental State of Leadership

Normal State			Fundamental State of Leadership	
Comfort centered	to		Purposed centered	
Externally directed	to		Internally directed	
Self-focused	to		Other focused	
Internally closed	to		Externally open	

Our normal state has four characteristics. First, we normally are comfort centered; we stay in our routines and react to forces that might influence and distort our equilibrium. When we are purpose centered, we become intentional, choosing to create a unique result. Second, it is also normal to be externally directed, to respond to the social pressures that demand conformity. Therefore, to become internally directed is a courageous choice. We must exercise the courage to act on own values and thus express our unique self. This choice reverses the normal deterministic relationship between the individual and the social system; we begin to influence the system around us. The third characteristic of the normal state is to self-focused, to be concerned with our own needs, our own results. In contrast, to be other focused is to act out of concern for the welfare of a relationship or the collective good. Such concern creates conditions in which others can grow with us in a mutually enhancing and unique way; the

relationship is more energized. Finally, in the normal state, we are internally closed; we avoid connections that require change. To be externally open is to move forward in uncertainty, searching out all forms of feedback and learning from them. A person who has made the commitment to deep change pursues a unique purpose while personally unfolding the self in a unique way, creating unique relationships, and learning unique things. To be in such a unique and dynamic state is to be transformational; it is to be in the fundamental state of leadership.

This state, with the commitment and integrity it involves, transcends traditional boundaries. Although changes often involve renewed effort and performance in a work setting, committing to a higher purpose does not always mean embracing an organizational goal. For example, for some executives a needed deep change may be a commitment to spend less time at work and more time caring for personal issues (Quinn, 2004). The necessary deep change may be having the courage to commit to spending more time with a family member, to resuming an old hobby, or engaging in a community activity.

People sometimes report the surprising discovery that making a deep change in one area of their lives has positive impacts in other areas. By committing to resume an old hobby, an individual may find, paradoxically, that she or he is more effective at work. Likewise, people who make the commitment to engage more fully at work often report an improvement in the quality of relationships at home. We must transcend ourselves to make deep change, and doing so affects every aspect of our lives.

In part, this spillover occurs because the dynamics of deep change generate reflection and commitment that lead to an increase in positive emotions. Whereas negative emotions have a narrowing effect on human processes, positive emotions broaden awareness, expand thinking, and result in increased vision and understanding (Fredrickson, 2003). Moreover, positive emotion and positive thought are mutually reinforcing, creating what is called an “upward spiral.” In the spiral our new perspective leads us to experience positive emotions, which further broaden our awareness, creating more insight, and so on.

Such upward spirals may be called “virtuous cycles.” They are reciprocating relationships in which new structures and patterns are emerging. These new patterns allow for the expanded flow of information and energy. When we personally experience such expansion in awareness and energy, we tend to initiate more effective patterns of behavior. Because we see new aspects of reality, aspects that others cannot see, we can interact with changing reality in ways that are more effective. We tend to exhibit virtues such as confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans and Avolio, 2004).

Typically, virtuous cycles are ones in which desirable patterns are amplified, leading to better performance. They thus fit the meaning of virtue as generalized excellence. However, this generalized excellence in the social realm can be traced to increased virtue in the moral realm. The Greek philosopher Aristotle considered courage the first of all virtues because the exercise of courage is necessary to activate the other virtues. By clarifying the result we want to create, by becoming internally directed, other focused, and externally open, we exercise the courage to reduce our hypocrisy and leave the reactive state. As described, this act of courage may activate positive emotions and increased performance. Thus, movement in the moral realm triggers various physiological and psychological processes that can spread to create general patterns of excellence (Pratt and Ashforth, 2004).

Organizational Transformation

Over time an organization turns various patterns and processes into routines. Roles, identities, and power patterns emerge. As denial occurs, the organization loses alignment with the external environment and secures fewer external resources. As denial continues, trust, cohesion, and coordination decay. As the gap between the internal capacity and the external demands increases, conflict also increases. People begin to lose hope in the collective purpose. They turn to preserving their own self-interest and collude in the slow death of the organization. This unconscious conspiracy results in increased entropy. When this

happens, change can occur only if someone cares enough for the collective good to risk his or her personal good. That person must take the risk of trying to change a system that does not want to change. This kind of commitment is rare. Such commitment requires the exercise of integrity and courage and may give rise to the fundamental state of leadership.

In entering the fundamental state of leadership we begin to transcend the normal or reactive state.. In place of denial and resistance, we practice choice and action; we have begun to genuinely *lead* our lives, rather than merely respond. In doing so, we tend to engage in the co-creation of our external world. By entering the fundamentalstate of leadership, we overcome our fears and become far more aware of what is possible. By acting on possibility, we change not only ourselves but also the world around us.

In addition, an individual's deep change and entrance into the fundamentalstate of leadership can affect others. Interaction with a person in the fundamental state of leadership can have transformational effects. In seeking a desired result instead of simply solving a problem, we see things that others cannot see. In particular, we may see potential in others that they cannot see in themselves. When they are reactive and in denial, stuck on the path of least resistance, they cannot see potentialities. If we are in the fundamental state of leadership, we see the potential, and we tend to call others to a higher standard while providing increased support for them to risk pursuing that standard.

A basic assumption of the social sciences is that individuals seek their own self-interest, a dynamic that is at the heart of the slow death phenomenon in organizations. As organizations move toward entropy, more and more people tend to pursue self-interest, and the process of slow death is accelerated. The only way to break the downward spiral is to transform the system. Just as an individual emerges from deep change with new awareness and capability to work in the current emerging reality, so it is with organizations. People become more hopeful and more committed. Trust increases. More information flows through the invigorated network of relationships. Everyone has more energy. The collective interest and the

individual interests are now one. People are willing to sacrifice for the good of the organization. The organization acquires new collective capacities, and performance tends to increase.

At this point at least two reciprocal upward spirals are unfolding. The first spiral is within the individual. In the committed state positive emotions and positive thoughts are spiraling upward, giving rise to new awareness. The second spiral is within our relationships. We are joining with others, igniting one another's positive emotions, hope, exploration, and discovery (Dutton, 2003). The two spirals themselves now join in a reciprocating relationship; we inspire others to inspire us. The group has thus increased in purpose, integrity, connection and emergent and spontaneous learning.

In this way the fundamental state of leadership also gives rise to emergent, spontaneous or unplanned patterns of organizing. In the first of the reciprocal upward spirals, we experience the emergence of a more unique and complex self. We are simultaneously becoming more differentiated and more integrated than we were previously. We are becoming more differentiated because we are developing new awareness and new capacities; we become increasingly different from others. However, we are also becoming more integrated or aligned with the dynamic, external environment and with our internal values. We are becoming more connected to our purpose; it is becoming more of a calling. We are also becoming more connected to the people who journey with us. We are, therefore, simultaneously differentiating and integrating ourselves in the fundamental state of leadership.

The second spiral gives rise to emergent organization. In the transformational state of leadership, we become disruptive of the status quo. We represent a new set of assumptions and perspectives. The old, recalcitrant organization is challenged. Because we are in an abnormal condition, we engage in acts of positive deviance. We become a disruptive signal to others, a distortion in their expectations of how things should be. They must stop to make sense of our altered state, broadening their own awareness by doing so (Nemeth, 1986). As a metaphor of change, we become a living invitation. We entice people to join us in the

fundamental state of leadership. To do so they must transform themselves. This joining is also a dance of co-creation. As it unfolds, a new organization emerges. We do not plan it. It emerges through a process of interpersonal contagion and interaction.

Being in fundamental state of leadership requires commitment and intense focus. It is a temporary state. In it we experience expanded awareness and expenditure of energy but we eventually return to the normal state. This shift provides a period of consolidation, sense making and recovery. Eventually the new plateau becomes our normal state, our new zone of comfort. To leave it we must again enter the fundamental state of leadership. It is normal to resist the need to move back into the fundamental state of leadership. Yet having been there once may serve as a facilitator of reentry. Multiple episodes of moving in and out of the fundamental state of leadership contribute greatly to our development as human beings and as leaders of change because we gain intellectual and emotional assets that improve performance and broaden awareness.

Summary and Implications

In summary, deep change is transformational change. Observations of people making deep change give rise to the concept we call the fundamental state of leadership. The concept deviates from normal thinking about transformational leadership and also provides an applied tool for leaving the normal state and entering the fundamental state of leadership.

Unlike most approaches to leadership, this one does not put heavy emphasis on position and authority, on traits or behaviors or on techniques for changing others. Much work on leadership focuses on people in positions of authority and automatically defines them as leaders. The CEO, for example, is normally referred to as the leader of the company. Since most of the time most people are not in the fundamental state of leadership, most of the time most authority figures including CEOs are not leading.

On the other hand, anyone can choose to enter the fundamental state of leadership and thus become a leader. Anyone can be transformational. This suggests extreme accountability. We are all responsible for the creation of the world in which we choose to live.

Most leadership approaches seek to identify those traits and behaviors that make leaders effective. This approach does not. It suggests that when we enter the fundamental state of leadership, we develop new patterns of behavior uniquely matched to context in which we operate. Transformational success cannot be imitated. It must, in each case, be created.

Nearly all leadership and management approaches suggest techniques for changing others. This one does not. It suggests that the key to transformation is self change. We can only transform others by becoming more centered on results, more internally directed, more other-focused and more externally open. When we do these things, we distort the context and gain attention. We model increased integrity and moral power. We attract people to greater challenge, higher self regard, enriched relationships and significant personal growth. As these things happen, a new organization emerges.

The concept also serves as an applied tool. We can increase the probability of exercising transformational influence by asking ourselves four key questions: What result do I want to create? Am I internally driven? Am I other-focused? Am I externally open? Truthful answers to these questions tend to change our perspective and our behavior and tend impact the context in which we operate. We begin to lead deep change.

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Further Reading

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