

Creating a Cultural Revolution in Your Workplace to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century

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The situation we are in. At the beginning of the 21st century, we are in the midst of a transformation that can only compare with the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. We call it globalisation. It affects every aspect of our lives - social, political, cultural, spiritual and ecological. It is transforming institutions of every kind including community, family and our individual lifestyles. We need to understand it and work with it.

Organisations face rapid change, unprecedented global competition, unpredictability and the constant threat of acquisition. At the same time, there is growing awareness of the global social responsibility of business and the challenges of sustainability in the broadest sense.

It is the century when we are going to need “servant leaders”, more than ever before. It is challenging, exciting and full of opportunity. If organisations are to thrive and survive, they must innovate. They need all the energy and creativity of their people. This requires a revolution in workplace culture – from workplaces that limit, frustrate and dis-empower people to ones that release energy, enterprise and spirit. They also need to be led by global citizens. The best people want to work for ethical organisations that meet the needs of society and avoid doing harm.

For their survival, the culture becomes top of the agenda. This presents people in HRD with exciting opportunities as never before. In this article I shall outline the part we can play and suggest how we can go about it.

New Theory about Organisations and how they change We require new survival skills. Some old ways of seeing organisations and beliefs about how to change no longer work. New thinking, rooted in complexity and chaos theory, is emerging that makes better sense of what actually happens in organisations and how they change. Organisations are seen as self-regulating, emergent, open, whole systems. The living system is a better metaphor than the machine.

“The main contrast is between the metaphor of organisations as machines and that of organisations as living systems” (1)

This message seems especially important for Government. Change emerges through the collective intelligence of many people. Leadership can encourage or hinder this natural process.

Ideas about leadership are evolving in tune with these new ways of seeing organisations.

Leading is more complex today. In a world of intense competition, and the power of the financial markets and media, the leader has to be exceptionally good at getting corporate strategy right. But she or he is more likely to do so by leading inclusively. Apart from

requiring exceptional entrepreneurial flair, leaders need to do *two* things exceptionally well: On the one hand, they have to offer *an appealing message* about purpose, values, vision, direction and culture. On the other, they need to *enable* the organisation – to respond, adapt, create, re-create and replace itself as a living system. In an organisation there are two ways of creating the future. On the one hand there is *designed future*, first created in our imagination; on the other, there is the *emergent future*. It is about both making things happen *and* letting go and allowing things to happen – yin and yang. The leader today has to be good at both. Leaders need both charisma *and* the wisdom to be enabling servants.

“The only way to lead when you don’t have control is you lead through the power of your relationships. You can deal with the unknown only if you have enormous levels of trust, and if you’re working together and bringing out the best in people” “It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be” (2)

The Servant Leader needs to model the behaviour that is required. She or he needs to be human and authentic; to listen to people; encourage them to be themselves and say what they think without fear; welcome conflict and use the knowledge coming from diversity; create a learning culture by admitting to not knowing - instead wanting to discover and continuously develop and challenge themselves. They need to embrace the whole organisation’s intelligence and stakeholders in deciding, planning and implementing change; give everyone dignity and meaning; appreciate and celebrate; learn from what works rather than overly focusing on what does not; show faith in people; create conditions that can bring out everyone’s full abilities. It requires integrity, humility, corporate citizenship and having the courage to stand up for what is right and to stand out against what is wrong. It amounts to “servant leadership”.

Amongst many examples of people who have had a good shot at this, are Ricardo Semler, Andy Law and Greg Dyke. There are plenty more, some who support the Robert Greenleaf Servant Leadership organisation or the Centre for Tomorrow’s Company.

Organisation culture For a long time the importance of organisation culture has been recognised. Richard Scase’s words make it clear that culture is now vital to national and organisation survival.

“To compete in global markets, companies must embrace continuous innovation. This can only be achieved by leveraging intellectual capital and the creativity of employees. Before this can happen there must be high-trust cultures in both the corporate environment and the broader society. At present, too many businesses are structured and managed on the basis of low trust. Management too often still demands employee compliance rather than encouraging personal creativity. Many employees feel dis-empowered and alienated..... They do not feel themselves as stakeholders in the future of their companies and therefore lack incentive to create and innovate. To be competitive in the future global economy will require a revolution in the culture and practices of British management. Their attitudes and assumptions are the major barrier. ” (3)

History can be seen as a long struggle for inclusion, but globalisation is giving it a new urgency. An inclusive, empowering culture is a necessity. Many people dislike the prevailing culture of organisations and want out. Recent research by the CIPD shows that stress and increasing absenteeism are related to workload, management style and relationships. In a more affluent society, people have increasing aspirations and can exercise more choice. They are attracted to good working environments, but they also want to work for organisations that fit their values and have a positive attitude to corporate social responsibility (CSR). This is becoming an important issue as more negative press appears. New technology and globalisation is helping people start up their own businesses, and there are a high proportion of women entrepreneurs emerging to whom CSR and a more open culture are more attractive. These are refreshing trends.

The Good Workplace Above all today, the culture of an organisation needs to release spirit and energy and empower people to take leadership together in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. Leaders need to engage mind, heart, body and spirit. All four have to be embraced if workplaces are to be fully productive and attractive to employees. People need to be free to be themselves and express their truth without fear. We are a long way from doing this in practice. Many leaders are emotionally and spiritually illiterate.

I listen to a lot of people and this is the sort of thing they tell me is needed:

The Good Workplace

- Delighting our customers – pride in what we do.
- People clear about direction and their part in the enterprise.
- One team – everyone takes responsibility and does what they promise.
- Encouragement and challenge - appreciation and celebration.
- Not afraid to tackle conflicts or difficulties openly.
- Being direct with people.
- A culture without fear or blame - mistakes are to be learned from.
- Feelings OK - eg enthusiasm or anxiety about change.
- Everyone fully involved in change, learning and discovery.
- Leaders encourage feedback and really listen.
- Diversity respected and valued.
- OK to be who you are.
- Trust and Integrity.
- Excitement, fun and humour.
- Balance - time to reflect, relax and keep well – not a long hours, macho culture.

Creating a cultural revolution - The challenge for people in HRD. So what are the implications for us? I think we need to see ourselves as keepers of the organisation's values, integrity and spirit - giving leadership in thought and practice about transformation, leadership, learning and culture. The task is also to provide wise counselling, both challenge and support, to the organisation's leaders. This requires courage, integrity and credibility. Your own personal development will be the key to it all.

We need to be experts in processes that enable the collective intelligence of the organisation in creating change. We need to move from the safe, didactic approach of courses and become change agents and OD practitioners. Courses are an inappropriate model for empowering people in the 21st Century. The circle is a better model than the classroom or lecture theatre. It means getting familiar with whole system processes that work with living systems, help the future emerge, and help people handle conflict, polarities, diversity, complexity, chaos, ambiguity and use right brain thinking. We need to learn from approaches like Future Search, Search Conferences, Open Space Technology, Real Time Strategic Change, Appreciative Inquiry, NonViolent Communication, Polarity Management. Not slavishly copying them as “products” or, the latest “fads”, but using the underlying principles to create our own processes for the unique situation we are in.

We need to bring into the organisation, practices that engage heart, spirit and body – we cannot be hopeful, creative and full of life energy without them. This means liberating spirit and energy through laughter and fun and having the courage to introduce simple “alternative” practices like movement and meditation. A lot of people need healing and space to recover from unrelenting pressure and stress. It may mean challenging the pressure to do everything in the shortest possible time – always wanting more for less and “value for money.” The exhausting Anglo American culture of overwork is alien to the enthusiasm, energy, innovation and creativity we so much need.

Here are some thoughts about underlying principles:

Principles for Change Agents

- See yourself as an OD practitioner, not a provider of didactic programmes.
- Make friends with leaders at every level – listen, above all, and give support and challenge.
- Make the CEO your leading client - support them in trusting their thinking, their vision, in changing the culture and finding their higher purpose.
- Create your own diagnosis of the key issues of the organisation and base your vision and strategy on it.
- Trust your thinking and your vision.
- Go where the energy is, especially for change and innovation.
- Work with both crusading **and** restraining forces.
- Foster networking, relationship building and conversations across boundaries – through conversations, change takes place.
- Help people work on their real issues and opportunities.
- Use processes that help them work with complexity, chaos, uncertainty, spirit, heart, body and mind.
- Have courage and take risks – playing safe because of fear is counter productive – what scares you is probably what you need to do and will build your stature and personal authority.
- Thoroughly understand the politics but do not get involved – integrity means being loyal to everyone. Being trusted widely is your greatest asset.
- Use yourself and your own organisation as your learning laboratory.

- Be the change you want to see – use your team as an example of the culture that works.
- Get support for yourself – you will surely need it - from inside the organisation and that different, challenging support from an outside perspective.

Tools for transformation Here are a few tools or structures I have used for helping people bring about transformation. Simpler tools are better – there is elegance and beauty in simplicity. Being accessible, and easily understood, they empower people. Anyone can use them.

Focus on what is working - positive news. A key concept is to study what is working in an organisation and make it grow. Appreciating what is working, indeed how much is working, and why it is working, helps people learn and feel good about themselves. Having a lot of people all focusing on what they appreciate and what is working has a profoundly positive effect on the whole organisation. When we feel good about ourselves we have more energy, function better, are more creative and more powerful. Whatever you focus on enlarges. If you focus on criticism, mistakes, problems and failure, that will enlarge. So many of us struggle with self-doubt and lack of self-esteem.

Some people call this approach Appreciative Inquiry or AI. It underlies all the following models. First appreciate what is working and celebrate success!

Another key ground rule is *Take individual responsibility!* If you have an idea, take responsibility, share it and do it! See difficulties as opportunities and setbacks as gifts that can teach you.

“There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving and that’s your own self.” **Aldous Huxley.**

1) An approach based on Appreciative Inquiry The key stages of an approach based on Appreciative Inquiry are below. Before these key stages, the first step is the **Definition Phase** to identify the key issue or issues that need to be inquired into, plan the strategy of the intervention, roles and logistics and create the conditions for a success. The following structure can be used as the basis for an event for a team, small or large or a major organisation intervention.

- Key Stages**
- **Discovery** What is working? What gives life? Celebrate it. Think of times when you experienced success. Criteria. What characterised it?
 - **Dream** What might be? Our vision. Our highest hopes for our organisation or my part of it.
 - **Design** Making it real. Key issues to address.
 - **Delivery** Goals, your key actions.

2) Giving and Getting a Good Listening to. Here is a simple agenda or model you can use and adapt for working with individuals in a one-to-one consultation session – I call it “a good listening to” because most people benefit enormously from being asked well chosen questions and given complete attention – it is often as simple as that:

An Agenda for a Good Listening to

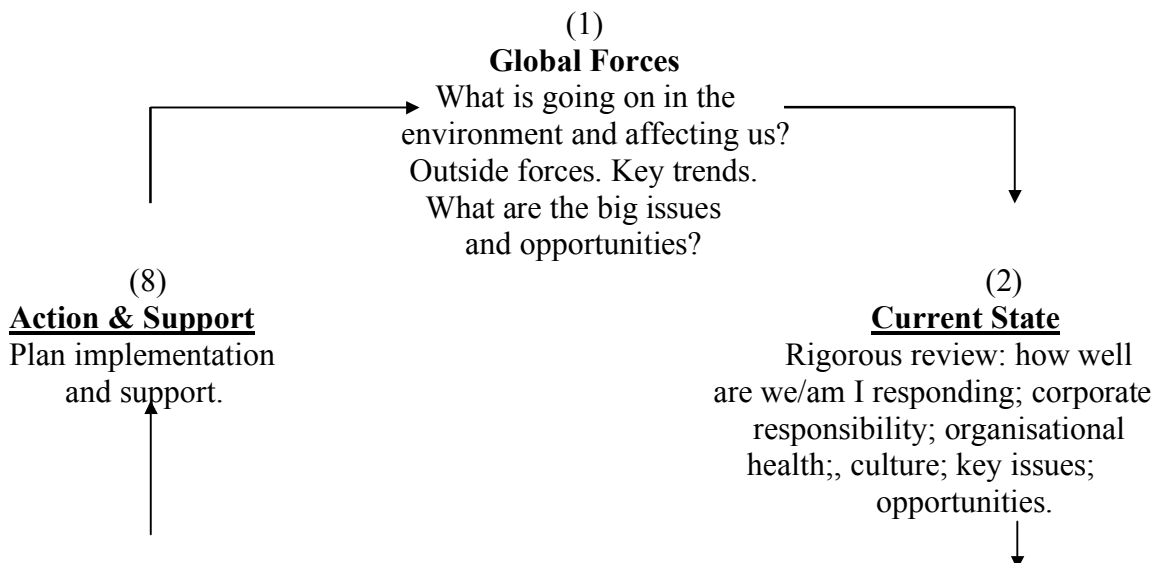
- **What is working well?** Celebrate.
- **What concerns you** or has been difficult? How do you feel? What is the gift in this?
- **What is the current situation?** Your diagnosis of the key issue that, if addressed, would transform the situation?
- **How do you want to change things?** How would it look if everything exceeded your highest hopes? What if you got in touch with your passion? What is your higher purpose? Your exciting vision of the way things could be and need to be.
- **What will get in the way** if you don't tackle it? In you and out there.
- **What will you do then?** What is your strategy? What are those few, key actions that will make all the difference and represent, "less is more"? Who do you need to influence?
- **What support do you need?** How can I help?

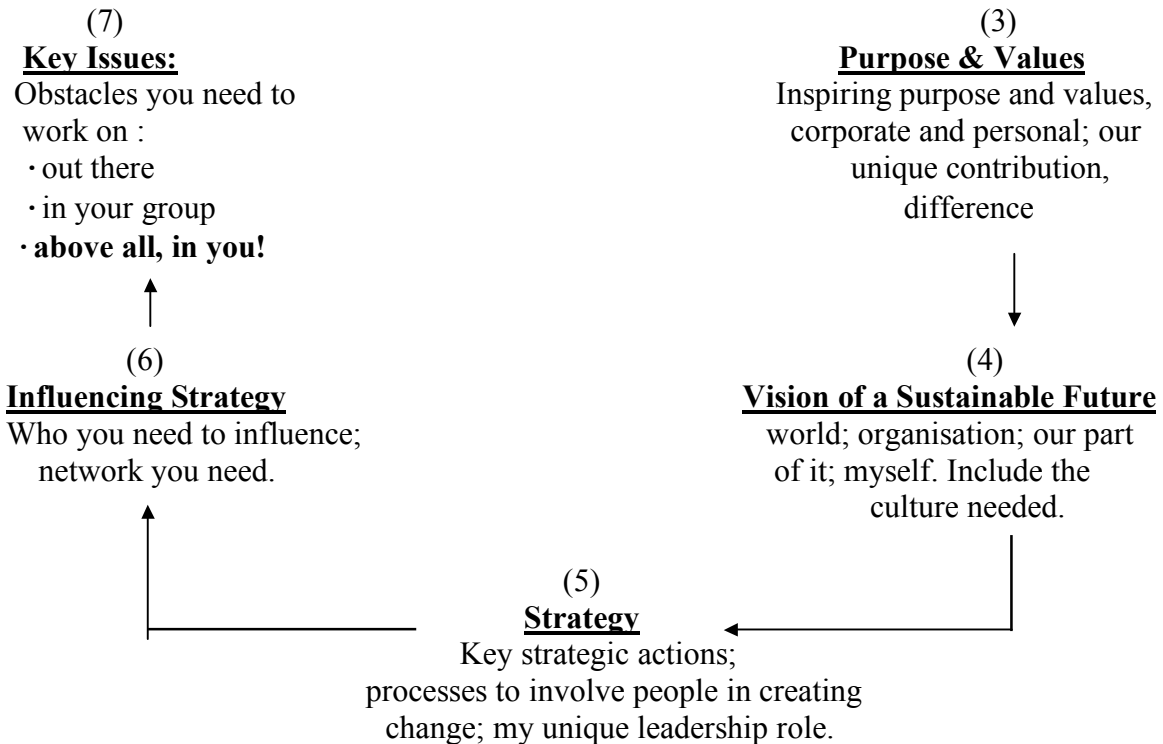
You can also use this model for co-mentoring, starting with a trusted, valued colleague and yourself. This is a wonderful way to make friends in your organisation. In the process you are also collecting data about the key issues of the organisation.

"The right way to do things is not to persuade people you're right but to challenge them to think it through for themselves." (4)

3) The Strategic Leadership Model Here is another structure I use with groups of people, large or small. I call it the Strategic Leadership Model and it can be modified to suit different needs and groups. People learn best by being helped to face and take responsibility for the real challenges and opportunities they have. This is a model you can use to enable people to do this.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP MODEL©





The model provides the basis for facilitating them in reviewing their environment and seeing the opportunities in it; appraising how well they are responding to it and developing a strategy that grasps these challenges and opportunities and moves them to creating a new exciting state. You can start by using it for your own team. This will help make your team a beacon for the organisation. It is a holistic process - different stages require people to involve heart, mind and spirit to varying degrees if they are to be fully successful. The opportunity will be wasted unless there is a rigorous support and follow on strategy.

It has to be said that to do all this, you need to build relationships with clients in the organisation who have the open-mindedness, imagination, vision, values and yearning for something better and are willing to make good use of your support. Usually you will find many people who will welcome such an opportunity, particularly if you go out and listen to them, create safety to talk honestly about their thinking, their feelings and express their deeply held hopes, values and beliefs. Finding leaders at the top who are open to this may be harder. But the trend is upward and on your side.

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Other Resources

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