

# Changing the language of change: how new contexts and concepts are challenging the ways we think and talk about organizational change

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- *This article proposes that our current terminology and conceptual language for organizational change make it difficult to address the range of changes confronting contemporary organizations.*
- *Difficulties discussed include ambiguous and imprecise ways of talking about organizational change, changing organizational contexts that require new ways to think and talk about change, and dealing with implicit assumptions about change that may not be relevant in a world of continual change.*
- *A matrix of change scenarios is presented and the term 'morphing' is introduced to describe continuous whole-system change in hyperactive business environments.*
- *Concepts, assumptions and metaphors associated with 'altered consciousness' and self-organizing 'complex adaptive systems' are also discussed as alternative ways to think and talk about transformational change.*
- *Implications discussed include the need to be specific and self-reflective when thinking and talking about organizational change, and to rethink a possible over-reliance on mechanistic, engineering or planned movement concepts, metaphors and word imagery.*

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## Introduction

There is no question that change is a dominant aspect of contemporary organizations. Faced with the forces of globalization and information technology, change initiatives such as downsizing, re-engineering, mergers and acquisitions, restructuring and drives to get 'better-faster-cheaper' by 'doing more

with less' have all become ubiquitous components of most executives' jobs as well as consultants' services. Moreover, and as Pettigrew *et al.* (2001: 704) note: 'The ideas and techniques of change management are now a global industry led by international consulting firms, gurus, a few high-profile chief executive officers, mass media business publications, and business schools.' Thus, given the scope of organizational change, and the change industry of consultants, trainers and academics that has grown up to

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define and support it, examining organizational change from many perspectives is both timely and appropriate. Valid points of inquiry include discerning the ingredients distinguishing successful from unsuccessful change efforts, consideration of alternative change processes or methods, determination of causal models of key variables influencing or leading to change, isolating what triggers, accelerates or retards organizational change, and so forth.

From a discursive perspective, however, there is an important question that should precede such inquiries because '(t)he language of change can be a liberating force or an analytical prison' (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001: 700). The preliminary question, therefore, is: 'Do we have the words and conceptual language to address the current and emerging change dynamics of contemporary organizations?' The position of this article is: 'No, we do not.' There are at least three principal difficulties with the current inventory of words and conceptual language for addressing contemporary organizational change. First, our current language of change is ambiguous and imprecise, especially considering the multifaceted nature of organizational change. Second, the context of organizational change is changing, leaving us with language and concepts that may have been highly appropriate in a different context, but are less applicable now. Third, the current dominant language of change reflects embedded concepts and assumptions that make it difficult to address certain types of emerging change dynamics and possibilities.

As a result of these difficulties, executives, employees and consultants no longer have effective ways to talk about the range of organizational change dynamics they are currently confronting. Put another way, '(t)he dominant change language then seems to uphold "preferred" ways of designing and implementing change that suppresses alternative, and possibly more appropriate, courses of action' (Morgan, 2001: 85). Even the word 'change' may be embedded in and encumbered by the very contexts and

concepts that are being challenged by current and emerging change dynamics.

### ***Our current language of change is ambiguous and imprecise***

The word 'change' has a variety of dictionary definitions connoting varying processes including, *to substitute, replace, switch, alter, become different, convert and transform*. The word, and its range of meanings, is then applied generically to all aspects of the change experience, implying that 'changing' an organization's structure is the same as 'changing' its culture in terms of reasons, methods, outcomes, time, cost, etc. Furthermore, the generic term 'change' does not differentiate among different sources, types or magnitudes of change. For example, 'fine tuning' and 're-engineering' are both organizational changes, as are changes 'to seize the initiative' or 'respond to competitor or market-place innovations'.

Partially in response to the ambiguous and imprecise meanings for the word change, as well as to account for new insights and ideas, consultants and academics alike have been busy developing new typologies and terminology to try to clarify one or more dimension of change. The full range of attempts to classify different types or aspects of change is extensive and beyond the scope of this discussion. Table 1, however, summarizes some of these efforts to help illustrate the point.

A review of Table 1 makes clear that clarifying the nature or magnitude of change has been a central concern of academics and consultants for over thirty years. If anything, trying to be clear about 'What kind of change are we talking about?' has become even more difficult in recent years. The change from single- to multi-variable typologies is probably a reflection of both our greater understanding of change dynamics as well as increased difficulty in communicating unambiguously what we mean when using the term 'change' by itself.

Despite the attempts to clarify our understandings by classifying different aspects of

**Table 1.** Some typologies and terms of change

Single variable: nature of change	
Greiner (1972)	Evolutionary or revolutionary
Bartunek and Moch (1987)	First-order, second-order or third-order
Ackerman (1996)	Development, transition or transformation
Weick and Quinn (1999)	Episodic or continuous
Multivariable: nature of change and ways of managing or focus	
Nadler (1998)	Nature of change combined with ways of managing leads to <i>tuning, adapting, redirecting</i> or <i>overhauling</i> .
Huy (2001)	Nature of change combined with focus of change leads to <i>commanding, engineering, teaching</i> or <i>socializing</i> .
Palmer and Dunford (2002)	Nature of change combined with ways of managing leads to <i>directing, navigating, caretaking, coaching, interpreting</i> or <i>nurturing</i> .

change, we are still left with ambiguity and confusion when we try to talk about it. There is simply no agreed upon terminology or typology to guide us in our thinking and acting with respect to 'change'. The use of different words and phrases referring to the same change dynamic, and/or the same words and phrases referring to different dynamics, also impedes communications among and between executives, employees, consultants and academics. Each community also seems to have some preferences for different terminology, adding to the difficulties in communicating across researchers and practitioners. For example, academics may use the term 'punctuated equilibrium' (e.g. Gersick, 1991) to refer to the same change dynamic that executives and consultants may call 'radical', 'revolutionary', 'fundamental', or, increasingly, 'transformational' change.

It is clear that efforts to clarify and further define change dynamics, leading to more agreed-upon typologies and terms, would greatly assist our ability to study, compare, and guide organizational change efforts. In the meantime, however, we are left with a cacophony of terms and compound words to try to communicate the whats, whys, and hows of organizational change. As a result, it remains hard to know what we are really talking about when we talk about organizational change, except perhaps that something, at some level, due to some set of circumstances or processes will be different to some degree.

### ***The context of organizational change is changing***

As we enter the Information Age, the scope, speed, and even nature of change seems to be changing. The new information technologies of the past 50–60 years (TV, satellite communications, PCs, the Internet, mobile phones, etc.) are creating a new era, marked by the ability of people to access and share information with virtually anyone, anywhere, anytime about anything on a continuous, interactive and unrestricted basis. These new capabilities have altered both the organizational game and the rules of the game. 'Connectivity, Speed, and Intangibles — the derivatives of time, space, and mass — are blurring the rules and redefining our businesses and our lives' (Davis and Meyer, 1998: 6). The result of these shifting conditions and capabilities is the emergence of a new context that invites different organization and change principles from those most applicable in the Industrial Age. For example, some of the keys to success in the context of the Industrial Age, such as productive and/or technological capacity, certainty and stability, and independence and autonomy, are being replaced by market and/or customer orientation, speed, flexibility and innovation, and interdependence and partnership.

Because of this change in contexts, contemporary organizational change also appears to be changing. Two major indicators that this may be true are the beginning shifts in organizational change emphasis, first,

from addressing parts/segments of an organization to addressing more encompassing patterns/wholes, and second, from episodic change to virtually continuous change (e.g. Weick and Quinn, 1999). For example, since the 1990s both practitioners and researchers have suggested that whole-system, rather than part-system, change is more likely to lead to successful organizational performance (e.g. Bunker and Alban, 1997; Macy and Izumi, 1993). Similarly, Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) argue that continual, not episodic, change is required to deal with the increased speeds of the new business context. 'Moreover, in high-velocity industries with short product cycles and rapidly shifting competitive landscapes, the ability to engage in rapid and relentless continual change is a crucial capability for survival' (1997: 1).

When we combine the dimensions of parts-wholes and episodic-continuous change into a matrix, the emerging nature of contemporary organizational change is suggested. The four change scenarios created by this matrix are shown in Table 2. Periodic Operational Adjustments are episodic changes to parts or segments of an organization, for example gap analyses and 'fix its' to some aspect of strategy, structure, processes, etc., but not to all at the same time. This was, implicitly, one of the dominant approaches to organizational change in past years, memorably captured in the phrase, 'If it's not broke don't fix it.' Continuous Operational Adaptations also focus on parts or segments, but do so on an on-going basis. Continuous improvements, *Kaizen*, or TQM reflect this approach to organizational change. Periodic Systemic Re-Arrangements address organizational patterns or wholes, but on an episodic basis. Re-engineering and systemic redesign efforts are examples of this approach to organizational change. Finally, Continuous Systemic Alignments call for on-going changes to the whole organization, for example virtually simultaneous changes to an organization's strategies, structure, processes, boundaries, culture, and so on.

Although we have some experience, language and concepts to help us talk about the

first three scenarios, we have little to adequately describe the last one. Yet the need for virtually continuous change of whole systems is now the context confronting many organizations, or at least those in 'high-velocity' industries such as electronics and the Internet. The difficulty extends beyond a lack of experience with new capabilities and contexts. The difficulty also includes the absence of language and terms to appropriately describe and explain this emerging type of organizational change. For example, the term 'transformational change' typically presumes the punctuated equilibrium paradigm where a radical shift is preceded and then followed by a more 'normal' and stable period of development. Within the context of the Industrial Age and the punctuated equilibrium paradigm, a suggestion that there could be continuous transformational change of whole systems might sound like science fiction. Nonetheless, at least some contemporary organizations are confronting new contexts and must be able to think and talk about organizational change in new ways. Because so much of our existing language of change is encumbered with concepts developed in a different context, we may need to develop new words to help express new understandings and possibilities.

To help capture the imagery, if not the specifics of continuous whole-system change, I first suggested the computer animation term for transformation, 'morphing', in a keynote address at a change conference in Singapore in 1998. Morphing had already started to come into popular use in the press and media to describe rapid, seamless, and more or less total change. The term morphing has also very recently been introduced in an academic context to describe comprehensive, continuous, dynamic organizational change. 'Continuous morphing refers to the comprehensive, continuous changes in products, services, resources, capabilities, and modes of organizing through which firms seek to regenerate competitive advantage under conditions of hyper-competition' (Rindova and Kotha, 2001: 1276). Drawing on recent research (Brown and Eisenhardt,

**Table 2.** Four change scenarios

Dimensions	Focus on parts/segments	Focus on patterns/wholes
Episodic change	Periodic Operational Adjustments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gap analyses</li> <li>• Fix its</li> </ul>	Periodic Systemic (Re) Arrangements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-engineering</li> <li>• System redesign</li> </ul>
Continuous change	Continuous Operational Adaptations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-going improvements</li> <li>• <i>Kaizen</i>, TQM</li> </ul>	Continuous Systemic Alignments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-going organizing</li> <li>• 'Morphing'</li> </ul>

1997; Rindova and Kotha, 2001) some of the 'principles of morphing' include:

- Creating limited organizational structures and principles such that there is both enough form and fluidity for rapid, organized action.
- Creating resource flexibility in terms of both availability and application.
- Insuring organizational learning to quickly develop and deploy new competencies.
- Bridging from the present to the future with clear transition processes while avoiding focusing on the future to the detriment of the present.
- Having top management mindsets that fully embrace the concepts of continuous change and flexible organizational forms, i.e. 'managers with morphing mindsets'.

Whether or not morphing is the right term to adopt, it does have some advantages that are needed to help describe the emerging context(s) of organizational change. Those advantages include its lack of association with prior terms and concepts of change, its origins in the Information Age, its connotation of rapid, seamless transformational change, unlike, for example, metamorphosis which implies stages of transformation over longer time periods, and an imagery that is both evocative and understandable. In short, morphing, or some term like it, may be needed as a generative metaphor or analogy to advance our thinking about continuous whole-system change.

***Our current language of change is limited by implicit fundamental assumptions***

Our language and concepts of change are not only challenged by contemporary change dynamics, they are also limited by powerful implicit assumptions about the fundamental nature of change. These implicit assumptions are rooted in the dominant philosophical worldviews of the Industrial Age and are supported in day-to-day conversation by related, but mostly unconscious metaphors and word images. What, then, are some of these assumptions and why are they so limiting?

We begin first with the Greek philosophers who helped to shape the Western worldview. From Plato and Aristotle we inherit the assumptions that permanence and stability are in all cases preferred over chaos and change. Plato and Aristotle also equated change with motion and asserted that motion/change must have a cause. In both cases their ideas prevailed over the earlier views of Heraclitus who claimed that the world is an 'everlasting fire' in a state of continual change (Wagner, 1995). The metaphorical equation of change with motion also coincides with the recent work of the cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson (1999) who claim that the dominant conceptual metaphor (a cognitively unconscious image that structures reality) used to express change is 'Change is Motion'. The metaphorical linking of change with motion also links assumptions about change to the Newtonian worldview that helped create and shape the Industrial Age. Thus the movement of

objects, including the laws of motion, causal forces, inertia, resistance, mass, momentum, and so on, as well as a mechanistic universe, are all likely to be implicitly invoked in any discussion of organizational change. Unfortunately, however, a language of change embedded with implicit assumptions of a mechanical universe where permanence and stability are preferred, chaos is feared, and change results from forced movement may limit our ability to talk and think about continuous whole-system change in contemporary organizations.

In explicit reaction to the limitations of the Newtonian and/or Industrial Age worldview of change, some consultants and academics have recently been searching for alternative concepts, assumptions, language and metaphors to help think and talk about contemporary and emerging change dynamics. 'We call the traditional leadership mindset, most prevalent today, the Industrial Mindset. This worldview contains the very blinders that prevent leaders from seeing the dynamics of transformation' (Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson, 2001: 7). To illustrate, we will briefly review two alternative conceptions of change along with their associated language and metaphors. One tends to equate transformational change with altered consciousness rather than movement. The other draws upon the post-Newtonian 'new sciences' for concepts, language and images to help facilitate and guide organizational change.

For some, the kind of radical whole-system change called 'organization transformation' requires a change in consciousness, often starting with the leadership and extending throughout the organization. This orientation '... understands transformation as being primarily driven by shifts in human consciousness' (Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson, 2001: 7). Here we have not only an alternative conception of change, but a different language and set of metaphors used to describe and explain the phenomenon of transformation. Consider that with movement metaphors change occurs in physical space, 'Despite resistance, the organization

moved from a national to a global strategy'. This evokes images and ideas of inertia, forces, resistance, end-states, paths, and so on. This is the language of planning, managing and engineering change. Unlike physical movement, however, altered consciousness occurs in psychological space and evokes a different set of metaphors and images. Frequently the imagery is not about going somewhere, but about *enlightenment* or *seeing* more clearly. Note that in the earlier quote from Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson, they write about *blinders* that prevent leaders from *seeing*.

In a summary of spiritual and traditional ways of describing the transformation of consciousness, Metzler (1986) identifies eleven major metaphors or images that are used to help describe and evoke that experience. Many relate directly or indirectly to seeing more clearly, some suggest organic processes, a few imply a transformational journey, and none invoke mechanistic or engineering imagery. See Table 3 for the complete list. This implies organization transformation requires that executives release their existing worldviews and acquire new mindsets in order to 'see', think and act differently. For example, abandon assumptions about organizational stability and adopt 'morphing mindsets' in order to create an organization capable of continuous change. In sum, this point of view urges managers to think and talk about transformational change more in terms of 'helping people to see new realities or possibilities' than 'how to move

**Table 3.** Metaphors for the transformation of consciousness

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From caterpillar to butterfly
Awakening from the dream of 'reality'
Uncovering the veils of illusion
From captivity to liberation
Purification by inner fire
From darkness to light
From fragmentation to wholeness
Journey to the place of vision and power
Returning to the source
Dying and being reborn
Unfolding the tree of life

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Source: Metzler (1986).

the organization to a new strategy, structure, and/or product offering'. The imagery invites thinking and talking in terms of psychological processes versus physical movement.

The 'new sciences', for example quantum physics, chaos theory, and complexity science, provide another set of concepts, language and metaphors for talking and thinking about organizational dynamics (Wheatley, 1992). They also directly challenge assumptions of stability and episodic change that must be initiated, planned and managed. Instead, it is assumed that change is continuous, and that complex systems can be self-organizing. These concepts, strange as they may seem to some, offer relevant ideas and images to help guide those interested in how to better understand and address continuous whole-system change.

Currently, the term and metaphor 'complex adaptive system' seems to be a favored way to describe organizational change dynamics from a new sciences perspective. 'Continuously changing organizations are likely to be complex adaptive systems with semi-structures that poise the organization on the edge of order and chaos...' (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997: 32). Olson and Eoyang (2001) also advocate the concepts and language of complex adaptive systems to escape the limitations of the Newtonian and Industrial paradigms. 'We need a simple, coherent alternative to the old machine model before we can work responsibly in the complex environments of today and tomorrow' (2001: 6). 'The emerging science of complex adaptive systems offers such a paradigm. It provides metaphors and models that articulate and make meaning out of the emerging adaptive nature of organizations' (2001: 19). The language and images associated with complex adaptive systems include *self-organization*, *cyclical change*, *patterns*, *containers*, *significant differences* and *transforming exchanges*. The image or metaphor of a 'complex adaptive system' is intended to invite managers to think and talk in terms of 'cultivating or enabling continuous self-organization' rather than 'how to plan, create and then stabilize change'.

The preferred imagery is continuous, self-organizing instead of episodic, engineered change.

### Concluding comments

Talk is never 'just talk'. Language is not a neutral medium. Language both enables and limits what and how we think and therefore what we do. The new organizational challenges presented by our increasingly hyperactive business environments may require new language to help managers, employees and consultants think through and appropriately talk about what needs to be done. We must also be mindful that our traditional terminology, metaphors and word imagery for organizational change, useful in certain contexts and situations, may elicit or encourage ideas and associations less applicable to current and emerging change dynamics (Marshak, 1993).

Given the powerful, but usually hidden, role that our language of organizational change plays in creating mindsets and resulting actions, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Be specific. Don't assume the term 'organizational change' means the same thing to everyone. Specify exactly what you mean. Ask specific questions of others. Check assumptions.
- Be self-reflective. Ask yourself what are your assumptions, mental models, metaphors and terminology for organizational change? How might these be limiting how you think and act with respect to organizational change dynamics?
- Rethink the use of, or reliance on, mechanistic, engineering or planned movement concepts, metaphors and imagery in transformational change initiatives.
- Consider a 'morphing mindset' or some other novel mental and word imagery to help address continuous whole-system change in hyperactive business environments.

Remember, as we enter the Information Age you may need to put aside the organizational

change scripts inherited from the past and author your own future.

### Biographical notes

Robert J. Marshak is an organizational consultant with over 25 years' experience helping executives and corporations to plan changes, develop new strategies and structures, challenge limiting mindsets, work cross-culturally and develop more effective partnerships. He has also worked with thousands of participants in change leadership and organization development programs at universities and institutes in the United States, Europe and Asia. He is the author of over 25 articles and book chapters on consulting and change, several of which are considered classics. In 2000 he was awarded the US Organization Development Network's Lifetime Achievement Award.

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