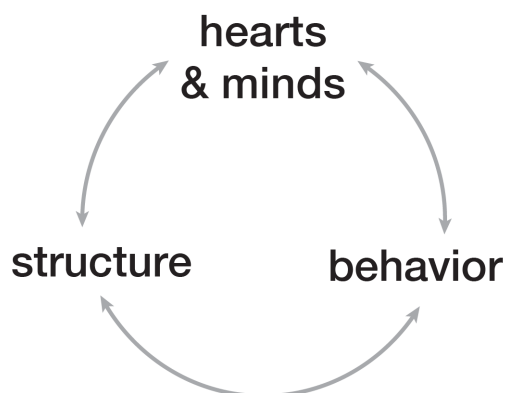


Transformation is a systems approach to change that is profound, radical, and sustainable – change that fundamentally and indelibly alters the very nature of something. The Wheel of Change is a transformative model that helps identify the constellation of factors that must be attended to facilitate this deep change in a person, on a team, or within an organizational system.

THE WHEEL OF CHANGE



As leaders or consultants, accepting the need for a systemic approach raises the question of where to prioritize our attention and resources. We can't simultaneously try to change 12 different factors in every element of the Wheel of Change, attending to Hearts & Minds, Behavior, and Structure all at the same time.

In working with any human system, be it a person, an organization, or even a society, we want to assess: Where is the point of maximum leverage? Where is the most critical place to intervene? We must develop an approach for discerning where to place our attention and where to make our interventions.

Imagine any human system as a constellation of energy. Where is the energy flowing freely through the system? And where is it blocked or stuck? Where are there already forces moving in the direction of the change? And where are there barriers that, if removed, would unleash those positive forces?

Imagine you are an acupuncturist. Where is the master point – the place whereby inserting one needle, you might unlock energy that will help the entire system restore itself to wholeness? In the world of keys and locksmiths, there is something called the “master key,” a key which releases every lock in a system. Looking at an individual, what is the master key that unlocks this person’s potential for transformation? On a team, which relationship or issue holds the system in a locked and stagnant position? Out of all the many factors at play in an organizational system, what is the *sine qua non*,¹ the factor which, if left unattended, will prevent change from happening?

¹ Sine qua non: Originally a Latin legal term for something “without which it could not be.”

Transformation is evoked by both diagnosing and attending to root causes, rather than becoming lost trying to fix a myriad of symptoms. We choose to intervene where we are most likely to initiate transformation – to not just solve the immediate problem, but create a profound shift in the entire system towards greater power, health, and vitality.

We have help. There is a natural force towards wholeness in people and all human systems. As agents of transformational change, part of our job is to liberate this force. We should think of ourselves as healers. The dictionary defines healing as “to make sound or whole, to cause an undesirable condition to be overcome, and to restore to integrity.”² Our job is not so much to fix others as to identify, call out, and unleash the latent power and capacities of people and organizations.

Think of the potential energy of a human system as a stream that is partially dammed up by a pile of rocks. To liberate the water, we don’t need to add more force. And we don’t have to dismantle the entire pile of obstacles. If we can find and help move those particular rocks that are linchpins, the natural pent-up force of the river will break through and free itself.

What does this look like in real life?

In coaching an individual leader, we are often presented with a particular problem:

- How to deal with a difficult staff person? How to answer a strategic question?
- How to deal with a challenging or unsupportive board? How to raise more money?
- How to deal with overload?

In the transformational approach, we don’t assume that focusing on the presenting problem is the way to begin. We want to not only help the leaders solve their specific problem, but to:

- Help them access their full intelligence and capacity to meet their own challenges
- Help them address the causal systemic factors of which this problem is a symptom
- Create breakthroughs in their confidence and capacity as leaders

While sometimes leaders might lack some particular technical expertise, in most cases, people do have the intelligence and capacity to meet their challenges. As practitioners we want to be curious about what is in the way of this leader being able to access and bring to bear their full power, wisdom, and experience to solve this particular situation. This inquiry creates an opportunity for transformational change rather than simply addressing their immediate issue.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/healing>

We can ask questions like:

- Are there mental models that limit their ability to see creative solutions?
- Are there emotions that have been triggered – perhaps feelings of frustration or anger, insecurity or fear – that are in the way of clear thinking?
- Are there mixed agendas, ambivalence, or competing values or needs that inhibit clear action?
- Is there some unseen factor – perhaps structural – that stands in the way of a solution?
- Are they in the grips of old habits that limit their ability to respond?
- Do they need help in sorting through the complexities of a situation to find an organizing principle that brings order out of chaos?

George was the president of a major national constituency organization. He had a strong sense that his constituency was failing to attain social, economic, and political power commensurate with their numbers. While having a clear vision for what needed to happen, he felt overwhelmed at stepping up to lead a national effort given his existing overload in meeting his ongoing organizational responsibilities. George felt torn between what felt like a strong personal calling and the seeming impossibility of having sufficient bandwidth.

The Master Key proved to be a lifelong pattern of feeling like “I have to do it myself.” In this mindset, the only options appeared to be giving up the dream or martyrdom. By unpacking this belief and habit pattern, the stuck energy was released and a middle path instantly became clear. Rather than charging ahead like a lone warrior, George chose to carefully convene a select group of other key leaders of this constituency. The group embraced his vision and collectively stepped up to take responsibility, lessening the burden on any one leader.

We similarly seek the Master Key in working to transform organizations. Where do we start? Amidst all the complexities of an organizational system, we try to focus on the intervention that will have the greatest impact to unleash the power and potential of the system even while surfacing and addressing its constraints.

A president of a large progressive non-profit is struggling to move the organization in a fundamentally different direction. He is finding it hard to get the message down through the complex and highly politicized divisions, geographies, and diverse constituencies within the very active membership. The presenting set of issues was around communication: how to create the right message and the best strategy for how to get that message out. But in looking at the flow of energy in the system, it quickly became clear that the Master Key was a lack of alignment in his senior team.

Two key leaders were not aligned with each other nor with some of the central tenets of the new strategy. This lack of alignment was rippling out all the way through the organization. It was the cause of not only unclear

messaging, but was raising concerns about whether or not the president was really calling the shots. Here was the one choke point in the system that had the potential to help many things to move.

The acupuncture-like intervention was to confront the two dissenting senior leaders. One had to be moved off the senior management team. The other came more fully on board. Not only was the most important barrier to messaging around the vision resolved, but the senior team could now align with one voice around a host of issues. The president felt more supported and no longer had to spend so much time mediating between his own senior leaders. This one move also sent a strong organization-wide signal that the president was firmly holding the reins, that the new strategy was going to be the strategy, and that it was time to get on or off the boat.

Take an individual or organizational situation or challenge, and ask yourself:

- What's the one thing?
- What's the one thing that has the potential to shift the entire paradigm in which this challenge exists?
- What's the one thing that could unleash the full power of people to solve their own problem?
 - One belief or mental model that needs to be unwound?
 - One habit that needs to be changed?
 - One relationship that needs to be reconciled?
 - One structure or process that needs to be recreated?
- What is the most important conversation that needs to be had?
- What's the one thing – a focal point in the system that, if moved, would affect many other nodes in the system?
- What's the one thing without which this change will never happen?

Like a master acupuncturist, courageously and skillfully place your needle right in that one spot . . .

And let the transformation begin . . .

“At these pressure points, a small change can have disproportionately large impact. At the deepest level of systems dynamics we are trying to cultivate a unique rational/intuitive sense of when we are getting close to a critical aspect of a system. You can really feel it sometimes, you know when you are getting close to a leverage point. It rarely has any correlation to the symptoms most people focus on, because in a system cause and effect are rarely closely related in time and space.”

Peter Senge