

# Establishing Collaborative Leaders through Emergent Design

Change through communities of practice ©

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## What really is change?

"All real change is an indivisible change. We like to treat it as a series of distinct states which form, as it were, a line in time . . . If you imagine a change as being really composed of states . . . You have closed your eyes to true reality". (Bergson, 1946/1992, pp. 146–147). Now they are fighting words. In order to create collaborative leaders we need to know what we mean by change – with some examination it does not appear what we think it is.

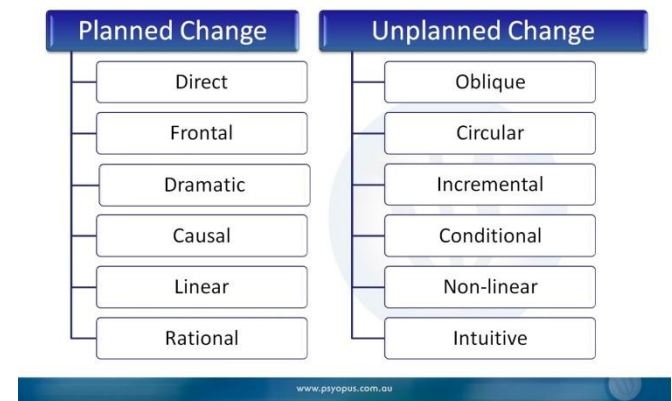
The Western imagination is fired with the myth of action and intervention, that is the heroic exercise of the individual will. Since ancient Greece we have lionised the active individual like Achilles who determines the 'outcome of things' through sheer grit, personal mastery and determination. From the invention of the phalanx, combat has moved from the oblique skills of ambush, encircling and skirmishes to direct confrontation and unambiguous victory over the vanquished. All of these activities have been attributed to the singular heroic leader. And if James Hillman is correct that '*a myth is what is really real*', then the myth of heroic leadership plays out unchallenged. But there are other 'real' ways of seeing the world including how to view change.

## Planned versus Emergent change?

The philosophical tenets of change could be placed into two distinct camps – these being planned vs emergent change. If we could examine the characteristics of the two they could be presented in the taxonomy in the figure above. We know emergent change to be occurring all around us but emergent change could be characterised as having what theorists call "unowned change" – it is the type of change which is slow, emergent, and based upon conditions and not causes that are ever present. As such, emergent change is characterised by

"spontaneous self generating processes often independent of human interventions" (Chia, R. 2014). So much for the heroic interventionist!

## Planned vs Unplanned Change



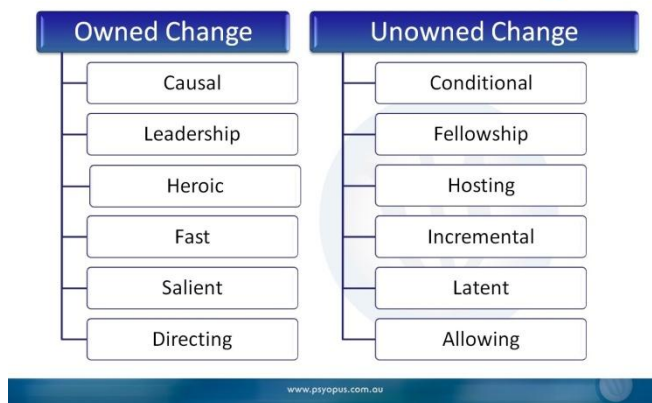
So what does emergent change look like? Simply look at your face in a mirror. Ageing is a change process that has all the characteristics of an emergent property. Firstly, it is acting quietly without warning, often silently without attracting too much attention (hopefully), and often happens without too much human intervention. Another characteristic is emergent change often takes place in global rather than localised situations (your whole body ages together) so it happens as a totality not in a locality. So how do I 'manage aging?' Now that is a perennial question if there ever was one. Alas without breakthroughs claimed everyday by the cosmetic industry, the truth is we can only '*manage at the margins*' with diet, exercise and healthy living. This is emergent change, allowing for the right conditions for inherent change processes to do their work. Of course you could take drugs, drinks lots of booze and party all your life, but unless you are Keith Richards the chances are those conditions are conducive for other emergent properties. Other examples of emergent change is climate change, the ripening of fruit and the harvesting of wheat. Conditions can be changed often at the margins to improve situations already inherent within the complex system.

## Change and the leadership attribution error

Hackman correctly identified that we over attribute the success of things to that which is salient (the leader) and not latent (the conditions of the team) that give rise to success. This leadership attribution error particularly in Western culture is the guiding myth. While in the West 'the squeaky wheel

get the grease' in the East 'the loudest duck is first to lose its head'. Collaborative leaders lead best by creating conditions conducive for effective emergent change process. That is – they learn to 'manage at the margins'. Instead of radical cosmetic surgery like a heroic leader, a collaborative leader lives a healthy lifestyle and lets nature do what it inherently does as a phenomena of change.

## Owned vs Unowned Change



So what is change? It depends on your philosophical point of view. Ontologically we know that change is happening all the time, and if we are being honest with ourselves, organisations are 'precarious' social constructions designed to buffer the effects of relentless change taking place regardless of human intervention. In other words, institutional structures are put in place where often 'arbitrary ontological incisions' are made into the flux and change of reality to stabilise the world long enough to make it slightly more predictable and hence more liveable. We have to accept if we are being honest with ourselves, that all decisions to act are based upon partial knowledge and unknown contingent relationships.

### ***Establishing a community of practice through negative capability***

So where does this leave collaborative leaders? John Keats the famous poet once said that we need to develop people of 'negative capability'. So what is negative capability - it sounds so depressing? Keats does not mean negative in the affective sense but in the philosophical sense (just in case the positive psychologists run me out of town!). Skills of negative capability requires leaders to be comfortable with ambiguity, to relax control and allow things to happen through quiet effortless insertions to improve

conditions on the margins. Negative capability also requires leaders to accept that all knowledge is provisional and contingent and has unknown properties. Collaborative leaders also need to eschew grandstanding gestures that erupt the natural tendency for complex systems to seek coherence through emergent properties. Negative capability also requires the skill of knowing when to pivot from divergent to convergent thinking. Knowing when to make 'incisions into reality' by making decisions where facts are partially known. In essence, a collaborative leader is a courageous leader but not a heroic one. A collaborative leader acts without the need to 'drive out every error' and to gather more facts. Negative capability requires the engagement of both IQ and EQ where divergent and convergent thinking is welcomed and encouraged as a tool for collaboration. Essentially, negative capability is to cultivate leaders who recognise that uncertainty, incompleteness and often incoherence lies at the very nature of human endeavours (Chia,R. 2014).

### ***Establishing communities of emergent design practice and collaborative leadership***

As you can see negative capability is a whole taxonomy of skills that do not lie at the core of Western notions of heroic leadership. In order to maintain and sustain collaborative leadership that uses emergent design practices, a community of reflective practice is required. Reflective practice is the skill to examine collaborative leadership by collaborating not complying. Collaborative leaders need to establish the skills of negative capability and emergent design where dialogue is maintained and sustained by raising the collective intelligence of leaders who seek to meet in genuine open dialogue to explore and examine practices that allow for emergent change. One commentator noted that Singapore Airlines one of the most respected and competitive airline carriers in the world, created an extraordinary company by very ordinary people. This is the kind of collaborative leadership that sets the right conditions and lets the emergent properties inherent in any system to do what comes naturally.

#### **References:**

- Bergson, H. (1946/1992). *The creative mind*. New York, NY: Citadel Press.
- Chia, R. (2014) Reflections: In Praise of Silent Transformation – Allowing Change Through 'Letting Happen'. *Journal of Change Management*. 14,1, 8–27.