

White Paper

Change the Way You Lead Change

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Key Points:

- Simply overcoming obstacles presented by the change process is not enough to ensure initiatives that result in organizational flourishing.
- In addition to understanding the potential pitfalls of change, you must also appreciate the transformational potential of change. This includes finding the properties in people and initiatives that help them thrive through continual rebirth and renewal.
- Change agents can move both themselves and their organizations to positive states that promote flexibility and enable thriving.
- Exceptional organizations encourage growth by embracing change as necessary and constant, and employ processes to identify instances of positive deviances to create a vision of the improved future that serves as an attractor for other members.

Introduction

Most change practitioners address difficulties in the change process by identifying forces that impede change initiatives and seeking ways to overcome them. We refer to this approach as “traditional” or “normal.” Although the assumptions that typify the normal approach to organizational change are accurate in many cases, they do not paint the full picture. A smaller but rapidly growing body of positive organizational scholarship (POS) research suggests that some individuals and organizations experience change very differently on 11 important dimensions (Table 1). The first five dimensions are relevant to the individual level of analysis; that is, they describe differences between the portrayal of individual change agents in traditional and POS research. The next six dimensions are organization-level differences. A comparison of the general trends is valuable and presents a more complete picture of the change process than either perspective provides on its own.

Individual-Level Differences:

1. Change Target: From Changing Others to Changing Self

Traditional Change: In the traditional perspective, change agents employ all the resources at their disposal to encourage others in the organization to change. Leaders campaign to acquire the necessary support for their predetermined objectives or agendas. They draw on their expertise to tell people how to change, and on their authority and political acumen to overcome resistance and leverage change. In both cases, they act “on” the human system just as they would act “on” any other object.

Positive Change: Positive change agents apply two additional strategies in addition to imposing change on others. One is participation, in which the change agent begins to act “with” others, co-creating trusting relationships and jointly constructed, attractive futures. This approach requires the surrender of control, the creation of trust, and the investment of time. Positive change agents trust participation and employ it with authenticity. The second is self-change, which creates a shift from telling people what to do to showing people how to be. The notion of changing others by changing one’s self represents a fundamental difference between the traditional and positive perspectives on change. Although the traditional perspective views change as forced down the organizational hierarchy through the exercise of formal authority, the POS perspective suggests change can spiral up through organizations, driven by positive transformations in individual members who may or may not occupy positions of authority.

2. Focus: From Comfort-Centered to Purpose-Centered

Traditional Change: Much of the traditional literature on organizational change views individuals as path-dependent. They do what they have learned to do in the past and are comfort-centered. They feel tense and anxious when events force them outside of their normal routines. They view deviance, both positive and negative, as a threat, and go to great lengths to restore the status quo by removing the source of the disruption or by finding some other way to make events turn out the way they expect to. They also use transactional leadership to influence others: rewarding those who meet their pre-determined standards and expectations and punishing those who fail to do so.

Positive Change: POS reveals individuals who are purpose-centered and open to learning and growth. Positive change agents not only tolerate challenges and disruptions of the status quo, but encourage them by continually clarifying their higher purpose and helping others to do the same. They engage in transformational leadership behaviors and recognize the existing routines and norms of the organization, but also appeal to the deeper motives and higher needs of others. These individuals inspire creativity, innovation, and positive deviance.

3. Expectations: From Externally Directed to Internally Directed

Traditional Change: Normal change agents are externally directed. They are microsystems residing in the larger macro system of the organization. The prevailing assumption is that the macro determines the micro. External pressures are a powerful determinant of individual behavior, and external forces can cause individuals to engage in behaviors that contradict their internal values and goals.

Positive Change: Positive change agents are internally directed. They self-regulate as they move toward desired ends and choose behaviors that are consistent with their values. In doing so, they author a self with congruence between emotions, values, and actions. Internally directed behavior can produce an upward spiral in which self-concordant motivation increases the likelihood that individuals will achieve their personally valued goals, which in turn promotes satisfaction and furthers internally directed behavior. These change agents help others see their work as more important and more self-congruent.

4. Relationships: From Self-Focused to Other-Focused

Traditional Change: Traditional organizational theories assume individual behavior is motivated by self-interest. Research suggests that 75 percent of all professionals hold a self-focused worldview (Quinn, Spreitzer, and Fletcher, 1995), and that powerful individuals tend to base important choices such as hiring decisions, intrapersonal judgments, and the selection of relationship partners on the other party's usefulness to their own personal goals.

Positive Change: POS reveals some change agents who are exceptional and transcend self-interest. They put the collective good ahead of their personal good and are willing to sacrifice themselves to help the group accomplish its goals. Other-focused individuals have, through self-change, adopted a more integrated perspective. In addition to achieving objectives, they put an emphasis on teamwork, participation, and openness. They manage stress and conflict through mechanisms of consensus-building. These people tend to be older, healthier, and more satisfied with coworkers and life.

5. Learning: From Internally Closed to Externally Open

Traditional Change: Change agents tend to be internally closed, that is, resistant to feedback and signals for change from their environments. Internally closed behavior on the part of managers causes others to withhold their opinions and concerns about potential problems, which contributes to the development of a "climate of silence" in many organizations (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This type of climate is highly pervasive, and once formed, can further perpetuate internally closed behavior on the part of change agents by restricting the feedback available in their environment.

Positive Change: Change agents are continuously engaged in the process of learning and development. They are able to recognize and respond to patterns that emerge in the present moment, which requires adaptive self-reflection. Because externally open individuals believe growth is possible and desirable, they embrace rather than defend against trigger events. They are able to move forward, seeking out feedback and adapting in real time. This means they are more aware of the opportunities emerging in their environments and are more likely to notice and engage them. By encouraging triggers and seeking feedback, externally open individuals also disrupt the climate of silence, encouraging others around them to voice their opinions and suggestions. These positive change agents model the processes of moving with confidence into uncertainty while adapting effectively and attracting others into the learning process.

Organizational-Level Differences:

1. Individual Agency: From Bounded to Limitless

Traditional Change: Individual actors, particularly those not in top management positions, are limited in their ability to bring about organizational change. Once the culture of an organization is established, it is rigid and little can be done to alter it. The organization's external environment is perceived as the major driver of change, and the beliefs and actions of individual actors are largely seen as unimportant.

Positive Change: Individuals can initiate positive change that spiral upward through organizations. For example, "issue selling," the process through which individuals bring events and agendas to the attention of top management, plays an important role in determining which change initiatives get activated and which actions ensue on the part of the organization.

2. Basic Vision: From Preserving the Organization to Facilitating Positive Organizing

Traditional Change: The traditional perspective assumes that the hierarchy that dictates the process of organizing already exists, and that human interaction is predictable because people respond to the predetermined roles and expectations. The goal of change is to preserve the organization in its current state by returning it to the equilibrium while retaining as much of the prior structure as possible.

Positive Change: The POS perspective acknowledges that preservation cannot happen without adaptation. Organizations are receptive to progressive change agents, who in turn move the organization to a more adaptive and effective state. The focus is on the creation of generative processes. The emphasis is not in organization but on organizing. The organization is not a thing, but a living system in the process of constant change. As such, an important part of its mission is to energize the process of positive organizing.

3. Knowledge: From Expertise to Learning

Traditional Change: The traditional perspective views change in an incremental and linear way. High value is placed on expertise, since experts are capable of making controlled alterations and adjustments to organizational processes. Because competent experts are promoted up the organizational hierarchy, organizations operate on a basis of knowledge and authority.

Positive Change: In the process of positive organizing, the organization moves toward bounded instability. Relationships and processes become more dynamic. Traditional assumptions of linear analysis and control tend to fail as the emphasis shifts from knowing to learning in real time. Leaders of these organizations facilitate continual learning and the emergence of the new.

4. Communication: From the Literal Present to the Symbolized Future

Traditional Change: Much effort and money goes into the generation and monitoring of organizational control systems. From these systems come the data that give rise to many of the organization's most important conversations, which are assumed to be factual and objective.

Positive Change: In order to attract people to continuous positive change, the communication of the literal present must be supplemented with the communication of the symbolized future. One of the most recognized methods for bringing forth such conversations is appreciative inquiry, the objective of which is to call forth the positive core of organizational life by asking questions about what is most valued and what is most desired. The resulting image becomes the envisioned system around which people may begin to self-organize.

5. Search Processes: From Problem Finding to Positive Deviance

Traditional Change: In the normal change perspective, organizations place a high value on stability. Hierarchical efficiency calls for the elimination of variance, and it is normal for authority figures to search for and identify problems. The very purpose of management is to solve problems.

Positive Change: Organizations recognize that excellence is, by definition, a form of deviance. Organizational control systems seek out positive anomalies that already have emerged. Once identified, the positive patterns can be shared and magnified. This strategy can be extended by sending people to observe positive deviance in other organizations.

6. Ratio of Positive to Negative Emotions: From Low to High

Traditional Change: The organization is characterized by low positivity ratios, which are low ratios of positive to negative emotions. Because these organizations are focused on identifying and correcting problems, they promote negative feelings such as anger and anxiety. Individuals in these organizations live in fear of making a mistake and feel hurt when they are reprimanded. These emotions cascade throughout the organization, causing it to become rigid and revert to narrow, pre-learned behavioral patterns.

Positive Change: The organization tends to have higher positivity ratios. They are characterized by an abundance of positive emotions and enable their members to play, explore, envision the future, savor experience, and integrate new views. Over time, this broadening process builds psychological and relational assets in the organization that can be called upon at later times.

Next Steps:

- ✓ Surrender control and begin to act “with” others, co-creating trusting relationships and jointly constructed, attractive futures. Change others by changing yourself: show them how to be instead of telling them what to do.
- ✓ Be open to learning and encourage challenges or disruptions of the status quo by continually clarifying your higher purpose and helping others to do the same.
- ✓ Self-regulate as you move toward desired ends and act consistently with your values. Help others see their work as more important and more self-congruent.
- ✓ Put the collective good ahead of your personal good and sacrifice yourself to help the group accomplish its goals. Emphasize teamwork, participation, and openness. Manage stress and conflict through mechanisms of consensus building.
- ✓ Welcome opportunities to learn and actively seek out feedback in real time. Encourage others around you to voice their opinions and suggestions. Attract them into the learning process.
- ✓ Supplement communication of the literal present with the communication of the symbolized future in order to attract people to continuous positive change.
- ✓ Implement control systems that seek out positive anomalies that already have emerged in your organization. Once identified, share and magnify these positive patterns. Send people to observe positive deviance in other organizations.
- ✓ Ensure that your teams have high positivity ratios and that they are characterized by an abundance of positive emotions. Enable team members to play, explore, envision the future, savor experience, and integrate new views.

*This paper was summarized by Penelope Mallinckrodt (Ross MBA '13) based on chapter 60 of Cameron and Spreitzer's (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2012).

Table 1. Comparing Traditional and Positive Perspectives on Organizational Change

	Normal Change	Positive Change
<i>Individual Level</i>		
Change Target	Others	Self
Orientation to Purpose	Comfort-Centered	Results-Centered
Expectations	Externally Directed	Internally Directed
Relationships	Self-Focused	Other-Focused
Learning	Internally Closed	Externally Open
<i>The Organization</i>		
Individual Agency	Bounded	Limitless
Basic Vision	Preserve the Organization	Facilitate Positive Organizing
Knowledge	Expertise	Learning
Communication	Analyze the Present	Symbolize the Desired Future
Search Process	Find the Problems	Find the Possibilities
Ratio of Positive to Negative Emotions	Low	High

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