

# So who is your Guru? - Part One

by Malcolm Anderson

This is a question I'm often asked and I suspect that some are rather disappointed when I answer a little vaguely that there isn't a specific one and that the approach I have developed over my years in change management is to blend the best of all into practical and holistic approaches to making change happen and stick.

So I thought I would write this article to explain that bland answer. I should emphasise that what I am about to say is not for the management academics and students of the management gurus who buy every new management book the moment it is on the airport bookshop shelves and read it avidly at bedtime so that their sleeping hours can be equally productive!

What I am going to explore with you is where you might look for change management theory for useful assistance for particular situations you might face today, and that means that we will take a little journey around a number of writers - because in my view no one writer has all of the answers.

There are, of course, many of these writers to choose from so I should emphasise that the selection that follows and the observations I shall make are very much from my personal perspective. There is no doubt that some will disagree with my choices and my emphasis but what I have to say I have drawn from applying this thinking to practical organisational issues for nearly thirty years now. What I did find when I started this piece of work was that there was a great deal more to it than first envisaged, and the list of writers I value is not short - that's why this article became two.

Most of my choices are well-known thinkers in change management - and aspects of management generally. These I deal with in Part One. Some are less well-known than the rest and one particular I believe is critical to our understanding of effective change in the 21st Century despite having done much of his work in the 1950s - the Australian working at the Tavistock Institute in London - Fred Emery. These intriguing more shadowy contributors to change management thinking will be explored in Part Two.

So let us start our journey with some of the more well-known thinkers and their flagship ideas.

## Hammer on Process

Business Process Reengineering (BPR) was developed by Michael Hammer, whose original Harvard Business Review article gave examples of the application of his technique. The article: "Reengineering work: don't automate: obliterate" gave the example of Ford, which reduced its accounts payable staff by 75% as a result of re-engineering. In the 1990s this approach became very popular - even overused - but carefully applied, enabled the releasing of resources for reinvestment in parts of organisations that could better use them.

The fundamentals of these approaches remain central to optimising performance, for example in always considering organisational activity from the output backwards to ensure the activity is justified, by its results being in line with the purpose of the organisation. However, the thinking

these days - thankfully - is more about redeployment of effort towards more creative activity rather than retrenchment.

**Key Text:** Reengineering the Corporation: a Manifesto for Business Revolution by Michael Hammer.

## Kotter on Leadership

Kotter's thesis is that strategies for change often fail in organisations because the changes do not alter behaviour. He identifies the most common mistakes in effecting change, offering eight 'steps' to overcoming obstacles. The eight-step process consists of:

- establishing a sense of urgency;
- putting together a powerful team to lead change;
- creating a vision;
- communicating the new vision, strategies, and expected behaviour;
- removing obstacles to the change and encouraging risk taking;
- recognising and rewarding short-term successes;
- identifying people who can implement change; and
- ensuring that the changes become part of the institutional culture for long-term transformation and growth.

He emphasises change requires leadership and that means through all levels in an organisation - not just from the pinnacle. In the second book below, Kotter deals with how change management links up with the differences between leadership and management. Both are worth a read if this is an area that intrigues you. As for me, Kotter is one of the few who has examined what I call the dynamics of the change process and defined some key jigsaw pieces. However, I continue to hold concerns about his use of the word 'steps', because in my practical experience – these eight matters present an important checklist – but do not expect them to work in a nice sequence like steps in a staircase.

**Key Texts:** Leading Change, and Force for Change : How Leadership Differs from Management both by John P. Kotter

## Schein on Culture

I like Schein because he speaks out against the superficiality of how culture is treated by many organisations. As an organisational psychologist he points to the evidence that shows that changing peoples' behaviour in the long-term requires objective assessment of motives, talents and values in relation to organisational needs. He also emphasises the key point that culture is not an issue in itself, but in fact an outcome of a complex mix of factors. This gives the lie to those who offer to tackle organisational culture in isolation which is to me is like expecting the plant to grow nicely if I talk to it long enough because then it won't need water anymore.

**Key Text:** Organisational Culture and Leadership by Edgar H. Schein

# Senge on Learning

Senge is well known for defining 'disciplines' with which a 'learning organisation' can be built. Using ideas from science and spirituality, Senge teaches personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning so that organisations can become more flexible, absorbing new ideas at all employee levels. The Learning Organisation is one of those heroic concepts to which we all should aspire. In terms of practical achievement however, many fail at first base failing to recognise that such cultures do not materialise from the ether - they require sound process, leadership and discipline before they can evolve.

**Key Text:** The Fifth Discipline: Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation by Peter Senge

# Davenport on Knowledge

Davenport believes that an organisation's most valuable asset is the total collective knowledge of its people, but that it is the most difficult asset to manage. He recommended systems and active management of knowledge and it is this that I think is the key. Many have written on knowledge management in recent times but the nub of the matter is not creativity and innovation. While these are great aspirations, the core of the issue is the need for organisations to do the basics consistently and well. That is a big enough challenge especially when there is an absence of systems thinking about capturing and deploying knowledge of process and performance. It is compounded when our baby boomers are departing for extended retirement travels in Europe with all our corporate knowledge still in their heads.

**Key Text:** Working Knowledge: How Organisations Manage What They Know by Thomas H Davenport

# Kaplan and Norton: the Balanced Scorecard

Kaplan and Norton developed the concept of the Balanced Scorecard to support the 'strategy-focused organisation' which was able to translate strategy to operations, make sense of everyone's work in strategic terms and mobilise change through leadership.

This is legendary stuff but unfortunately like many great management ideas can fall down in the implementation, either because of the absence of rigour in the specifics of a situation or in the senseless creation of additional process to populate scorecards with data. It doesn't change the value of the idea, but it does make you think that some managers shouldn't be let out without a minder!

**Key Text:** The Strategy Focus Organisation by Kaplan and Norton

Well that just about concludes the first part of our tour. I trust it has been enlightening. However, before I go, let me make a couple of parting comments.

# Health Warning!

The first is in the form of a caution to all who are contemplating the employment of guru ideas into business intent. Beware of the pitfalls of management-speak. Just because a guru said it does not mean everyone will understand it, so be ready to translate the words into language your people can comprehend.

And finally in this vein, beware the dangers of Fad-Surfing. No one guru is all-knowing and no idea is universally applicable, even if you own the hammer - every problem is not a nail. Finish what you start: the more fads you surf, the less success you will have and the more cynical your people will become.

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