Profound Transformation vs Shallow Change

Imagine two stone age villages, Lindin and Piras, of similar size and at the same stage of development. Their villagers have only six basic tools that they use routinely:
- big hammerstones
- small hammerstones
- hand axes
- stone flakes
- bone awls and needles
- wooden spears

Lindin and Piras do a good job training all villagers to use these six tools effectively. Elders and more adroit villagers regularly share experiences and advise younger ones. Nevertheless the performance with each tool remains stubbornly dependent on individual talent. Small improvements or modifications to the basic tools rarely emerge and, when they do, they are not easily adopted.

For tens of thousands of years nothing much changes in these two villages until one day, out of the blue, a traveling salesman from a more advanced planet appears in Piras driving an enormous flying truck. It is the middle of the day and all the villagers are out gathering food or hunting. The village Chief and seven elders are the only ones there to see the truck approaching. They are in shock and can't believe their eyes! They are awed by the truck and rather scared of the salesman when he steps out of it. He bows to the Chief and, with a great deal of patience and a few presents, he succeeds in making him feel comfortable enough to explain that the purpose of his visit is to offer some new tools to the village. He then fetches from his truck a toolbox and a bag of supplies that he empties in front of the wide eyed Chief and village elders.

Very slowly he starts demonstrating how each tool works and can be used. First a hammer, then a hammer and some nails, then a screwdriver and screws, a pair of pliers, a hand drill, a saw, a clamp, a razor blade, a wire cutter and finally a needle and thread. He finishes with a display of all the supplies: ropes, metal wires, tapes and, finally the glue which he demonstrates by gluing two pieces of wood. The salesman then repeats every tool demo one by one and invites the chief to try each one by himself and experience personally how to use it. Then it is the elders turn to do the same. Predictably, the Chief and the elders are awestruck.

When all the demonstrations are finished the salesman explains that he has been sent to bring new tools to the village and he offers to donate however many tool boxes and jars of supplies the Chief wants, at no cost or obligation. The Chief and the elders are predictably dumbfounded, speechless and at a loss how to respond to such an amazing offer. They ask the salesman to repeat his offer and to wait as they walk away to discuss what to do. After much debate they decide that these new and exceptional tools will be quite useful for new and important projects which they will personally direct. When they return the Chief asks the salesman to give 10 toolboxes and 10 bags of supplies, three for the chief and one for each elder. As the salesman

unloads the boxes and bags the Chief and elders thank him profusely. As he takes off in his amazing truck they waved excitedly, then promptly carry the precious boxes and bags to a cave for safe storage until an appropriate project materializes.

With his truck still full, the salesman then drives to Lindin. Once again, all villagers are out and only the Chief and a few elders are there to welcome the salesman and watch him demonstrate his tools. They love trying out all the tools, laugh a lot while doing it and, they too, are absolutely awestruck. However, when the salesman offers to donate tool boxes and supplies to his village, a different scenario unfolds. The Lindin Chief jumps on the offer, doesn't hesitate or debate with the elders and quickly answers: "if it's possible I would like two boxes for every villager!"

"Two boxes for every villager! Wow!" The salesman is taken totally by surprise, then laughs and finally replies "Chief, what are you going to do with all these boxes?" The Chief replies "if villagers have only one box most of them will use it rarely because they will be afraid to break the tools. However if each one has two boxes I hope they will start to use them every day". "Chief, you are incredibly lucky!" replied the salesman "The Piras Chief only took ten boxes and my truck is therefore still full. I can agree and unload the entire truckload for your village". "Great" replied the Lindin Chief, "Wait until the villagers return. They will help you unload and each one will take two boxes. Then I would like you to do your demonstrations again in front of all the villagers and show all of them how to use their own new tools and supplies."

And so it was! With the help of the amazed villagers, the salesman emptied his truck of all the toolboxes and all the barrels filled with basic supplies of nails and screws of various sizes, jars of glue, bobbins of threads, rolls of ropes, rolls of metal wires and rolls of tapes. Every toolbox contained the same twelve simple tools: one small and one large hammer, screwdriver, pliers, hand drill, knife, needles, razor blades, wire cutter, clamps, one small and one large saw. Every villager received two boxes and the Chief claimed all extra ones as a reserve.

The salesman demonstrated once more how to use each tool and all villagers got to practice a few times to get the feel of every tool and supply. Lots of exclamations, lots of clapping and lots of laughter followed every demonstration and trial. Many questions were asked and all were answered. The villagers couldn't believe their eyes and couldn't resist talking about what they might do with their new tools. Every tool was simple enough for villagers to imagine using them and the Chief encouraged those discussions. When all demonstrations were finished the salesman was exhausted but happy and excited. He bowed. All the villagers clapped. He bowed again. There was more clapping, he bowed again, then waved goodbye and got back into his truck. The Chief and all the villagers started jumping up and down and cheering very loudly. The pandemonium brought a huge smile on the face of the salesman as he drove off into the sunset.

From that point in time life in Piras and Lindin evolved quite differently.

In Piras, the toolboxes and supplies stored in a cave wound up being used infrequently and only for projects that benefitted the Chief or, occasionally, some elders. For each project a few villagers were instructed and directed by the Chief how to use some of the "special tools". As

soon as the project was finished the tools were stored back in the cave. For all routine or daily work Piras villagers, including the Chief and the elders, continued to use the same six basic tools, making small improvements in them or their use as time went by.

The new tools helped Piras change but only a little and very slowly.

It took three million years for Piras to evolve to the bronze age.

In Lindin, the Chief, a few elders and a handful of villagers didn't wait for any special reason and started using their new tools immediately, a little at first and gradually more over time as they became more adept and confident. Villagers, with a few exceptions, energized by the example of their Chief and elders started trying one tool at a time, beginning, of course, with …the hammer!! They quickly discovered that the new tools made most daily tasks easier, faster or more productive.

The Chief however noticed that he kept having a hard time getting rid of his old habit, his automatic reflex, of grabbing one of his familiar old tools for routine tasks. His solution was to collect all six of them, carry them to the most senior elder and give him the following instructions: "if I come and ask for one of my old tools, you must not give it to me immediately. First you will ask me "what is your purpose?" and then you will ask "why is that important" and then you will ask "why is it important to use an old tool instead of a new one?". You will give me my old tool only if I convince you that it was the best choice".

As they became more confident some villagers started experimenting doing tasks or building objects that would have been impossible with their traditional tools. The village was small and news of the progress made with the new tools traveled fast but the Chief noticed that old habits didn't die easily and only some of the villagers made full use of their new tools. All other villagers continued to do their daily tasks the same way using the same old tools. He considered for a while confiscating all the traditional tools from his villagers but changed his mind. He sensed that brute force wouldn't be well received and would draw a lot of resistance. He needed something instead that would make it easy for all villagers to deal with their personal habits, traditions or insecurities at their own personal speed. So he decided to gather the whole village every ten days for a few hours and to invite villagers to share stories, good or bad, of their experiences with the new tools. He encouraged all villagers to observe one another and learn from each other, or to ask and get help. The gatherings were a new thing and the villagers had to invent a name for them. They held a contest, every villager participated and the winning new word was "joyshop".

Joyshop after joyshop confidence grew for all villagers. Gradually all used their new tools more and more but without abandoning their traditional ones completely. They discovered that they could do more not only alone by themselves but even more so together with some other villagers. Teamwork developed and innovation started to flourish. Life became more interesting, more surprising, more exciting. More became possible which invited more to become possible. The wider range of tools created more and more opportunities for villagers to cooperate and to

learn how to work together. "Maybe", "let's try" and "why not" entered the daily vocabulary. Frequent progress brought joy and satisfaction. The new tools improved not only how villagers did their work but also how they related to each other: more interactions, more trust, more exchanges of help, more sharing, more communication.

Lindin had not just changed, it had transformed!

Lindin zipped to the bronze age two million years ahead of Piras.

The villages of modern days are the offices where a growing portion of modern work requires groups and organizations of all sorts to work together, to collaborate regularly within their group and often across groups or functions, or beyond their organization. While not manual this work also requires tools, of a different kind, but tools nevertheless. These tools are the methods or techniques that people use to organize how they work together when they meet (in person or virtually or a combination). They are the methods groups use for making progress, for solving problems, for innovating, for reaching decisions, for adapting to change. Because these work/organising methods determine who gets included, who gets heard and who doesn't, who participates and who contributes they have a critical impact on the quality of outcomes and the effectiveness of their implementation. Indirectly and invisibly they either drive or limit performance and speed of progress.

What can be learned from two stone age villages?

To start answering this question check every working group in your network: how many tools/methods is each group using routinely or daily when meeting and working together? Make a list of methods for each group.

Next, identify which groups or organizations are, like a stone age village, using only a handful of traditional methods routinely. Are most of these methods ancient? Is the group using the same handful of methods meeting after meeting regardless of the agenda? How much meeting space is taken by the five "stone age" methods: presentations (or lecture, or speech), managed or open discussions, status reports and brainstorming. (These five are so basic that they must have already been used during stone age meetings😀) How aware is each group of the inadequacies (such as not inclusive or target-specific) of each of the "old five"?

Then, either you can be the "salesman from a more advanced planet" and deliver a more effective set of simple tools/methods or find someone who can. Liberating Structures (LS) (www.liberatingstructures.com) are one very effective set: three dozen methods all easy to learn and to use. Each LS is designed for achieving a specific objective and all LS are structured to make it easy to include everyone who can contribute. LS are widely used across the world so there should be no need to search for help from another planet. And there is a free App which can be downloaded on Apple App Store or Google Play. It provides easy to follow step by step descriptions of every LS in nine languages. Many more useful ideas and information are

provided in the book [The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures; Simple Rules to Unleash a Culture of Innovation](#)

Second lesson from the stone age: do not, as in Piras, introduce LS solely to the top management team. Now as then, the new methods will only have a significant impact if they are used widely and routinely by many people at all levels. This is possible with LS because many objectives for which they are designed are encountered daily by everybody. Hence LS can be used by everybody every day. As close to the whole "village" as possible should be offered the benefit of demonstration and practice sessions of how to use a set of Liberating Structures. Workshops (joyshops?) are easy to arrange for groups of any size up to two hundred. Which LS to include in the workshops is best decided with a small team of "villagers" who are familiar with its challenges: introduce first the set of LS that the villagers are likely to use regularly.

Just as the Lindin Chief understood and accepted that all villagers would not start using their new tools at the same time, be prepared!! A few early adopters will jump on the LS but many others will need multiple opportunities with each LS to build confidence. Each person will need varying amounts of time for changing his/her long standing habits of always using the same traditional tools and everyone else's long standing habit of using the same old methods. As it was in the Stone Age village, so it is today when it comes to change: the challenge is not with the tools or methods, it is with the people - with their difficulty of changing habits, with the fear of failure, with the "what will I do if it doesn't work?".

The Lindin Chief dealt effectively with his own challenge of changing his habits. He dealt patiently with the "people challenge" by giving his villagers regular opportunities to gather, share stories of their experiences, help one another, form teams to invent and build new applications, etc.. For each group that you work with, your challenge will be to help design a program (a series of events) that the group will implement to get **all its members** comfortable with the routine use of LS. Given the human unpredictabilities It will have to be adjusted step by step informed by progress and failures.

Lindin's Chief had one great advantage: he knew everyone in the village and walked around every day observing how each villager was using the new tools. He would then help or advise or ask some other villager for assistance ... and learn new tricks to practice and pass along.

Nothing can replace direct observation so, you too, like the Chief, must find ways to observe what is being done by members of your groups. Since you will not have the same luxury of walking around on a daily basis, you will have to organize for this observing and counseling to be done internally by various participants. Do all you can to inspire your groups to make observing and feedback a routine practice: it is a key to progress and success.

The Chief never argued with reluctant villagers or forced any of them to use a particular tool. He spent most of his time with "happy users" developing new ideas or gathering them to practice and brainstorm. He chose to wait for the many demonstrations and stories of the periodic "joyshops" to work their magic on even the most hesitant villagers.

You too should focus on supporting those who are eager, interested, excited and then giving others as many opportunities as possible to be exposed to what they do and the results they are getting. Forcing people to use LS is a waste of time!

Like the Lindin Chief you will discover that many people have a hard time stopping their reflex habit of using traditional tools that they have been using for years in order to make space for new tools. He invented games and contests for villagers to put away one traditional tool for one day, then two days, then one week, and come up with alternative solutions using their new tools. Villagers shared stories of their workaround, laughed a lot at their adventures and discovered painlessly how they could let go.

Yes the obvious but hard lesson is that one must stop doing one thing to make space for doing a different one. For instance "stop presentations in meetings by sending them in advance in video form for example to make space for questions or comments or debate or…"

As he watched, the Lindin Chief discovered that the villagers' main challenge wasn't how to use each tool separately. It was how to plan which step by step sequence of tools he/she had to use for a particular project.

Like the Lindin Chief you will discover that many people struggle initially with planning/choosing which LS to use for achieving their meeting objective. Many are used to agendas consisting of a list of topics without any description of how to "treat" each topic. They are probably used to meetings with always the same design regardless of the topic - - for instance a "presentation followed by discussion" - - and maybe also always the same participants. The effort involved in the design/planning process, or the time it takes, or the difficulties experienced, can be the true obstacles to using LS for many as will be asking "who should be included?".Practicing as a group is the more effective approach.

In conclusion, five meeting/work methods -- old, generic, not particularly effective, not inclusive, not target-specific -- does look like being in the stone age of modern work and explains in great part why complaints about meetings never end at all levels. Liberating Structures are a modern set of three dozen simple methods that can transform how work gets done: better results, more fun and true effective inclusion.

Enjoy the journey!

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