



# CONSULTING WITH THE FLOW

*Change Management Consulting For Real*

By Tony Coyle and Tony Page



Part 2:

## *The Vision Thing*



*The article is published in two parts. Part 1 was entitled "Letting Go".*



Cartoon 35

### Finding the clues

After letting go of our old change paradigm with the accompanying feeling of mild despair, we started to notice a wide range of hopeful new avenues. Our senses seemed to be re-opened, stimulated by new possibilities that had actually been there all along but invisible. It was as if pieces were all around us and what we had to do was put the jigsaw together. The pieces were embedded in everyday conversation, daily experience, in books and seminars but now were standing out, glaringly obvious.

The accompanying emotion was heady excitement, thrill, enthusiasm, feeling of fresh discovery, unique and privileged insight, wild optimism....

Here are some of the pieces we found which each represent clues into our new emerging change paradigm:

#### Clue 1: Overheard conversation amongst children at 7am

##### Connection

One child asks other: *Shall we play our Mutant Hero Turtles game?*  
Other child: *Yes, OK, shall we play in my room?*  
First child: *Yes, can I get it down from the cupboard?*  
Second child: *OK. Which colour counter do you want?*

##### Blockage

First child: *Let's both have 2 counters. Shall we?*  
Second child: *No, don't be silly, that's not how you play.*  
First child: *I want the red counter then.*  
Second child: *But I always have the red.*  
First child: *No. Give it to me.*

First child snatches red counter from second child.

Second child: *I'm not playing then.*  
First child: *Don't be silly. It's not important. I'll have another colour.*  
Second child: *No, I don't want to play now. Get out of my room!*  
First child: *Come on. Let's play. Why should I get out anyway. I let you into my room.*  
Second child: *Get out! GET OOOUUUTTT!*

Second child pushes first child out of room and slams door.

#### Clue 2: Passages from contemporary writing

*Water is fluid soft and yielding. But water will wear away rock which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome what is rigid and hard.*

John Heider, The Tao of Leadership

*All of us have had some taste of dialogue - in special conversations that begin to have a "life of their own" taking us in directions we could never have imagined nor planned in advance.*

Peter M Senge, The Fifth Discipline

*We have found that when an individual walks up to another person and engages in a conversation, which happens billions of times a day, one of two things can happen. That individual can come away feeling strong or feeling weak depending on what occurs in the interaction.*

James Redfield, The Celestine Prophecy

*The energy level is quite low as people meet for the first time...separate individuals, watchful, wary and holding back. As individuals introduce themselves....the energy levels rise and each member expands and makes contact....the overlapping individual energies are now merged in the group energy. As the group continues and develops....like the heartbeat of the group...there is a constant flow: a continuous dance as the energy waves vibrate.*

Trevor Bentley, Facilitation

*Productive relationships usually require and often stimulate changes within the partners, changes that they may not anticipate at the outset of collaboration. When two companies place themselves in intimate contact with each other through an alliance, it is almost inevitable that each will compare itself with the other: How do we measure up to our partner?...What lessons can we learn from our partner?... In fact learning and borrowing is part of realizing the full value of the relationship.*

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Collaborative advantage

*Let us imagine that life is a river. Most people are clinging to the bank, afraid to let go and risk being carried along by the current of the river. At a certain point, each person must be willing to simply let go and trust the river to carry him or her along safely. At this point he learns to go with the flow And it feels wonderful.*

Shakti Gawain, Creative Visualisation

### Clue 3: Project Team Meeting

Half way through meeting

Boss: *Before we break would you report on your energy levels using a scale from 1-10*

Other participants: *5, 2, 3, 0.5, 0.5.....*

Participant: *It's a bit hot in here. Perhaps it's because it just after lunch*

Facilitators discussion: *We're drifting. They're not engaged with it. Let's begin the second half by asking what do you want to gain from the meeting and get some more buy-in*

End of meeting one hour later

Boss: *Let's report energy levels again*

Participants: *7, 8, 7, 6,.....*

Facilitators discussion: *We did not cover everything we'd hoped, the meeting was difficult in the first half but now it feels good, the team is engaged, we are working together.*

#### Clue 4: Statement by course leader

*Facilitation is understanding the human as distinct from the technical issues, recognising that human problems obey different laws than technical problems and treating human problems differently.*

Maxime Hassid

#### Clue 5: Positive feedback from client to change agent

*We know you're leading us, but it happens in a nice way, it works, we say things in the management team that we wouldn't say normally, you are helping to unblock us.*

#### Clue 6: Conflict arises with client and is resolved

Client 1: *We do not want to do it in the way you're proposing. It will take too long. We have done a lot of this work. Can't we start at step 3?*

Change agent: *But this is the best way to do it. Steps 1 and 2 are important. If we miss a step we might regret it later.*

Client 2: *Let's do what Tony is proposing and find a fast way to step 3.*

#### Clue 7: Changing backdrop to change management

Employees in 1994 are experiencing life differently within corporations than they did after the last recession. There are signs of corporations slowly coming to recognise a needed change in the "deal" with employees.

##### Old World

- Career for life
- Hierarchy offers promotion
- Security promised or implied
- Life long loyalty required
- Soft, cocooned
- Protected from truth
- Busy



##### Collectivist:

- Company takes care of you
- Acceptance of compromise, consensus, greatest good for greatest number, fitting in to imperfect world
- Broadcasting approach to leadership, motivation, communication, education.

##### New World

- Jobs not careers
- Flat, little upward progression
- Lack of security, honesty expected
- Freedom to move for a better job
- Hard, facing tough competition
- Uncomfortable truths
- Serious, urgent, driven achievement



##### Individualist:

- Look out for yourself
- Requirement to be informed, free to decide, in control, exercising personal choice, moving away from imperfect towards preferred world
- Person-centred approach to leadership etc.

*Summarised from New Deal article published in Fortune June 1994*

#### Bringing life to a new paradigm

From the clues or insights above we seemed to be on the verge of expressing something fresh and new but we did not really know what it was, it was not yet real.

It felt like a new change paradigm had been conceived but had not yet been born. What we had so far in summary was:

- the human factor is by its nature unpredictable, unresponsive and resistant to change management in the conventional sense
- something magic (win-win) can sometimes happen within a dialogue between people at work, when it does both parties spontaneously learn from and change each other.

We tried to bring life to our new paradigm by re-visiting the assumptions listed in our old paradigm and finding out how by turning these inside out or upside down we could produce a positive as opposed to a dysfunctional result. In this way we crafted new assumptions based on the new workplace values of freedom and honesty. Here they are:

*OLD ASSUMPTION: Change must start at the top*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Change must be reinvented by each group affected by it*

**POSITIVE RESULT:** Change arises in and is worked through by individuals. Change is owned, connected with and integrated within the individuals and their work roles.

*OLD ASSUMPTION: Rushing will help speed change up*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Change moves at its own pace*

**POSITIVE RESULT:** Change is real not illusory, takes root and a natural momentum gathers. Paradoxically change is faster (only because resistance previously generated by rushing, forcing, pushing people has been removed).

*OLD ASSUMPTION: Top people must behave as role models*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Top people must express their true feelings authentically*

**POSITIVE RESULT:** Expression of feelings is encouraged. Top people provide a visible demonstration of change to everyone else. Integrity is modelled and reinforced. People work positively and constructively through personal change issues rather than blocking change with their guilt about feeling negative and disloyal. Resistance is acknowledged as real, surfaced and, in the process, change occurs.

*OLD ASSUMPTION: Reward and reinforcement should be aligned*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Reward is best made "change neutral" neither encouraging nor discouraging but allowing free choice.*

**POSITIVE RESULT:** Open communication and honesty is reinforced. Change continues to arise instead of being suppressed.

*OLD ASSUMPTION: News will filter through if there is a problem*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Honest communication only happens in honest relationships*

POSITIVE RESULT: Honesty is maintained in both directions. Honesty recognises freedom and the real level of security/risk/exposure that exists. Management decisions remain appropriate and connected.

*OLD ASSUMPTION: Consultants can be used to carry the message out*

*NEW ASSUMPTION: Change Agents are ineffective unless impartial*

POSITIVE RESULT: Change Agents provide real value by seeing clearly where resistance exists, by being trusted, helping people change by working through resistance with them (instead of being message carriers and manipulators).

### **Finding a new guiding metaphor**

So far we have unearthed an old change paradigm, let go of it, gained some new insights and begun to give life to a new change paradigm. But we all know that habits are hard to change. As Change Agents we are all engaged daily in thousands of encounters and decisions embedded in our many conversations and communications. Any new mode of operating needs real clarity of definition or how are we to know if we are slipping back into old mode?

We felt the need to somehow cull from our insights a hypothesis or "guiding metaphor": something simple, essential, to be held in the mind to measure and regulate our future behaviour in change management.

We wanted the metaphor to live, to be validated experientially through practice and results, to evolve and continue to represent emerging reality in change management rather than to fix itself and become outdated.

The metaphor we have arrived at to capture and express this is called FLOW THEORY. It arises from the clues above and emerged during dialogue between the authors. So far we can offer it in outline only and we expect it to continue to evolve. Here it is.

### **Flow Theory and the art of the Change Agent**

What is the function of Flow Theory?

Flow Theory

- defines the "art" of the change agent.
- explains how people become engaged with or disengaged from change
- describes the human conditions for change and operates when logic, power, politics and other levers for change have ceased to be effective
- defines the conditions for maximum human commitment, productivity and performance

Why "Flow?"

Flow recognises:

- human nature is unpredictable, unresponsive and resistant to Change Management in the conventional sense
- a "fluidity" in the normal everyday behaviour of people unless there is threat

- a "rigidity" in human behaviour where there is threat
- a "magic" quality of connection can occur when people retain their dignity, that is when fluidity is recognised and respected rather than blocked or violated
- that the condition needed for "magic" is also that needed for change to occur.

What is the nature of Flow?

Flow is not a relative concept: either it exists or it is blocked, either you are connected or disconnected, there is no partial Flow.

You can identify Flow by observing body language. You can assess Flow by monitoring whether your own energy level is high or low. You can check Flow by asking other people to report on their personal energy levels.

Flow is a semi-visible energy that under certain conditions emerges from individuals and groups. This energy is the fuel for change.

Flow takes place easily, constantly and naturally between people provided honesty and freedom exist.

When people are in Flow together they open out revealing their deeper thoughts and feelings, inviting learning, change and growth.

Flow is the process through which leadership occurs, whereby people join, trust in a team and continue to support a leader.

The experience of Flow is being accepted, valued. It is harmonious and blissful.

<b>Some behaviours initiate Flow</b>		<b>Some behaviours block Flow</b>	
seeking truth	accepting	masking truth	ignoring
speaking truth	showing interest	disinterest	inflicting
giving	facilitating	telling	imposing
offering	seeking permission	taking	forcing
listening	checking interest	refusing	tricking
asking	respecting	denying	ridiculing
giving up	honouring	manipulating	withholding
inviting	trusting	exploiting	

Flow is not controlled by any person directly, it moves like water, finding its own path, changing what it touches.

Flow builds strong, trusting relationships between people.

Flow is a connection of energy inside a person (to their core motivation) and between people (between their core motivations).

The Change Agent's art is to observe change energy (Flow) and:

- notice where Flow exists



- notice where energy is dissipated, disconnected or blocked
- assist connections of Flow both within and between individuals.

### **Hope, objections and achieving realism**

We have begun to use the word Flow as a shorthand to explain what is and is not happening in our meetings with clients and in our working relationships. It has helped us to plan and shape new, more effective approaches with clients. It has helped us to recognise and shed some old less effective habits. This aspect feels exciting, different, new.

But as soon as the new metaphor was articulated the objections flooded in. Firstly objections from the authors themselves: we have never worked in an organisation that is remotely like the one described in Flow. We must have got it wrong. It's fine as a soft, new age, OD, leather sandals, veggie, Buddhist type concept but it's not today's real business world, grass roots, or pragmatic is it? The seeds of disillusionment were planted.

On the other hand, we have practised Flow in dialogues with clients and Change Agents and it really does seem to pay off. But when we introduce Flow directly as a concept, there is some understanding and support for it (not by any means universal) and the objections multiply:

- It is what I have been saying for years!
- It is counter cultural: do you know any company like this?
- It only works if the others will play ball
- Conflict exists and needs to be managed
- How does this assist us in directing and influencing people?
- Change requires an external threat to existence.....

Through the discussions we are discovering the limits of validity of the new paradigm and raising new questions. Here are some of them.

- Business leaders are still reared on books and images that draw life from a Machiavellian view that is the anti-thesis of Flow. Does this invalidate Flow? How do we handle this? Can we expect Flow to gain acceptance amongst this group?
- We believed that to work in an organisation in which Flow is valued would be satisfying professionally and emotionally. But would it lack edge, thrill, bite? Would it in fact be boring or even repugnant?
- Would conflict exist? Of course. So how would conflict be managed in the Flow paradigm?
- We believed that our old change paradigm was a deluded and incomplete view of Change Management causing damage to the business organisation. But isn't Flow equally deluded and incomplete?
- We believed Flow could become a unifying theory that pulling together the strands of the "soft" school and achieving a reconciliation with the "hard" school, something pragmatic, that re-connects people with their work and achieves

stunning results. But does it, can it? Does Flow contain the essence of a learning organisation? Or is it just more writing to support the "soft" school?

- We believed Flow was new but hasn't it all been said before in a different way? Is it important whether or not it's new?

The jury is still out. We would rather the matter had been decided already and that Flow was widely accepted as a universal truth. But that wouldn't be realistic in this fast changing, whitewater rafting world.

This is where we, the authors, have got to on our change journey.

We have described our own journey in some detail. We hope that this might assist other change agents who have a journey of this kind to undertake. The personal change journey is we feel a challenging and necessary self-education for a change agent. The personal change journey is what delivers the experience and the empathy needed by a change agent to assist their clients through change.

### **An invitation**

We do want to continue developing the change management principles explored in this paper through dialogues with other interested practitioners. If you would value a free and honest dialogue around change management please get in touch. Please enter the Flow.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the following for the assistance they provided directly or indirectly in the writing of this article:

Robert Abel, Neil Bitting and the ITM team, SmithKline Beecham  
Peter Callender, Balance Consulting Group  
Dave Cliffe, British Airways  
Colin Coulson Thomas, Adaptation Ltd  
Kate, Laura and Hannah Coyle  
Barry Curnow and Geoffrey Ahern, Maresfield Curnow  
Chris Davies, Shanks McEwan  
John Evans, SmithKline Beecham  
Vic Hall, Managing The Dynamics of Change  
Maxime Hassid, Terri Brennan and Tilak Fernando, Catalyst Business Consultants  
Grant Hearn, Forte Hotels  
Jack Hutson, SmithKline Beecham  
Adrian Machon, SmithKline Beecham  
John Nicholls, John Nicholls Associates  
Denys Page, Orbit Consultants  
Helen, Wil and Nancy Page  
Richard Pascale  
Gareth Rees, Kinsley Lord  
Tim Savage, Scotts Hotel  
Garth Spiers  
Kelsang Tarchin  
Di Watts, Unisys

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