

Draft

Laboratories For Social Change

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Introduction: The Change Lab

“A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of a road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power.” – Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*

CURRENT APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING COMPLEX SOCIAL CHALLENGES ARE NOT WORKING. While there is much to celebrate in terms of the numbers of people involved in change initiatives, the increasing amounts of money being invested and daily innovations in what could be called alleviation, the underlying trends continue to deteriorate. Social fabrics are increasingly strained under loads they were never intended to contain. Both scrutiny and demands for action from civil society organisations are increasing.

The reasons for our failure to shift underlying trends is partly that we are living through a historical shift in the very nature of modernity - from a “solid” modernity to a “liquid” modernity¹ – increasingly characterised by uncertainty, continuous risk and shifting trust. Navigating this shift requires us to grasp both the nature of the shift but also the historical legacies of modernity that unconsciously work on us and within us.

In the face of increasing injustice, direct-action has either become a strident call for someone else to take action or the alleviation of symptoms that leave underlying causes largely intact. Meanwhile there is increasingly pressure on individuals to change their behaviour, particularly around environmental issues, in what Ulrich Beck describes as an attempt to find “individual solutions to systemic contradictions.” Project or planning-based approaches, favoured by governments, corporations and large non-governmental organisations, though familiar, are entirely inadequate in the contemporary context². A different approach is required.

In order to cope with the challenges of liquid modernity, new spaces are required, new containers, peopled by diverse communities, within which the capacities for addressing challenges can be learnt and new cultures emerge. The need for such

¹ See “Liquid Modernity” – Zygmunt Bauman

² See “*Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*” By James C. Scott

spaces stems from a historically particular approach to change, based on historical familiarity with modernism, that is currently dominant within many institutions, both public and private. These new spaces, profoundly social in nature, can also be thought of as an ambitious (perhaps foolhardy) attempt to reclaim the public domain and re-envision, re-imagine, re-create and re-claim a new commons, a new politics within which we learn to co-exist.

The Change Lab is one such space and one such attempt. It is not a project or a plan, but a space within which emergent processes can unfold and flow, where learning³ can take place and conflict is invited as an opportunity⁴. As a space it is experimental and heuristic in nature, characterized by action-learning, driven by the purpose of discovering and growing the seeds of healthier, more resilient and more just social realities. The Change Lab is a space within which multiple and potentially divergent action-learning experiments can be launched in order to learn how best to shift increasingly inter-connected social challenges. In this way, the Change Lab opens a space within which an experiential pedagogy of change can be practiced. The seeds of new cultures and new realities lie in this practice.

The opposite of being “stuck” is to move. The Change Lab is presented here first as a space and secondly as a space with direction⁵ and movement - literally an approach. What makes a good movement? The movements that the Change Lab has been characterized by to date draw on and are inspired by the U-process⁶. They constitute a collaborative process of innovation that provides both direction and movement.

The Change Lab is a response to increasing “stuckness” of many contemporary social challenges. Convening and supporting Change Labs, and other such spaces, provide us with a better and more promising direction to take in addressing complex social challenges than the accepted planning and problem-solving paradigms that are normally used to manage “problems” and mitigate risk in most institutional contexts.

³ John Heron defines learning as follows: “Learning itself I see as having four inter-dependent forms, which in many different ways complement and support each other.” These are “*Practical, Conceptual, Imaginal and Experiential learning.*” See John Heron, “*The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook*” for more.

⁴ See “*Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*” by Arnold Mindell for more on this idea.

⁵ The idea of a “caravan” gives us a sense of what a space with direction might look like.

⁶ The theory behind the U-process is articulated in three books and a number of papers: Peter Senge, Claus Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*; Claus Otto Scharmer, *Presencing: Illuminating The Blind Spot of Leadership*; and Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities and Connecting to Source* by Zaid Hassan.

A Change Lab is not primarily intended as a consensual space, rather it is a space where movement and flow are valued over consensus, where conflict is actively encouraged. It's a space where friction is viewed not through a reactive judgment that it is bad but rather as utterly necessary to movement, as part of the microphysics of movement. In other words, if within the space of a Change Lab inter-personal and inter-group friction is missing, this is really a sign of non-movement, of stuckness, of a politeness that damns the space as not being worthy of authenticity. Movement requires friction by definition⁷. The space of a Change Lab is characterized by an emphasis on experimentation, learning and action, not on dialogue per se, rather on giving space to an emergent (and often fragile) rationality, on finding your allies and working with them, as opposed to establishment of positions that everyone can sign up to and agree with in public.

The Change Lab brings together “practical wisdom” as represented by individuals with diverse experiences of a complex social system, in order to “attend to” a social challenge. In this bringing together of experiences, the dynamics of a social system are re-created “in the room” as people *de facto* take on the roles they are most habituated to playing. This re-creation brings to life the possibility that these complex dynamics can be also be transformed “outside the room.”

The origin of dynamics that characterize wider systems, both what makes them function and also their dysfunctions, are the result of both individual actions (a function of the roles individuals play) and assemblages of individual action (that give rise to unplanned and unintended social complexity). Becoming conscious of the paradigms, roles, mind-sets and prejudices that give rise to individual action is the first step towards transforming wider social complexity at scale.

In the context of the Change Lab, this transformation is addressed through taking phenomenological approaches that are deeply personal in nature. The “practical wisdom” sought to bear on both the dynamics “in the room” and in the wider system are phenomenological⁸ in that they are directly and intimately concerned with how to deal with the raw phenomenon of a social situation as it is, the mess of a situation – individual and group conflict, power dynamics, emotions, body-language, the “stuckness” of political, ideological and other positions, practices

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*

⁸ They are not technological (that is based on mastery and scaling of technique) and nor are they epistemological (for example concerned with mastery of new models.)

that are either working or not working, the ethics of intervention and so on.

The essential capacities required to grasp and then shape such situations are profoundly human in nature. They range from the capacity to see clearly what is going on, to capacities such as listening (making discernments), speaking (transforming power), embodying and collaborating. A radical embrace and re-discovery of our profoundly human natures and functions lie at the heart of the capacities required by the particular challenge of our times.

The scalability of transformations and initiatives, that is, their ability to affect changes beyond the purely local (individual and group) is dependent on a building a shared understanding of how innovations (ideas, practices, behaviour changes, products or policies) diffuse across landscapes of increasing cultural and institutional diversity. Leaving transformation to spread by chance is not a good strategy for those of us who are interested in systemic changes. Neither is the “Moscow rules” strategy of high-modernism, which typically attempts to achieve such diffusion through normalization followed by diktats, decisions emanating from a central authority that are adapted en-masse.

Current political and cultural forms make this type of diffusion increasingly impossible. Not only is change-by-diktat unlikely, more dangerously, institutions that practice this form of thinking inadvertently promote a synoptic, normalised view of societies as well as simplistic cause-and-effect thinking towards change. All too often “successful” change is measured through short-term activity (“so many people came to a meeting, so much money was spent”), by what could be thought of as churn, as opposed to any underlying changes in trends or causes. These underlying high-modernist characteristics are, unfortunately, alive and well within dominant institutional contexts., both private, public and non-profit.

New forms of planning processes⁹, capable of dealing more confidently with uncertainty, risk, emergence, diversity, questions of power, as well as the catalytic and statistical causality that characterises complex social systems, are required in order to scale transformations. Such planning processes must crucially recognise that attributing any real systemic changes in a situation to single processes or

⁹ See for example, “*Phronetic Planning Research: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections*” by Bent Flyvbjerg, *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 283–306, September 2004 (<http://flyvbjerg.plan.aau.dk/PhronPlan7.1PUBL.pdf>)

local actions is very difficult. The long time-lines and non-linearity of scaling generally means that new ways of measuring effectiveness need to be designed. A recognition is required that the work of scaling change and transformation takes time (years upon years), is messy and cannot be held to traditional planning goal definitions and processes. What do the outlines of such a process look like?

Distinctions, most crucially by funders and other sponsors, should be made between resources that target the alleviation of symptoms and resources that attempt to shift the underlying causality of a situation. In each case the entire underlying theory of change is radically different, requiring in turn, an entirely different approach to resource management and investment decision-making. Funding and supporting Change Labs and other such spaces, should be seen as an experimental attempt to ensure that alleviation effects are not overwhelmed over time but rather that the necessary work of alleviation becomes less and less necessary.

The Change Lab is a container within which we can learn how to cope with the exceptionally fast-changing and “liquid” nature of social challenges that we face. It’s essentially an attempt to conduct action-learning experiments in order to learn how the social body can be healthy, as opposed to accepting a triage-paradigm that largely cannot afford to consider underlying causes and in the long run cannot be sustained.

Finally, the Change Lab presents us with the opportunity to re-negotiate the various social contracts within our societies that have broken down from pressures they were never intended to contain. The possibility and promise of the Change Lab is the possibility of resolutions to many of our most intractable challenges.