

CHANGE AS A CREATION STORY

A Theoretical Tool Plots the Dynamics of Organizational Change

All organizational systems go through change. Sometimes change occurs at so profound a level that it is easy for those charged with the responsibility of guiding that change to lose heart and give up to the forces over which they have no control. In this article, I want to offer a perspective that may provide some guidance through the chaos of the change process—the chaos that is the source of both creativity and destruction.

David Whyte, in his book *The Heart Aroused*, quotes some lines by the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

I am the rest between two notes,
which are somehow always in discord
because death's note wants to climb over—
but in the dark interval, reconciled,
they stay there trembling.
And the song goes on, beautiful.¹

Interpreting these lines, Whyte writes: "Stop choosing, he [Rilke] says, between chaos and order, and live at the boundary, where rest and action move together."²

In recent years, constant organizational reconfiguration has reached such a pitch that it threatens to wear out the most important resource an organization possesses—the people who work for it. Instead of fostering creativity, constant change's requirements—to adjust, monitor new events, and incorporate unfamiliar cultures and procedures in familiar ones—eventually begin to drain energy out of the people involved in them.

In the late 1960s a perspective on change was developed by Robert Hoover, of the University of Cincinnati, which addressed the need for attention to the dynamics of change created within a system. This theory, known as the "Change

Grid," was adopted by the consulting firm Management Design Inc., also of Cincinnati, and shaped the method of consultation and design used in work with organizational systems. In the early 1980s the theory was further enhanced by the perspectives offered by the emerging "New Story of the Universe" as articulated by Thomas Berry, most recently in his book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*.³ The theory has also been used by the members of Connections, a network of consultants on organizational life.

The theory, a sturdy one, has been used over the past eight years in the design of both business mergers and partnerships between religious communities. Because all organizations are made up of people, goals, and products (although different organizations may have different names for them), the theory is universal in its adaptability.

A THEORY OF CHANGE

When change occurs, there always comes a moment when one has an overwhelming sense of having lost his or her way. And that sense of being overwhelmed overshadows the change's positive possibilities. After describing this feeling in a poem called "Lost," David Wagoner urges the overwhelmed person to

Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside
you are not lost. Wherever you are is called here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.
Must ask permission to know it and be known . . .⁴

"Wherever you are is called here." Hoover's theory of change, like Wagoner's poem, offers us a way of standing still and listening, looking and finding our way through apparent chaos to the next step.

Change is best analyzed as a series of five distinct stages (see the left side of the **Box**, p. 40).

BY ROSALIE
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Doing so gives us a way of assessing just where, in the change process, an organization happens to be. The stages usually do not occur in a neat sequence. However, for the purpose of analysis, we will describe them in the following manner.

Stage 1: No Doubt All organizations go through a period of time, often quite brief, when their staff members share a common sense of purpose, commitment, and clarity. Staff members think of themselves as "we." They feel energized and excited by their work, and dedicated to it. Because most people *like* being engaged in a worthwhile endeavor, the staff likes the "No Doubt" stage and will go to great lengths to remain in it.

Stage 2: Operational Doubt This is the point at which staff members begin to raise questions related to the maintenance of the "No Doubt" stage that was such a joy. These questions are often phrased

as problems to be solved. (For good administrators, there is nothing quite so satisfying as solving a problem.) The areas addressed in this stage tend to be about time, schedules, and adjustment of various things. However, the better people are at solving problems, the more problems they are likely to find. By staying busy solving minor problems, staff members in the "Operational Doubt" stage often blind themselves to the fact that something deeper is going on.

The "No Doubt" and the "Operational Doubt" stages of life occur in the organization's Rational dimension. This is the dimension in which problems can be solved intellectually, with reason and clarity. Solving problems in this way is possible primarily because the people involved have a commitment to making things work well. However, as change accelerates in the organization, this commitment may become frayed.

REFLECTION

Tapping employees' energy and passion



Sr. Riehl

Sr. Claudia Riehl, OSB, director, mission integration, Benedictine Health System, Duluth, MN, offered the following reflection on Rosalie McDermott's ideas.

Significant change in the workplace challenges all organizations. Catholic health care, because of its emphasis on mission and values integration, faces even greater challenges than other organizations in implementing major change in ways that align with its stated values.

Rosalie McDermott's way of clarifying the change process, with its five distinct steps, makes the process easy to understand and apply. The entire process is ideal for Catholic health care to use as it carries on the Gospel imperative to continue the healing ministry of Jesus, with his values. While the base remains constant, the industry is constantly changing.

As organizations respond to change, McDermott's process allows them to assess their acceptance of it and then develop ways that can channel their efforts toward recommitting themselves to its mission and values.

I could relate personally to all of McDermott's concepts because the Benedictine Health System (BHS) has recently completed significant organizational restructuring. According to McDermott's theory, a mission integration department can play an important role in moving an organization through change by accompany-

ing the change with rituals and celebrations that remind people of their original commitment. At BHS, rituals that celebrated the sponsoring order and reminded us that change is part of life helped us all to respond positively to the process of change.

I believe that mission integration departments can also be a source of reflection that helps one bridge the stages of change. Mission integration can help a system's leader recognize the stages and respond wisely to them.

The most vital piece of McDermott's article urges leaders to allow the process to unfold, while at the same time providing employees with opportunities to share their feelings and concerns about the change they are experiencing. Listening to and respecting their responses prevents erosion of employees' interest, commitment, and trust.

Stronger relationships develop, trust is built, and commitment is strengthened when, as McDermott says, an organization addresses its "nonrational" areas and creates new "myths." Catholic health care is an inspiring witness when employees are listened to and their passion and energy are tapped. Then all things are possible.

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Stage 3: Ideological Doubt

As staff commitment to a project or an idea is used up, a new stage begins. This new stage brings with it different kinds of questions. Instead of inquiring, "How can we do this better?" staff members now ask, "Why are we doing this at all?" This is a crucial stage in the decline of commitment.

At the "Ideological Doubt" stage, the organization's staff begins to experience itself as

divided. What once was a source of unity becomes a source of division. The "we" and "they" language surfaces, and beliefs that once sustained and supported the organization are questioned. Both the questioner and the person being questioned may feel fearful, sensing that the answer may hold a surprise that neither party wishes to entertain.

At this stage, the organization is moving into the Nonrational dimension of life—the world of feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. These aspects of life are not "solvable"; they will not be "fixed." They may go underground, but they do not go away—unless they receive a different kind of attention.

Stage 4: Ethical Doubt The organization's staff may still, at the "Ideological Doubt" stage, retain a sense of belonging to a group (or perhaps subgroups), a sense of themselves as people united by various causes or stances. However, at the "Ethical Doubt" stage that sense of connection to others is diminished. Staff members begin to feel that they are individuals against a system. They feel a deep sense of alienation from something that was once very valuable. They talk a good deal about "injustice." They feel separated and alone, and respond to events with anger rather than cool logic.

Stage 5: Absolute Doubt As "Ethical Doubt" is characterized by hot anger, "Absolute Doubt" is characterized by icy withdrawal.

Staff members separate themselves emotionally from the organization, depriving it of their energy and commitment. They feel no sense of connection to the bigger endeavor. They may continue to go through the motions, but without much interest.

THE "UP" SIDE OF CHANGE

The stages of doubt give half of the picture of organizational life. They offer one a way to stand

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the more problems
they find.

back and take a look at what is happening, a way to develop a perspective on responses to change. At times this perspective can by itself give one the kind of grounding one needs to make a wise response. If we realize that an organization is experiencing radical change and that lives will be disrupted by it, we will also see that we are not dealing with the Rational dimension. Understanding

that we are going through a Nonrational dimension of organizational life, we will know better than to try to fix it. It is not a problem to be solved. Instead, we must simply listen and pay attention to what is being said.

Not everyone understands how the Rational and Nonrational dimensions function in organizational life. For example, the president of a small company once complained to me about his employees' response to the company's mission statement. After writing the statement himself, the president had it engraved on plaques for each of his employees so that they could display it on their desks. Still, the president said, his employees were not committed to the mission statement. This man had missed the obvious: A polished piece of metal is not the same thing as a commitment. Indeed, one might go so far as to say, The weaker the commitment, the more polished the statement.

Organizations undergoing radical change need to create space in which the new—new thinking, processes, goals—can develop and grow. Reflection on and evaluation of experience is what provides the fuel for the creation of the desired possibilities. But the new cannot grow unless the organization provides opportunities for staff members to tell the story of what it has cost to get to this point. Just as a field will not yield a good crop unless it is ploughed and tilled, an organization will not grow unless the stories about its foundation are given voice.

The right side of the **Box** on p. 40 gives us a framework for learning from those stories and then moving from them to the formation of a new story—a new creation. From story flows commitment; from commitment flows energy; and from energy flows action. All this takes place in that perfect world that we all desire but seldom actually experience.

The theory, which provides a way of viewing life in organizations, is somewhat artificial because it is abstract. Life simply does not unfold in a step-by-step fashion. Nevertheless, this perspective is one that gives us both some insight into what really occurs in organizational life and an opportunity to pay attention to the stages of organizational change.

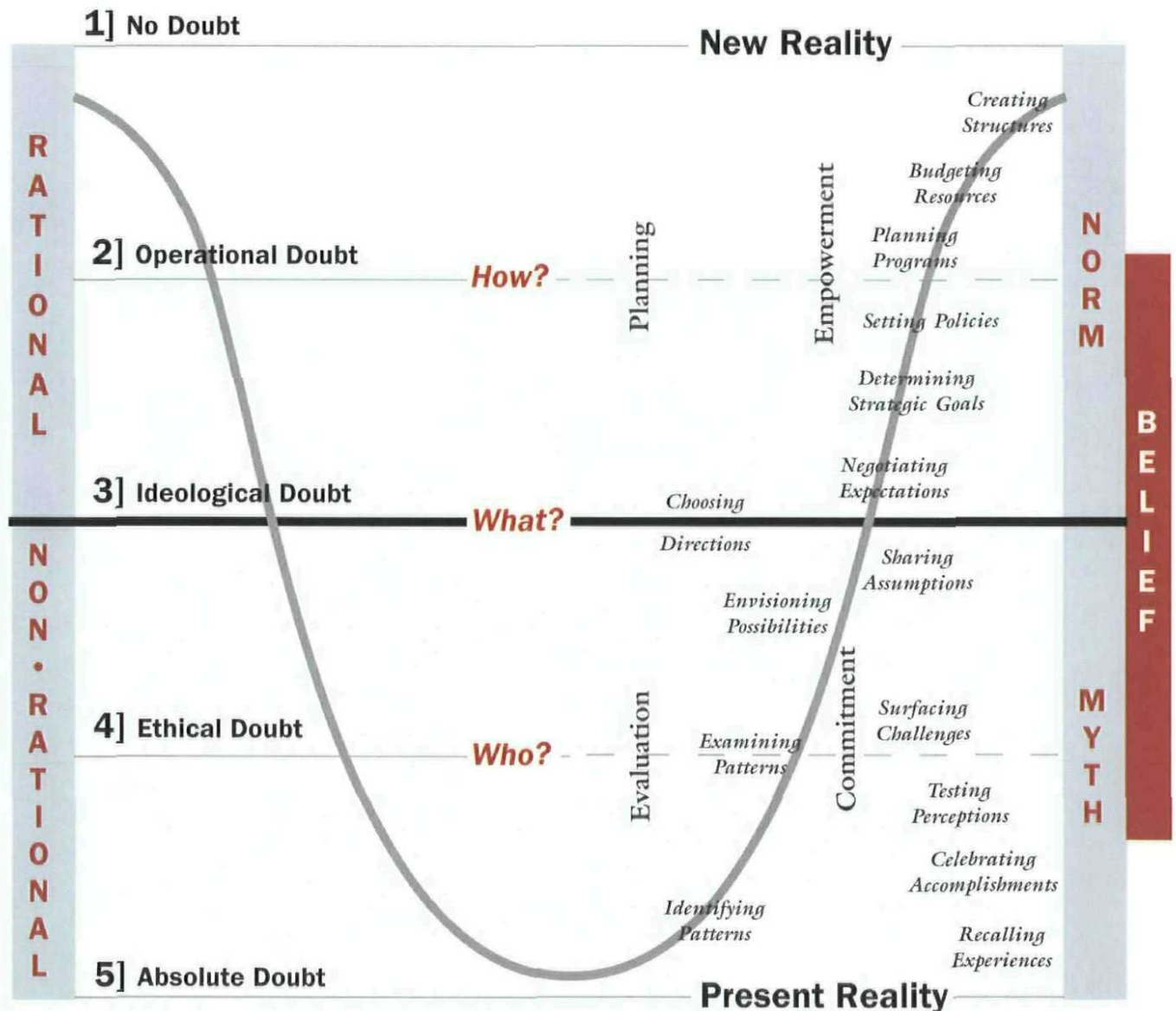
The Nonrational and Rational dimensions can also be seen in the developmental side of organizational life. By pointing out an organization's Nonrational aspects, one can encourage staff to reflect on the levels of disconnection they experi-

enced as they moved downward from "No Doubt" to "Absolute Doubt." The Nonrational aspect of life is where resides the Myth from which a new identity will grow. If the Nonrational is not opened and respected, only negative responses to change—rather than the potential for positive change—will issue from it.

Myth levels are touched through celebrations, rituals, the acknowledgment of accomplishments, and play, to mention just a few. One may, in forming a merger or partnership, create an organization without a soul unless one pays attention

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A Model for Spiritual Leadership



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The doubt cycle will begin again, of course.

to Myth, Story, and Tradition. Poetry touches life experience in a way that strategic plans cannot. This is the part of organizational life in which the spirit of the new system rests and from which the energy for the new endeavor is generated. It is dangerous to ignore it.

Out of the deeper roots of identity flow the challenges that emerge when differences unite. These challenges are always unique to the particular combination of persons involved. The articulation of these challenges leads, in turn, to a testing of the assumptions that undergird them. If trust has been a byproduct of the sense of celebration and coming together, the testing of assumptions will lead to greater clarity of purpose. If trust has not been a byproduct, then the system is rushing into the Rational without a sufficient base in the Myth.

Once staff members move from Myth to Norm to Belief (see the right side of the **Box**), they begin to sense that they have reached firmer ground. Most organizations are experienced in setting direction and articulating strategies that fulfill those directions. The top level of the **Box** is about allocation of resources and the planning of programs and structures to carry out the purpose.

Once the organization has its new structures in place, has finished forming its plans, and has begun implementing them, the doubt cycle will begin again, of course. The question often arises: "Must an organization experience 'Absolute Doubt?'" There is no simple answer. I urge leaders to pay attention to evaluation. If evaluation reveals deeper levels of doubt, leaders should pay attention both to the questions being raised and the people raising them.

Change surrounds us, usually continuing without our permission. However, those who are immersed in change can at least do the following:

- Recognize the level of change occurring. Is it Rational or Non-rational?
- Develop processes that encourage connection at the Myth level.
- Stand still long enough to assess what is happening and don't expect a quick solution.
- Understand that personal attitude to change shapes one's resistance or accommodation to it.
- Take time to build relationships; from them a Myth is being created.

Remember that we can, by our response to change, choose either to create or destroy. If we respond intelligently, we can be part of the creation of the new story.

Radical change is a time of great challenge for organizations. It is a time when leaders should pay attention to the moment in which they find themselves. Leaders should remember that whatever they may need is right in front of them or perhaps in the person seated next to them. As Whyte's poem reminds us: "Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger." □

NOTES

1. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused*, Doubleday, New York City, 1994, p. 241.
2. Whyte, pp. 242-243.
3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Crown, New York City, 1999.
4. David Wagoner, "Lost," quoted in Whyte, p. 259.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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that someone spends a few moments with them...It picks them up and makes them feel better."

Pam Ehlers, who has two clown alter egos ("BeaCuz" and "Uh-Oh"), says, "When patients do not get visitors, it means a lot to them if we can put a smile on their faces. Many people stop and ask us to go see a friend or family member. These are often the patients who need us most, and we can make a difference in just a few minutes. We always leave a balloon and a smile behind."

"This has been a huge plus for Presbyterian Hospital," Flores says. "Our clowns are well known because of extensive press coverage, and we're receiving requests for them from organizations from throughout southern California."

The clowns bring laughter from the Emergency to the Maternity Departments but seem to have an especially poignant effect on patients with life-threatening disease. On a recent visit to the hospital, a nurse flagged down "Uncle Sammy" and asked him to spend a few minutes with an elderly woman who had an inoperable brain tumor. "She has not smiled in months," the nurse told the clown. "She just lies in bed and stares at the walls, never saying a word."

The clown approached the room and slowly walked inside, bowing and asking if he could come in. The woman tilted her head slightly, looked at him silently, and nodded yes. He began talking to her, and, against all odds, she began talking back...and smiling!

"That is the special magic our clown program brings," Adams says. "Our clowns were trained to provide comfort to our patients. And our patients and their families are more comfortable here because of the spirit the clowns bring to our hospital." □

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