A Guide to Paradigm Shifting

The True Purpose® Process

Change agents are in the business of paradigm shifting (and paradigm creation). There are a number of difficulties with paradigm change. An excellent treatise on this (from a business perspective) is Willis Harman's book, *Global Mind Change*. In it, he contends that a true global paradigm shift is so transformative that those after the change cannot understand how those before the change thought. The last global mind change that meets this standard was the Renaissance, ending roughly 400 years ago.

Here is how to make sense of this definition of a global mind change. Imagine that you had a time machine and were able to invite people from history to visit our time. Imagine having a conversation about science with Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton. Would it be possible? Certainly, if you were able to overcome language barriers. How about a debate about the role of government in society with the framers of the United States Constitution? Absolutely. Though technology and increased population have changed our society's appearance, the basic way that we think about the world hasn't transformed so much in the past few hundred years that it would make it impossible to communicate.

Now imagine having a conversation with a medieval peasant or a knight who fought in the crusades. Discussing science, religion or politics suddenly becomes much more difficult. Their context is so profoundly different than ours on so many levels that it might prove impossible to discuss many topics.

If Willis Harman is right, it means that in another hundred years (maybe less), people will not be able to understand how *we* think. I like to imagine a child asking her mother about different aspects of how we live today.

> "But mommy, didn't they know they were destroying the environment?"
>
> "Yes, honey, by that time they had figured it out."
>
> "But then, how come they kept doing it? I don't understand. And why did they fight wars instead of working things out?"
>
> "I'm not sure, sweetie…."

If we're successful at altering our societal paradigm, the child's mother will have a very tough time answering these questions, because she won't understand, either.

What Is a Paradigm?

A "paradigm" is a cognitive framework, a set of beliefs, assumptions and perceptions that members of a group share in common. It is a basic structure that allows us to interact and operate together. Without a common framework as a foundation, two people might have great difficulty communicating even the most basic of concepts, requests and expectations. In this case, we are discussing paradigms that operate on a national, cultural, or global level.

A successful global paradigm has many of the same features as a healthy human psyche, particularly with regard to belief systems. Our paradigm, though under great criticism and scrutiny at the moment, has been highly successful by a wide variety of measures. Here are some of the things we must consider while attempting to change it:

- Paradigms are self-reinforcing. The behavior of people within the paradigm tends to "prove" the assumptions on which it is based.

- It is difficult to see beyond the paradigm. A true paradigm, like any belief system, is so all-encompassing that it is extremely challenging to perceive or conceive of anything which is not part of it.

- Many of the assumptions and beliefs of the paradigm are so pervasive as to be unconscious, untested and unchallenged. Even when they have been tested and shown to be false, they are so much the fabric of people's experience that they continue to believe they are true.

- As a result of this inability to see outside of a paradigm, it is much easier to criticize the current paradigm than to design and implement a new one. Many change agents get stuck here, unable to offer realistic alternatives to the current system. This is a serious problem; negative judgment is polarizing, and polarities are stable. Hating something tends to entrench and empower it in its current form. Attempts to change the old paradigm from a platform of hatred and judgment simply become part of the existing paradigm; no change results.

- Deviating from the paradigm tends to produce a decrease in results. Remember, people are using it because it works! Things other than the paradigm, unless carefully chosen and designed, are likely to work less well.

- Correctly implementing a new, superior paradigm also produces a short-term decrease in results. Designing, learning and implementing something new requires time and energy. People are less skilled at a new thing than they are at something with which they are familiar.

- When people decide to shift out of a paradigm in which they have been operating for a long time, they tend to judge it negatively and "throw the baby out with the bathwater." They are often blinded by their judgment and desire for change and unable to see the positive features of the old paradigm. This usually results in trying to implement the opposite of the paradigm, which works no better (and usually much worse) than the existing system. This is a very important point; changes made from judgment and reaction will do more harm than good.

- Because it is so all-pervading, most people are unaware of all the functions the current paradigm is performing. Therefore, when they design a new one, it often does not handle all the same functions as the old one. It may be possible to design a new paradigm in which an old function does not need to be performed at all, but this usually doesn't happen by accident!

- Trying to change everything at once results in chaos and almost never works. Many organization development consultants recommend changing no more than 10% of a system at any given time, if you want it to continue to function.

The Challenge

We are talking about making modifications to a pervasive, invisible, all-encompassing system upon which the most basic functioning of our society depends. And the people who want to change the system are convinced that it is bad, but have no thoughtfully conceived and thoroughly designed alternative. As a result of these various features, when an attempt is made to change a paradigm, people frequently engage in one of the following behaviors (none of which results in a sustainable shift):

1. Criticize some feature or side-effect of the current paradigm. Frequently, this is accompanied by blaming someone (or the ubiquitous "them") for the feature and sweeping judgments that the current situation is unacceptable or immoral.

2. Propose a tweak, fix or upgrade to some feature of the current paradigm.

3. Congratulate someone for a tweak, fix or upgrade to some feature of the current paradigm (or for doing anything that looks different from the prevailing behavior).

4. Propose something that is the exact opposite of some feature of the current paradigm.

5. Explain why things must work the way they currently do. This most often happens in response to someone proposing something truly interesting and radical.

It is difficult to come up with an apt metaphor that conveys the degree of challenge that this poses, but try this one: you decide to change the engine of your car so that it doesn't run on gasoline anymore, since you know that gasoline is bad for the environment. You don't know what fuel you want to use instead, but you lift the hood and get to work anyway. You're not sure exactly what you'll need, because you've never overhauled an engine before, but you have a few tools. And no replacement parts. And you're driving on the freeway at the same time.

Bad as this sounds, it's actually much simpler than our current reality. There are thousands, perhaps millions of change agents around the world, all rewiring the engine at the same time. We are not in communication with one another (for the most part) and have no common understanding of the current system and no shared vision for the new one. In this situation, it's not surprising that intelligent, well-meaning people are resisting change!

Principles for Improving a Successful Paradigm

How do we pull this off? There is no specific map, but there are values, principles and beliefs that will help us engage in the process in a productive way. Here are some of them:

- "The seeds of the new lie within the old." Nothing of the old paradigm needs to be completely discarded. Aspects of the old paradigm may take on completely different forms, but they will still be present. The desire to "throw it away and start over" is a polarizing expression of frustration and judgment, not thoughtful design of a new system.

- "If you want to change something, you must love it." In order to make changes without inspiring polarization and resistance, your heart must be filled with love, admiration and gratitude for the current paradigm. If you cannot gaze in awe at the sublime beauty of the design of the current system, you are in no condition to change it, because you will likely do more harm than good. If you cannot meet this standard, then the transformation that is required is internal. Deal with the parts of you that cannot love the old before trying to "help." Until you have done this work, you are not even qualified to tell whether the current paradigm requires any changes at all. You are much too likely to see things through the distorted eyes of judgment and break things that are working fine.

- "Everything is perfect exactly the way it is, including my desire to change it." This wonderful quote from Ram Das shows the path out of the paradox posed by the prior principle. You can truly love and honor something and still choose to change it. An interesting corollary of this principle is that some aspects of the old paradigm will likely remain intact, with little or no change. The attitude or spirit in which the function is performed may change, but it is possible that it is impractical to improve on some aspects of the old paradigm. This is difficult to see from a position of negative judgment and reactivity.

- "Start with the willing." Most people have no interest in being part of a paradigm shift. The old Chinese saying, "may you live in interesting times," was actually considered a curse. There are plenty of people willing to help and participate; deal with them. Arguing with skeptics is not progress.

- "Timing is everything." Trying to create change before its time is incredibly frustrating. The path of least resistance often leads to the change that can be made now.

- "There is no enemy." If a person or group is opposing the paradigm change, it is almost always because they do not see how their needs and

values will be accounted for in the new one. This is an indication of an incomplete solution. It is easy to say that if only "they" would change, everything would be fine, but it is neither true nor helpful. Do not be tempted to treat an "opposing" view as illegitimate so you can proceed with your agenda and ignore objections. Look to your own ability to engage stakeholders and include them in the process, not their "unenlightened" stance.

- "There are no obstacles." Anything that is blocking your progress is there to bring your attention to something. It may be drawing your attention to a missing aspect of your design or your process. It could be pointing to internal work you need to do before proceeding. If you have organized your interior psyche in a true change agent configuration, "obstacles" become stepping stones, indicators of the next work that must be done, training modules. Welcome them.

- "The means are the ends in the making." A quote from the powerful change agent Mahatma Gandhi, this one speaks to process and values. Simply put, "the ends do not justify the means." If you engage in a divisive, polarizing process, you will get a divided, polarized result. You must adopt principles and values that model the new paradigm you seek to create and stick to them throughout the change process.

- "You cannot solve a problem from the consciousness that created it." A famous quote from change agent Albert Einstein, this one challenges us to adopt the consciousness of the world we seek to create and then make change from there. This means that all transformation is rooted in internal transformation: I must transform my internal paradigm first, then set out to change the world. Fixing problems with the current paradigm reinforces it. Which leads to the next principle:

- "External obstacles are a dim shadow of internal ones." The things we perceive as blocking us are projections of our own parts, fears and beliefs. When we resolve the obstacle within, the obstacle without loses its power.

- "There are no problems to be solved, only deeper truths to be revealed." Jeffrey Van Dyk's lovely paraphrase of an ancient Zen saying challenges us to shift our perspective away from problem solving altogether. If trying to fix things reinforces the current paradigm, and things are perfect as they are, then we must give up altogether on problem solving. The alternative?

Revealing the truths that underlie the apparent problems. Only by unearthing the beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation of our reality can we change it!

Most of these are easier said than done! Fully adopting just one of them could be a project in personal growth and development. And don't expect the people around you to follow these guidelines! Practice them, though, and you will notice your ability to create change increase (as well as your ability to detect correctly which things don't need to be changed!)