The WHY of Our Work

“The primary question in life is, “What are you doing with what you’ve been given?” —Source Unknown

As change practitioners, we spend a lot of time refining what we do (facilitate change) and how we go about doing it (applying our various concepts, methodologies, etc.). Professional disciplines can’t function without a solid what and how foundation, so the time and attention we invest in these kinds of activities is clearly justified. In the process, however, we should be careful not to lose sight of the why of our work.

It’s important to stay mindful of why we are so motivated—some of us even driven—to engage in this occupation. Without a solid understanding of why we do what we do, there is no passion—no soul in the work.

When addressed honestly, there are many possible answers to why we are change practitioners:

- “It allows me to make a living and provide for my family.”
- “I gain satisfaction in helping achieve specific change goals for my organization or my clients.”
- “I like to excel at whatever I do and this work keeps me on my toes.”

These are all legitimate and admirable motivations for being a professional change facilitator, but I want to draw our attention to a different altitude of why…where aspirations beyond self-gain reside. I want to talk about the fulfillment that comes from applying one’s professional talents to a greater good…whatever that greater good might be.

The Ultimate Why

When we act with a sense of purpose, we unleash both energy and a dedication that have the power to transform a job into a calling. Having a clear and compelling answer to “Why am I doing this?” allows us to invest our hearts as well as our minds and bodies into the profession. We come to the work with our whole being, instead of just the brains and brawn needed to accomplish specific tasks.
To move past basic motivators for being in this line of work, we must ask *why* questions like:

- Other than earning a living and keeping myself intellectually stimulated, is there meaning to being a professional change facilitator?
- Does the fact that I help implement change create sustainable differences in the lives of the people I work with or the ones I work for?
- Does being a change practitioner have any relevancy and positive impact on the challenges faced by people beyond the organization(s) where I work?

If the answer to any of these or similar questions is *yes*, there is depth to our profession beyond satisfying bosses and clients. As such, it is in our best interest to be clear, not only with ourselves, but also with our colleagues, about the importance we place on our work. Without this clarity, we run the risk of straying off course or missing alliances with others who might share our passion.

There are as many perspectives on *why* change facilitation is a worthy profession as there are practitioners. You have yours; I have mine. The inquiry requires introspection, and our answers are often very personal, but that doesn’t mean we have to keep them to ourselves. Maybe by opening up to each other about the deeper agendas we have for pursuing this line of work, we will find new inspirations and new common ground. The point isn’t to seek a single, homogenized one-size-fits-all answer, but for those comfortable doing so, I believe there is value in sharing our passion for this kind of work.

In my next post, I’ll talk about why I feel it is so important to be in the change business, and say more about *changes that matter*.

*Post 2*

**WHY I Believe Change Facilitation Is a Worthwhile Profession**

In my last post, I talked about moving past basic motivators for being in this line of work, and hinted at the fulfillment that comes from applying one’s professional talents to a greater good. We each have our deeper reasons for engaging this work. To encourage you to think about yours, I’ll share mine.

Here are the major reasons I think it’s important to be a change practitioner.

- **The challenge of change grows…relentlessly.**
  
  No aspect of human existence is protected from the unending avalanche of change that continues to escalate in magnitude, complexity, and far-reaching, interdependent implications.

- **It's not simply more of the same. Changes now and in the future will ask more of us.**
  
  Einstein said, “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Without new perspectives on the difficulties/opportunities we encounter and ingenious ways to address them, there is no hope of elevating the level of thinking to what is needed. Too much inventiveness, however, can also be a problem. For example, many leaders feel they are charged with executing initiatives that they don't fully understand and/or believe in. To accomplish major change in today's world, we not only need creative solutions, we need people to fully grasp and support them.

- **Whether they initiate change or respond to it, people struggle the most with the execution of their plans.**
Knowing how to successfully orchestrate a transition is just as vital as correctly determining what to change, yet implementation is typically the more neglected of the two skills. For most people, this has led to a significant gap between their ability to identify what solution to pursue and their ability to actually accomplish their intentions.

- **The true cost for this “what/how” skill variance comes to light when there is poor implementation of changes that could make a difference.**

Despite the rhetoric that accompanies the majority of new endeavors, in the grand scheme of things, most attempts to change or respond to change have little long-lasting impact on people’s lives. Some undertakings, however, could make a significant, positive difference in the quality of life (and even protect life itself) if only they could be fully realized. These are the *changes that matter*... the ones we must ensure are successfully executed.

Today, the number and criticality of *changes that matter* is higher than ever before. Sometimes the issues being addressed are massive: local/global economic challenges, environmental degradation, starving multitudes, or the inhumanities one group of people inflicted on another. Other times, the scope of impact is limited to an individual or small group, but the implications are no less critical for whoever is affected. *Changes that matter* are the ones intended to have a positive impact on the course of history, whether the beneficiary is a person or all of humanity. The problem is that, too much of the time, solutions of this nature are derailed because of weak execution. It’s not enough to be well intended. Important changes must be actually realized.

- **Changes that matter generate great value on their own, but there are additional, secondary benefits that happen each time important initiatives are successfully executed.**
  - People believe more in creating new possibilities because they have confidence that innovative ideas can translate into tangible results for individuals, organizations, and society.
  - People learn that it’s possible to be personally resilient and organizationally nimble when faced with significant change.
  - People see that complexity and ambiguity can be managed and used to their advantage.
  - People affected by change don’t feel victimized, and the credibility of those leading the efforts is strengthened.
  - People are able to apply lessons learned in one setting (i.e., an organizational environment) when they encounter change in other aspects of their lives.
  - People learn they have a greater capacity for courage and discipline than they realized.

- **Changes that matter come in many forms and domains (social shifts, geo-politics, technology, healthcare, environment, business, etc.), but what they all have in common is the imperative nature of their implementation.**

Because of the positive implications if successful, and/or the negative repercussions if not, there is a prohibitively high price tag for these kinds of efforts failing to reach realization. Learning to guide these kinds of transitions toward their intended outcomes is more than a good idea. The caliber of life—in fact, the very survival of the human species—depends on people becoming architects of, rather than overwhelmed by, change.

- **Few people are proficient enough at orchestrating or responding to transitions to successfully execute today’s *changes that matter*, much less the important ones just over the horizon.**
Because of the ever-accelerating pace and sophistication of change, even people with honed implementation skills and a high tolerance for ambiguity will find themselves, at some point, underprepared for the level of turbulence they will face. As a result, whether people are aware of it or not, everyone needs more effective ways to navigate change.

- **Organizations provide excellent settings for learning how to successfully execute important change.**

  Professional change practitioners are positioned to help people acquire the knowledge and skill needed to accomplish changes that matter. The high concentration of people, the practical nature of the initiatives taking place, and the measurable impact of success and failure makes a person's work environment an ideal place to learn how to advance implementation-related knowledge and skills. There is plenty of justification for applying these lessons to an organization’s initiatives. An even greater payoff comes, however, when people realize that their place of work can serve as a learning laboratory for what can be applied far beyond organizational boundaries (with family, local community, government, or social action causes, for example).

*In the next posting: a challenge to all change practitioners*

**Post 3**

**If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?**

I wrote in the two previous posts about the importance of exploring why we are change practitioners and shared some of the reasons I choose to be one. Now I’d like to make a case for change facilitation as a calling.

Our role as change practitioners grants us more than an opportunity to earn a living; it comes with responsibilities.

As the world becomes more complex and convoluted, the necessity for successfully addressing changes that matter grows in equal proportion. The ones that emerge during our era will leave footprints that our children and grandchildren will either benefit from or suffer through. There are those who are rightfully concerned about the economic burden we are leaving for future generations to contend with. We should have an equal concern, however, for the change-related legacy we’ll leave. Some of the transitions we are currently facing, and others to come, have long-term implications and will have a direct bearing on life after ours is over.

Our timing couldn’t be better. We are change experts during an era when more transitions are being thrust upon our species than at any period in recorded history. The juxtaposition of our skills and the magnitude of disruption taking place means we’re perfectly positioned to foster a virtuous spiral that can have far-reaching significance.

Today, we are standing at the crossroads of two change-related futures facing humanity:

- **A downward spiral**, where people feel they are already drowning in shifts they can’t keep up with and are insecure about the next wave coming their way, which makes them even less capable of handling the impending load

- **An upward spiral**, where confidence about addressing approaching changes is built each time a current wave is successfully addressed

Either scenario could be our destiny and it’s possible that no more than modest influences will create the tipping point in one direction or the other. I believe our change facilitation profession is one of those modest influencers.
If not us, who will help guide people toward the knowledge and skills needed so that important changes have a greater likelihood of becoming reality? If not now, as so much is riding on solutions that could have a genuine impact on people’s lives, when will we step up to face our responsibilities?

**Where Meaning Resides**

Speaking for myself, there are many change initiatives to work on, but the ones that really make a difference keep me energized as a professional. As I see it, there are only three types of meaningful projects:

- *Changes that matter*
- Endeavors that help me practice my craft and sharpen my skills so I can perform at my best when *changes that matter* next appear
- Endeavors that offer me the opportunity to help other practitioners prepare themselves for the *changes that matter*, which they will have a chance to influence

I’m fortunate in that, generally speaking, I’m blessed with opportunities to pursue one of these three options. But there are times when I’m not. When this happens, it’s important to remind myself that the present work is not what I’ve dedicated myself to do. That doesn’t make it wrong, nor does it prevent me from providing value to whomever I’m working with. It simply means I’m not aligned with my stated purpose for being in this profession and I need to get back to one of these three alternatives as soon as I can.

**How About You?**

*“Where your talents and the needs of the world cross, there lies your calling.”* —Aristotle

Some of you may resonate with my answer to *why* being a facilitator of change is so important but I’m sure others will feel I’ve missed the mark, at least as far as you’re concerned. If this is true for you, it means you have a different set of higher-order outcomes that you are passionate about, which our profession allows you to pursue. This is as it should be. It is a diversity of passions about this work that gives it a collective depth, and not just a deeper meaning for us individually.

In this regard, the intent of this writing isn’t to create closure, it’s to open a dialogue…at least within yourself, if not with others. Do you feel being a professional change practitioner has a loftier purpose beyond employment, doing no harm, and accomplishing the specific initiatives you are asked to facilitate? Is there a greater good you hope to accomplish by engaging in this work? Is there a larger justification for you being part of this profession?

If your answers are consistently yes, I encourage you to be as specific as you can with yourself about what your purpose is and then share as much as you dare with colleagues. Let’s be personally clear about where True North is for each of us and let’s join forces if we find that others have similar aspirations.