Building employees’ capacity to adapt to change

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By : Céline Bareil, and Justine Gagnon,
HEC Montréal

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Abstract

Organizations are changing more rapidly than ever, and employees must adapt within a shorter period while playing an important role integrating the change into their responsibilities. Becoming an excellent change facilitator by building employees’ capacity to adapt to change is an essential competency for every manager in today’s fast paced world. However, given individual characteristics, it is not always easy to precisely determine employees’ needs and to what a particular change represents for them. The "Phases of Preoccupations during Change" theory (PoP model) proposes that groups of employees experience different preoccupations at different points during the change process. This foreseeable chronology of psychosocial and cognitive reactions is an interesting and pragmatic alternative to the limited perspective of resistance to change. We propose a continuous three-step approach as a legitimate way to manage employees’ reactions during periods of high turbulence and intense episodes of adaptation. By creating multiple windows of opportunity at different strategic times during implementation, leaders can leverage their employees’ capacity to change.

The phrase “Change is there to stay and people have to adapt to it faster and better” is common currency. Yet implementing a change seems to be a bigger challenge than envisioning a strategic change. As recent studies indicate, the success rate of major transformations is quite low; more than two thirds of change initiatives fail to deliver desired outcomes. They often leave the organization in a significantly weaker state both strategically and operationally. Explanations for the failures of change initiatives converge on “people issues.” Many leaders with experience in organizational change know that modifying people’s behaviors is not easy, and is not feasible without huge investments of their own time and resources. Even if they have read extensively about change management, they may be uncertain about the most effective way to guide their employees during those times of turbulence. Given scarce resources and a more highly skilled workforce, managers must approach their employees with a winning strategy.
We believe that the best way to reach success when implementing an organizational change is by becoming an excellent change facilitator. As a change leader, you expect your people to adapt to the change quickly, achieve higher business results and comply with the project's schedule and budget. You hope to retain all your employees within the company during this turmoil, to keep motivation at its highest, to feel that your team is committed and to maintain a positive organizational climate. Moreover, you expect the employees to take risks, be proactive and stay in good physical and psychological health. Inversely, you must strive to minimize stress, burnout, depression, frustration, status quo, resistance to change, conflicts, “laissez-faire” attitude and employee departure. Therefore, you must build your employees’ capacity to adapt to the change. Is there a more effective way to increase your team’s capacity to change than a “trial and error” strategy?

Many theories and models have been proposed to explain the “transition” period. However, few propose direct proactive leadership behaviors, predictive factual experience, non-specialized diagnosis, group reactions and windows of opportunity before/during/after change, without blame. In this article, we propose an innovative, pragmatic, positive and operational model that can be used directly by today’s leaders, that enables them to understand the reactions (“the black box”) of their group of employees during change, and more importantly, to know when and how to act successfully. Our model rests on a group and cognitive perspective, an outlook that is manageable, directly involves people and that explicitly leads to successful and specific actions that do not require specialists (like consultants or psychologists) or a psychological background. It also explains reactions over a long time frame.

A Dynamic Approach

In order to become an excellent change leader, we propose a model that has been tested with hundreds of directors and managers of small, medium and large organizations, both public and private, that were undergoing major transformations (mergers, acquisitions, technological change, reengineering, ERP system, cultural change, etc.). For more than a decade, we have conducted research on the transition period, also called "the passage" for the people. Our model has been measured over time and validated. Most importantly, it works smoothly and is easy to use for any managers that wish to take full advantage of a change. This practical and operational approach should be added to the portfolio of any leaders that are seeking to improve their day-to-day actions vis-à-vis their team, during the implementation of a major transformation. In addition, it helps the organization develop readiness for the next change.

This powerful, proactive and positive approach had been initially developed by Hall & Hord in education. In our knowledge, only two management articles had cited those authors as a promising way to deal with change in organizational settings. We decided to expand this model for broader organizational change and to redesign it in order to better capture XXIst century preoccupations of workers. In fact, since twenty years, world has changed: the workers’ expectations and experiences with change have evolved, management techniques have improved and change knowledge accelerated. Based on our research, we propose a new model called “Phases of Preoccupations”. This model, revisited, is beneficial since it recognizes that people’s preoccupations are legitimate and natural. It is the first model that directly addresses people's issues in a positive direction towards the change and allows managers to act upon preoccupations by creating windows of opportunity. Instead of reacting to the imposed rhythm of the change based solely on the project management schedule, this model addresses the human rhythm of people that become involved in the process in a new way.
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Capacity to change is regarded in a similar way as the capacity to learn, which is defined as not only the acquisition of information and knowledge, but also the self-recognition of a problem and the motivation to learn. In that sense, the individual capacity to change is defined as the recognition of some preoccupations about a change and the willingness to change (habits, behaviors, relations, etc.). Building employees’ capacity to change is a leadership skill whereby the leader creates multiple windows of opportunity.

These windows are opened at different times during implementation: one window serves to create openness to change; another creates conditions for motivation to adapt to change. A third window could help to consolidate the change, and the last window fosters continuous improvement triggered by the change. Managers can open those windows by addressing people’s preoccupations as they occur during implementation (starting from the announcement of a change before the change, during the transition period and until the change is implemented), and by facilitating the transition until migration to other changes.

A preoccupation is a worry, a care, a concern; and a state of mind absorbed by an object. Preoccupations are aroused naturally and must be resolved in order to create some space for the arrival of upcoming preoccupations. It is natural to be preoccupied during periods of change, and those preoccupations constitute windows of opportunity for leaders who would like to accelerate their people’s adaptation to the change.

This model underlines some basic assumptions that constitute the paradigms of this model.

1. Change takes time. Organizational transformations are more than just projects. Academics and professionals agree that major organizational transformations resemble a process occurring over time, which takes usually more than a year and often, several years. We estimate the leader’s time devoted exclusively to managing change to be as much as 30%, for a successful implementation of a change (this is probably the reason that 65% to 70% of those transformations usually fail).

2. Organizational change is driven by people’s efforts. Change affects people, and there is no organizational change without adaptation. Consequently, all managers must support their people throughout the process of change. They must manage the evolution of their employees’ preoccupations over time. Thus, leaders must focus their attention on individuals during the implementation of the change.

3. The experience of change can be predicted. Even if change is a highly personal experience, our studies show that groups of employees have similar preoccupations at the same time and there are approximately seven Phases of Preoccupations. This finding provides powerful leverage for different responses and actions directed towards individuals and groups of employees’ phases who tend to experience the same preoccupations at the same time.

The model: “PoP” – 7 Phases of Preoccupations during Change

Our model, the “PoP model” comprises 7 phases (see Figure 1).
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Figure 1. The PoP Model: Phases of Preoccupations during change

| Phase 1 – No preoccupation about change |
| Phase 2 – Preoccupations about Self |
| Phase 3 – Preoccupations about **Organizational Capacity** to change |
| Phase 4 – Preoccupations about the **Nature of Change** |
| Phase 5 – Preoccupations about **Experimentation** |
| Phase 6 – Preoccupations about **Cooperation** |
| Phase 7 – Preoccupations about **Continuous Improvement** |

Beginning with no preoccupation (Phase 1) about the change, then groups of employees experience preoccupations about impacts on Self (Phase 2) to preoccupations about the organizational capacity to change (Phase 3); they will then have factual experience with preoccupations about the exact nature of the change (Phase 4) and finally, with preoccupations about experimenting the change (Phase 5). Some will have preoccupations about cooperation (Phase 6) and continuous improvement of the change (Phase 7).

Each of these 7 Phases of Preoccupations (PoP) is described, together with comments that best represent employees’ questions and reactions during the phase. In addition, specific and targeted actions are proposed for each phase; which can be tailored to the organization’s culture and management style. As people advance to higher Phases, they become more comfortable and involved with the change. The success of a change is determined largely by the resolution of people’s preoccupations at different times during the change process.

A change leader’s role is to build his team’s capacity by guiding them through their preoccupation phases and nurturing them as and when needed 7. This means of sustaining their attention and motivation regarding the change will invariably heighten the employees’ capacity to change.
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Phase 1: No preoccupation about the change

Even when a change has been announced, the first phase most people experience is an absence of preoccupation. This stage is called “homeostasis.” Typically, employees maintain their routine without worrying about the change. They appear to not take the change seriously and to be waiting to see concrete proof of the change. During this period, we often hear comments such as: “It doesn’t concern me,” “We will see when we get to it,” “Anyway, there’s nothing we can do about it,” “It’s possible that in the end, they might not implement the change,” “Our unit won’t be affected, we already changed our process.” If for some managers this Phase is practical because employees keep working as usual, it is not ideal. Employees should not be kept there for too long. Employees in this phase are basically protecting themselves, and if, for example, a training session is given while employees are in this phase, they will probably try not to attend. If they do, they will not be as receptive as they should be.

Recommended Actions at Phase 1

It is important at this point that managers destabilize their employees and stimulate uncertainty and openness to change. This phase is similar to what Kurt Lewin dubs the “unfreezing stage” or Bridges’ “endings period”. A good way to initiate this reaction is by opening a window of opportunity concerning the upcoming change. This could include topics and updates about the coming change in regular meetings like recent news about the change. At this point, some explanations about the change, its impact on people and the consequences of not doing it should be carefully communicated but without too much details. Like your best marketing campaigns, it is crucial to repeat the message often and to offer proof that change will take place. Intense communication is recommended. Ask employees to classify their current tasks into "essentials", "desirables" and "unnecessary," so that when the change creates additional workload, employees will be ready, and will have time to focus their energies on learning new tasks, which they will view as future opportunities.

Phase 2: Preoccupations about Self

When openness is created, employees will begin to gage the personal impact of the change (e.g. job cuts, workload, new or old tasks). This phase is a period of loss (responsibilities, colleagues, boss, status, level of influence, sense of direction, etc.). Individuals might feel less appreciated, in particular if they were seen as experts. Usual comments during this phase are: “What will happen to me?” “I’m really worried” “I’m afraid I will lose my work conditions, colleagues, boss, job,” “I’m not taking any chances and I’m sending my resume elsewhere.” This period is very hard for managers to tolerate since people usually complain about the change, express fears and are not very cooperative. With the many changes that happened over the recent years, employees rapidly start asking questions about the impacts of the change on them.

Recommended Actions during Phase 2

This Phase is critical: without the right support from the management team, the climate will quickly deteriorate. People will become more stressed, especially if the announcement entails job cuts. Some employees may start looking for another job. Managers should play an active role by listening and showing their support and understanding. The most effective way to be empathic is by being available. Employees should be given opportunities to dialogue about the consequences of the change. Informal meetings, lunches and conferences could be organized for that purpose. In order to keep people motivated and not too stressed, employees (especially the most talented) should be reassured about their pivotal role...
in the organization's success. In addition, employees should be given enough time to recover from their mourning phase. To rebuild employee confidence and give them the impression that they are in control, involve the employees in as many decisions that concern them as possible and set short-term achievable goals.

**Phase 3: Preoccupations about the Organizational Capacity to change**

During this phase, employees try to identify the impacts and consequences of the change for the organization. They basically question its legitimacy and want to make sure that the efforts they will invest in adapting to the change will pay off. They are preoccupied with the organization’s capacity to adapt to the change and with the long-term benefits. The following comments are commonly heard during this Phase: “Will the change be really implemented?” “There’s a lot of problems with the change, I wonder if top management will decide not to do it or to stop it so that we could return back to where we were.” “Are we able to change so radically”?

**Recommended Actions in Phase 3**

When you discover that your employees are in this Stage, your priority should be to prevent them from losing confidence in the change. Start by carefully explaining the reasons that the organization needs to change, along with the long-term impacts and the cost of not implementing the change. The most effective way to prove to your employees that the change will be implemented is to modify your own behaviors. In addition, pay attention to the coherence between your message and your own new behavior. The evaluation process and the reward system should include the new skills and behaviors requested. In the case of a road block during which people go back to this Phase (after advancing to other Phases), we suggest that you provide feedback on what happened, what went wrong and what will be done to prevent this regression in the future. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge the difficulties and provide people with the opportunity to learn from this experience.

**Phase 4: Preoccupations about the Nature of the change**

In this phase, employees become more pro-active and ask for additional concrete information as well as details about the upcoming change and its implementation. They will ask, for example: “What is the change?”, “When will it start to be implemented and how will this be done?” These employees are preoccupied by the quality of the implementation process. Other comments usually heard are: “Could you explain to me what the change is about?”, “What are the real objectives behind this change?”, “Who will be responsible ultimately for making it work?” “Are we going to be involved?”, “Will our opinions and ideas be taken into account?”, “What is being done in the other departments and regions?”

**Recommended actions in Phase 4**

The best way to respond to this Phase is by showing how the change will be implemented. Scenarios and plans with time lines, objectives and next steps should be provided at this point. Utilize all the necessary resources to help you explain the change, such as external consultants, internal experts and representatives from other companies or departments that have successfully implemented a similar change. Also, offer some books to employees on how to effectively manage change and stress, and, organize team meetings to discuss the new tasks and roles. Make sure to listen to comments and opinions on how the implementation has proceeded to date. Too often we have seen managers inform their employees about this concern before the other phases, which is much less effective because people are not receptive at this point. If adequate
information is not provided during this phase, employees will continue to question the implementation project, the resources, the budget, the time-line without really investing themselves in the change.

**Phase 5: Preoccupations about Experimentation**

Employees are now ready to try to adapt to the change and to its requirements. However, they feel incompetent toward their new responsibilities or functions and are worried about their self capacity to adapt to the change. They consequently request help through coaching and training sessions. They are preoccupied with their own learning. Usual comments are: “Will I be able to…?” “Do I have enough energy to confront it?” “Am I going to have enough time to learn?” “Will my boss understand why I am less efficient?” “Could I ask help from other people in order to adapt?”

**Recommended Actions in Phase 5**

Now is the perfect time to train and coach your employees, to offer them help, support and training activities as well as tools, as they are now ready to learn. Training sessions should be carefully planned and prepared in order to help employees understand the logic behind the change and develop new skills and attitudes. Short sessions are usually better than long ones. Train-the-trainer sessions where a colleague is the trainer well-trained and two-tier training are recommended. Transfer sessions with other departments that have already implemented the change can also be organized. Encourage everyone to help. Refuse to listen to blame and ask for solutions instead of problems! Performance objectives, time lines and learning curves should be reviewed, and the opportunity to reward people based on efforts not on results should be addressed. Don’t forget however, employees should be given enough time to adapt to the change. Tolerate errors and offer many opportunities to practice. Employees will be more willing to change if they are reassured of their capacity to adapt and their importance for the organization. Many actions are needed to prevent employees from losing confidence in them, and starting to look for a job elsewhere or finding a way to “bypass” or avoid the change. Special attention should be paid to low and top performers to ensure that old behaviors and tasks are dropped. In Phase 5, most people feel that they have adapted to the change. After a successful period of training and the creation of new habits, some employees may have no further preoccupation about the change, which would imply a return to the activities of their new routine. In this case, managers can simply recognize the employees’ efforts and results and continue to motivate them and to measure performance.

**Phase 6: Preoccupation about Cooperation**

Some employees may still be preoccupied. Those people may become concerned about transferring their new knowledge. They may be anxious to share their experience and their tricks with their colleagues. Usual comments are: «I would like to meet with other professionals or employees from other departments to discuss our different experiences»; «We should meet more frequently to make adjustments or give feedback on…». We noted that not all employees reach this phase, because it shows a great will of involvement. It can also depend of the organization culture (encouragement of improvements, participation in decisions).

**Recommended Actions at Phase 6**

In order to facilitate this Phase, organize team building sessions to give everyone a chance to share lessons they have learned and experienced, and to eventually develop best practices and processes in order to transfer knowledge. Those with these preoccupations should become your champions, your trainers or
experts. Make sure you celebrate successful implementations and noteworthy accomplishments. Take this opportunity to reward teams and individuals based on their results!

**Phase 7: Preoccupations about Continuous improvement of the change**

A few employees may be looking for other challenges. They would like to improve the existing change by modifying it or transferring it to other domains or departments. They will propose new applications of the change. They are questioning the current methods and would like to continue to improve the change. We then hear those usual comments: “We should do this or try that,” “How could we do in order to improve our efficacy?” This Phase could translate into many advantages for the organization since these employees could try to work with consumers or people responsible for developing the change to make some improvements. People who have reached this Phase should be involved in the next implementation process or upcoming change.

**Recommended Actions at Phase 7**

Encourage these employees to try new ways of doing things. Communities of Practice could also be built. However, make sure that those employees don’t try to improve upon details of the change that will not provide significant advantages for the organization, and verify that they stay focused on their main tasks and responsibilities. Be careful! If people want to change too early in the process (for example, during the first months of implementation), that could signify resistance to change instead of improvement.

A new window of opportunity could reopen after an interval of routine activities in order to innovate on the change. Preoccupations of phases 6 and 7 would then resurface regarding the improvements.

**Applications**

All of the above preoccupations actually exist in the mindset of employees. However their intensity may vary. These preoccupations are triggered by actions in the environment or by employees’ experience. An excellent change facilitator should learn how to diagnose the arousal of these preoccupations in order to better address them, at the right time for the employee’s wellness. For example, if an employee gets training on new software too soon, he will be less receptive because his preoccupations may regard his new tasks and responsibilities (Phase 2) instead of his being concerned about his capacity to change (Phase 5). Phases are thus a process; regressions might occur if employees don’t get the answers they need along the way. It is critical to understand, however, that usually, if correct actions are taken, the first phases will eventually diminish in intensity and the next ones will arise as the theory dictates.

**A three-step procedure**

As stated at the beginning of this article, we particularly appreciated the ease of use of this model, and the fact that it can be directly accessed by managers. In fact, managers can show they care about their people by constantly SOLICITING their employees’ concerns. Second, they can DIAGNOSE their employees’ concerns based on the model and can ACT accordingly. This 3-step procedure (Figure 2) must be repeated at frequent intervals during the transition period to maintain credibility, to measure progress or regression and to build employees’ capacity to adapt to the organizational change.
Figure 2. The 3-step procedure for PoP: Diagnosis & Action

Asking

The most effective way to diagnose your employee’s preoccupations is by meeting with them individually or in small groups. Informal meetings are recommended. During the coffee break, near the copier, or by walking around, just ask the simple question: “When you think about… (name of the change) what preoccupations come to mind?”. When implementing a major change, other resources (change management consultant and/or your HR manager) may be enlisted to prepare a simple survey to identify employees’ preoccupations throughout the organization. When people answer the question, they become psychologically active regarding the change, which increases their adaptation. Listening carefully and empathetically is a core competency for managers.
Diagnosing

After empathic listening, leaders are able to diagnose preoccupations based on the 7 “Phases of Preoccupations during change” Model. They may identify if these preoccupations are new or old, in sequence with the previous ones or if they signify backsliding. In other words, comparisons with previous answers are adequate to measure the evolution of preoccupations.

Acting

Moreover, leaders have to act appropriately upon employees’ preoccupations by determining the best actions and actions to take toward a specific group of employees, based on their company’s culture. They can determine which source or actor is best suited to address the specific preoccupations. A few weeks later (or once they have acted upon the previous preoccupations), managers need to reassess their employees' main preoccupations, as they are not fixed during the implementation process. In doing so, they will guide the employees smoothly through the process and will be able to adapt their own actions. Ultimately, all of the employees’ preoccupations will have been resolved, and they will adapt to the change easily and faster.

This 3-step procedure will help leaders to open new windows of opportunity for intensive adaptation activities at strategic times during the implementation of a transformation. Such periods foster openness, motivation, receptivity and responsibility, which are all crucial for building employees’ capacity to adapt to change.

Group Preoccupations

Experience has shown that preoccupations appear at about the same moment for a group of similar users (those affected the same way by the change = 80%). For example, all accountants will have the same sequence of preoccupation compared with first-line supervisors, whose sequence may differ over time. However, in a single group, there may be a few outsiders (20%) i.e. those that are more advanced or positive about the change and those who stay behind. The PoP model helps facilitators adjust their strategies for success.

Success Factors

This approach to individual and group change is not a silver bullet! It only works if adequate conditions are in place: good communication between superiors and subordinates, trusting relations, adequate climate, solid interpersonal skills, participative management, and most importantly, time spent taking care of employees and their adaptation to change.

Never forget to carefully manage your own group of managers who are leading the change. They also have preoccupations throughout the change implementation. For them to be able to answer their employees’ questions, they need support from top management.
Conclusion

The 7 PoP “Phases of preoccupations during change” Model should be incorporated in every planning and execution of important organizational change. This model allows leaders to anticipate the arousal and resolution of the different Phases of preoccupations that are legitimate for every individual experiencing a change. Preoccupations are pertinent and adequate information for understanding a group of employees’ reactions during their transition and making sure they are adapted. Preoccupations are a positive and proactive way to address real issues and to create opportunities for building capacity to change within employees.

Regarding the creation of multiple windows of opportunity, we expanded the concept initially developed by Tyre and Orlikowski8 who noted that the “period immediately following initial introduction of a new technology provides a special “window of opportunity” for adaptation where at the start of the project, the level of energy is high”. In our view, this concept could be enlarged and usefully applied to manage the intensive adaptation periods of employees’ actual experience. Our usage of the concept of “window of opportunity” differs in 2 ways from that of Tyre & Orlikowski: first, it refers directly to individuals and specifically to group preoccupations; and second, our time span is initiated before the installation of a change. In fact, it starts as soon as employees are being informed of a change. This expansion has two major implications for management. As our studies indicate, there is a window of opportunity to develop the capacity to adapt to change at phase 1, in which there is no preoccupation, and during which the routine continues. It is very important for leaders to be aware of this phase and to destabilize their team. The goal is to create openness to change. Another period of receptivity and influence will then naturally emerge. This period corresponds to the time before the change becomes entrenched, and where communication and training activities usually take place. Phases 2 to 5 will intensify and there could be also some preoccupations up to phases 6 and 7, until a new routine emerges. After that period, many people have no further preoccupations when new habits have taken root. This period is similar to routine activities. After this period of stability, we propose another cycle of change where leaders open a new window of opportunity for improvements. This would correspond to the two last phases of preoccupations: cooperation and continuous improvement. This intensive adaptation period, following the routine, represents a good opportunity to take the change further. It is therefore clear that that the time span to influence and build the employees’ capacity to adapt to the change is longer than previously anticipated, and consists of periods of intense adaptation alternating with periods of routine during which receptiveness is lower.

In conclusion, excellent change facilitators should create motivation for intensive adaptation periods (before/during/after implementation) and the PoP model can facilitate their diagnosis of employee’s transition alternating with routine periods. Managers can use the 3-step model to create multiple windows of opportunity at strategic points during implementation, to leverage their employees’ capacity to change and prepare them adequately for the next change.
Selected Bibliography and Notes

1. The research reported in this paper was partly funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The principal author gratefully acknowledges this support.

2. For models, please look at the three phase of Kurt Lewin model: unfreezing, change and refreezing or at William Bridges’ transition model: endings, the neutral zone and making a beginning. (Making Sense of Life’s changes: Transitions).


4. Only two articles were published in Management Journals referring to Hall’s Stages of Concern model: one by Ken Blanchard (1992) The Seven Dynamics of Change, Executive Excellence, 9,6, 5-6 and the other by W.A. Randolph (2000) Re-thinking empowerment: Why is it so hard to achieve? Organizational Dynamics, 29, 2, 94.

5. Bareil’s researches have been presented to many European’s Congress and scientific articles were published: Actors’ transition during a transformation: a longitudinal study with practical applications (article under revision); Transforming organization with ERP, Gestion, International Review of Management, 27, 4, 24-33 (French); A significant advancement in the conduct of a change, Work and Organizational Psychology, 8, 1, 27-45 (French); Individual Adoption Model in a technological change, Work and Organizational Psychology, 7, 3-4, 223-241 (French). Understanding and Managing Individuals in a situation of change, Gestion, 24, 3, 86-94; “Evolution of users’ concerns during an ERP Implementation” (presentation at the 11th European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology, Lisbon, Portugal, May 17, 2003); “Stages of Concerns: An alternative model to resistance to change” (presentation at the 10th European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology, Prague, Czech Republic, May 16, 2001).


7. Note: We could also consider that an autonomous team takes the lead in their own evolution of preoccupations and search for answers. The whole process of building capacity to adapt to change would then be taken charge of by the whole team, who would develop their own capacity to change.