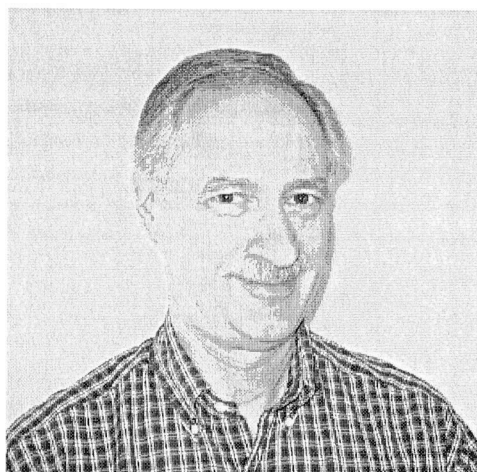


Feature Articles

Morphing: The Leading Edge of Organizational Change in the Twenty-first Cen- tury

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Abstract

Incremental and “start-stop” models and methods of change developed during the Industrial Age are insufficient to address the needs of contemporary organizations operating in hyperactive environments. The concept of continuous whole-system change or “morphing” is introduced along with the basic ideas, principles and requirements for how to engage in it. Implications for organization development, including needs for new theories and practices of organizational consulting and change are identified and discussed.

A central preoccupation of organization development is dealing with organizational change. Over the years, organizational theorists and organization development consultants have advanced a wide range of theories about organizational change. Most of these theories and ideas are based on concepts and assumptions about change that are rarely examined very closely. Many of these implicit beliefs, however, are now being challenged by the emerging dynamics and contexts of the Information Age. The difficulty is that many of our historical ways of thinking about organizational change may now be limiting our ability to fully address the new conditions and contexts confronting contemporary organizations. For example, many organization development models of change implicitly assume that organizational change is something that can be started and then stopped or stabilized. The whole idea of planned change assumes, in essence, that it is possible to determine rationally how to initiate and implement actions to achieve and then maintain a predetermined, desired future state. Peter Vaill, when first introducing the metaphor of “continuous white water” to describe emerging change dynamics, observed: “The present environment of chaotic change requires a response so different from the traditional managerial approach of diagnose-plan-implement-evaluate that perhaps I should not even use the simple word *change* to refer to the kinds of events contemporary managers are facing” (1989, p. xiv).

To the degree that some contemporary organizations may be finding themselves dealing with needs to engage in comprehensive and continuous change, then “start-stop” models of change may be helpful to some degree, but are ultimately insufficient to address the real change dynamics these organizations are facing. The remainder of this discussion will seek to articulate and justify this conclusion, offer the concept of “morphing” as an additional way to think about the change dynamics confronting organizations in certain types of environments, present some ideas and principles for how to guide organizational morphing, and conclude with a discussion of the implications for the theory and practice of organization development.

Organizational Change Is Changing

In recent years, as we entered the Information Age, the scope, speed, and even nature of change seem to have changed. The new information technologies of the past 50 to 60 years have created a new era, marked by the ability of people to access and share information with virtually anyone, anywhere, anytime about anything on a continuous, interactive and unrestricted basis. These new capabilities have altered both the organizational game and the rules of the game.

“Connectivity, Speed, and Intangibles—the derivatives of time, space, and mass—are blurring the rules and redefining our businesses and our lives” (Davis & Meyer, 1998, p. 6). The result of these shifting conditions and capabilities is the emergence of a new context that invites different organization and management principles from those most applicable in the Industrial Age. Table 1 summarizes some of these shifts.

Whether or not there is a direct correlation, there has also been a shift occurring in organizational change dynamics. Two major indicators that a shift is occurring are the beginning changes in organizational change emphasis: first, from addressing parts/segments of an organization to addressing more encompassing patterns/wholes; and second, from thinking in terms of episodic change to thinking in terms of virtually continuous change. For example, since the 1990s both practitioners and researchers have suggested that whole-system, rather than part-system, change is more likely to lead to successful organizational performance (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Jacobs, 1994; Macy & Izumi, 1993; Whittington et al., 1999). Similarly, others argue that continual not episodic change is required to deal with the increased speeds of the new business context. “Moreover, in high-velocity industries with short product cycles and rapidly shifting competitive landscapes, the ability to engage in rapid and relentless continual change is a crucial capability for survival” (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997, p. 1).

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Table 1. Shifting Contexts and Paradigms

Industrial Age	Information Age
<p>Communication Capabilities: Some people can communicate at some times about some things to some places on a delayed basis in a sequential and/or restricted way using stationary equipment.</p> <p>Organization and Management Principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National & international orientation • Vertical integration • Own versus buy • Standardize • Specialize & segment • Vertical hierarchy • Command & control • Rules & regulations • Focus on “hard” extrinsic aspects • Use historic data (“lag time”) <p>Keys to Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productive or technological capacity • Analysis, certainty & stability • Independence & autonomy 	<p>Communication Capabilities: Anyone can communicate at anytime about anything to anywhere in an immediate, continuous, interactive and unrestricted way using mobile equipment.</p> <p>Organization and Management Principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global & transnational orientation • Value chains • Virtual organizations & outsourcing • Customize • Multi-functional & end-to-end • Horizontal networks & teams • Commitment & collaboration • Values & visions • Focus on “soft” intrinsic aspects • Use real time data (“no time”) <p>Keys to Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market or customer orientation • Speed, flexibility & innovation • Interdependence & partnership

When we combine the dimensions of parts-wholes and episodic-continuous into a matrix, the emerging nature of contemporary organizational change is suggested. The four change scenarios that are created by this matrix are shown in Table 2. Periodic Operational Adjustments are episodic changes to parts or segments of an organization; for example gap analyses and “fix-its” to some aspect of strategy, structure, processes, etc., but not to all at the same time. This was, implicitly, one of the dominant approaches to organizational change in past years, memorably captured in the phrase, “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

Continuous Operational Adaptations also focus on parts or segments, but do so on an on-going basis. Continuous improvements, *Kaizen*, or TQM reflects this approach to organizational change. Periodic Systemic Re-Arrangements address organizational patterns or wholes, but on an episodic basis.

Re-engineering and systemic redesign efforts are examples of this approach to organizational change. Finally, Continuous Systemic Alignments call for on-going changes to the whole organization; for example, virtually simultaneous and continuous changes to an organization’s strategies, structure, processes, culture, and so on.

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Although we have some experience and concepts to help us deal with the first three scenarios, we have little to adequately address the last one. Yet the need for virtually continuous change of whole systems is now the context confronting some organizations, or at least those in “high-velocity” industries such as electronics and the Internet. The difficulty of dealing with continuous whole-system change extends beyond a lack of experience with new capabilities and contexts. The difficulty also includes the absence of theories and concepts to appropriately describe and explain this emerging type of organizational change dynamic. For example, the concept of “transformational change” typically presumes an *episodic* transformation that is preceded and then followed by a more “normal” and stable period of development. This concept is consistent with the punctuated equilibrium paradigm of change wherein equilibrium states experience a radical or revolutionary disruption and shift before returning again to a new equilibrium (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). While organizational change theorists have historically commented on the differ-

ences between evolutionary, incremental or developmental change as contrasted with revolutionary, radical discontinuous or transformational change (for example, Greiner, 1973), and more recently on the differences between episodic and continuous change (Huy, 2001; Pettigrew et al., 2001; Weick & Quinn, 1999) discussions of continuous “transformational” change of whole-systems have been relatively rare or absent.

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Consequently, within the context of the Industrial Age and the punctuated equilibrium paradigm of organization transformation, a suggestion that there could be *continuous* transformational change of whole systems might sound unrealistic or unbelievable. Nonetheless, some contemporary

Table 2. Four Change Scenarios

Dimensions	Focus on Parts/Segments	Focus on Patterns/Whole
Episodic Change	Periodic Operational Adjustments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gap-analyses • Fix-its 	Periodic Systemic (Re) Arrangements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-engineering • System redesign
Continuous Change	Continuous Operational Adaptations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going improvements • <i>Kaizen</i>, TQM 	Continuous Systemic Alignments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going organizing • <i>Morphing</i>

organizations are now confronting just such contexts. Because so many of our existing ways of thinking about organizational change are encumbered with concepts developed in a different time and context, we need to develop new ideas to help managers and consultants think about organizational change in new ways.

Many of Our Current Concepts of Change Are Limited by Implicit Fundamental Assumptions

Our current concepts of change are not only challenged by contemporary change dynamics, but they are also limited by powerful implicit assumptions about the fundamental nature of change. These implicit assumptions are rooted in the dominant philosophical worldviews of the Industrial Age. What are some of these assumptions and why are they so limiting?

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We begin first with the Greek philosophers who helped shape the Western worldview. From Plato and Aristotle we inherit two basic assumptions that critically impact how we think about change. The first is that permanence and stability are in all cases preferred over chaos and change. This

assumption creates an implicit bias that there is something “wrong” with continuous change or chaotic conditions and that they should be avoided if at all possible.

If the world is beautiful and its maker good, clearly he had his eye on the eternal: if the alternative (which it is blasphemy even to mention) is true, on that which is subject to change. – Plato, *Timaeus*, 29

God, therefore, wishing that all things should be good, and so far as possible nothing to be imperfect, and finding the visible universe in a state not of rest but of inharmonious and disorderly motion, reduced it to order from disorder, as he judged that order was in every way better. – Plato, *Timaeus*, 30a

Plato and Aristotle also equated change with motion and asserted that motion/change must have a cause. “For Aristotle...change is motion, and every motion has to result from a causal force” (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 378). In both cases the ideas of Plato and Aristotle prevailed over the earlier views of Heraclitus who claimed that the world is an “everlasting fire” in a state of continual change (Wagner, 1995). The two basic assumptions that stability is desirable and change must be caused tend to implicitly support thinking about organizational change as desired states of stability interrupted by unfortunate episodes of “forced” change, or, even worse, chaos.

The metaphorical linking of change with motion also links assumptions about change

Table 3: Historically Embedded Assumptions about Change

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Permanence and stability are preferred to change and becoming 2. Change must have a cause 3. Change is motion 4. Deliberate acts are necessary to create order out of disorder or chaos 5. Order is always preferred to disorder or chaos |
|--|

to the Newtonian worldview that helped create and shape the Industrial Age. Thus concepts related to the movement of objects, including the laws of motion, causal forces, inertia, resistance, mass, momentum, paths, end states, and so forth are all likely to be implicitly invoked in any discussion of organizational change. This is the language of planning, managing, and engineering change.

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Unfortunately, however, theories and practices of change embedded with implicit assumptions of a universe where permanence, order, and stability are preferred, chaos is feared, and change results from

forced movement may limit our ability to think about and address continuous whole-system change in contemporary organizations. “The dominant paradigms in organization theory are based on stability seeking and uncertainty avoidance... these paradigms are inadequate for global hyper-competitive environments, although their replacements are not clear yet” (Ilinitch et al., 1996, p. 217). See Table 3 for a summary of some of the key historically embedded assumptions about change.

Morphing

Clearly we need some new concepts less encumbered with historical assumptions to help us address certain aspects of the change dynamics of the twenty-first century. Such conceptualization will require a change in the consciousness or mindsets of both managers and consultants. The new mindsets will need to embrace the ideas of fluidity and continuous change rather than stability and certainty. Because so many of our existing terms, including perhaps the word *change* itself, are embedded with historical assumptions, new language, terminology and word imagery may be needed to help explain and support these new mindsets.

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To help capture the imagery, if not the specifics of continuous whole-system change, I first suggested the computer animation term for transformation, *morphing*, several years ago in a keynote address at an international change conference in Singapore (Marshak, 1998). This term had already started to come into popular use in the press and media to describe rapid, seamless, and more or less total change. The term *morphing* has also very recently been introduced in an academic context to describe comprehensive, continuous organizational change. "Continuous morphing refers to the comprehensive, continuous changes in products, services, resources, capabilities, and modes of organizing through which firms seek to regenerate competitive advantage under conditions of hyper-competition" (Rindova & Kotha, 2001, p. 1276).

Whether or not morphing is the right term to adopt, it does have some advantages that are needed to help describe the emerging contexts and dynamics of organizational change. Those advantages include its lack of association with prior terms and concepts of change; its origins in the Information Age; its connotation of rapid, seamless transformational change—unlike, for example, metamorphosis that implies stages of transformation over longer time periods—and imagery that is both evocative and understandable. In short, morphing, or some term like it, may be needed as a generative metaphor or analogy to advance our thinking about continuous whole-system change (Schön, 1993).

In the meantime, what do we know now about how to go about organizational morphing? Based on recent research by Brown & Eisenhardt (1997) and Rindova &

Kotha (2001), some of the principles of morphing are beginning to be defined. A list of several of the key emerging principles for how to go about organizational morphing is offered in Table 4. These principles place emphasis on the requirement to have managers with morphing mindsets who can create and maintain the flexible and fluid organizational forms and practices necessary for fast-paced, continuous, whole-system change. These principles of morphing, of course, apply to organizations facing high velocity, hyper-competitive, *hyperactive* business environments where rapid and nearly continuous whole-system change is a requirement for ongoing success. For example, operating in the hyperactive environment of the Internet, both Excite and Yahoo! underwent two transformations during the period of 1994 to 1998. They morphed from Internet search engines providing navigation tools to Internet destination sites providing content to Internet portals providing broad-based on-line services. These on-going transformations required continuing shifts in strategy, organization form, key resources, and bases of competitive advantage (see Rindova & Kotha, 2001, p. 1268). Other organizations in less fast-moving and competitive environments might follow different change principles.

Implications for Organization Development

If continuous whole-system change, or morphing, is at the leading edge of organizational change in the twenty-first century, then there are a range of implications for organization development and its practitioners. These include review and expansion of existing change theories, augmentation of change practices, and searches for new change concepts.

Table 4. Principles of Morphing

- Create limited organizational structures and principles such that there is both enough form and fluidity for rapid, organized action
- Create resource flexibility in both availability and application
- Ensure organizational learning to quickly develop and deploy new competencies
- Bridge from the present to the future with clear transition processes while avoiding focusing on the future to the detriment of the present
- Have top management mindsets that fully embrace the concepts of continuous change and flexible organizational forms, i.e. develop “managers with morphing mindsets”

A Contingency Theory of Organizational Change Is Needed

Because most existing change theories were developed with embedded assumptions in contexts different in varying degrees from some of today’s conditions, new theories with different assumptions are needed to guide responsive practices. Some of the ideas presented here are suggestive of what may be needed. At the same time, we must also understand how and when to use the extensive range of existing theories and practices. One way would be to move more explicitly to a contingency theory of change, which would simply be a way of saying, “Use different change assumptions, theories and practices depending on the context and situation.” This is not a new approach per se, and contingency theories of leadership and organization are familiar to most organization development practitioners, but applying a contingency approach to change theories in the way envisioned here might be somewhat

new or novel. Just as Burns and Stalker (1961) in one of the first conceptualizations of open systems contingency theory during the late Industrial Age suggested that organizational forms should be contingent upon the nature of their environments, we might also consider that change concepts and approaches should also be contingent upon organizational environments and contexts.

So, for example, building on the Burns and Stalker premise that mechanistic organizational forms are appropriate in stable environments and organic forms in more turbulent environments, we might add that *morphogenic* forms are needed in the *hyperactive* environments of the early Information Age. Similarly, we might also add that models and assumptions of change conceived in the Industrial Age might still be highly appropriate for organizations facing stable to moderately turbulent environments, but that Information Age models and assumptions of change, including perhaps morphing, may be more appropriate for highly turbulent to hyperactive environments. A summary of these initial ideas is shown in Table 5. In terms of whole-system change, it might also mean that many of our existing theories and practices for organization transformation would be applicable to *episodic* transformations, but that a theory of organization morphing would be more applicable for organizations facing *continuous* transformation.

Table 5. Organizational Change Contingencies

Environmental Context	Stable	Turbulent	Hyperactive
Organizational Form	<i>Mechanistic</i>	<i>Organic</i>	<i>Morphogenic</i>
Change Approach	Periodic Operational Adjustments	Continuous Operational Adaptations and Periodic Systemic (Re) Arrangements	Continuous Systemic Alignments

Modify and Augment Traditional Change Practices

Regarding change practices, morphing would require some shifts and/or augmentation in both the task(s) and methods of traditional organizational change. The primary task in organizational morphing would be to help foster a morphogenic organization, that is, an organization capable of continuous whole-system change. Note especially that the emphasis would be on creating and maintaining capability rather than arriving at some preferred or planned end state. The characteristics of a morphogenic organization, as previously noted, would include clear, but limited, organizational structures and principles to promote both form and fluidity, resource flexibility, organizational learning, clear transition processes, and managers with morphing mindsets. Since in continuous morphing there is no end state per se, a wide range of organization development theories and practices that are explicitly or implicitly based on the classic Lewinian model of unfreezing, movement, refreezing (Lewin, 1951) would need to be re-examined. Theories and practices related to the psychology of episodic change, where there is an expectation of an end to the movement or transition phase, would also need to be re-examined, modified and/or augmented with

additional theory and practice explicitly based on continuous whole-system change.

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Such shifts in the change task and practices of both managers and consultants will require preceding shifts in their mindsets. Minimally, there would need to be shifts from implicit assumptions about relative stability, certainty and episodic change to morphing mindsets based on fluidity, flexibility and continuous change. Reliance on mechanistic, engineering or planned movement concepts and imagery would need to be avoided. Such shifts in

consciousness or mental models, of course, do not just happen and are not always amenable to the rational, databased change technologies of traditional organization development. Organization development consultants working with organizations facing continuous whole-system change will need to augment their traditional skills and competencies with new or extended social technologies focused on changing consciousness or mindsets in key individuals and organizations. This emerging area of theory and practice will need to become a core competency of organization development consultants who wish to help create morphogenic organizations (see for example, Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2001; Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2001).

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Morphing and Concepts of Change from the New Sciences

To aid and augment shifts from episodic to continuous change mindsets, greater knowledge of and interventions based on the new sciences may be helpful. The new sciences, for example quantum physics, chaos theory, and complexity science, provide concepts for thinking about organizational dynamics in new

ways (Wheatley, 1992). These concepts directly challenge assumptions of stability and episodic change that must be initiated, planned, and managed. Instead, it is assumed that change is continuous and that complex systems can be self-organizing. For example, in their analysis of four types of change (life-cycle, evolution, dialectic and teleology), Van de Ven and Poole (1995) come close to suggesting that chaos might be a fifth type of change. “Advances in dynamic systems theory provide mathematical tools for examining chaos as an alternative explanation of organizational change and development processes” (p. 535).

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In particular, the concepts associated with complexity theory, strange as they may seem to some, may offer relevant ideas to help guide in part those interested in how to better understand and address continuous whole-system change. For example, Olson and Eoyang (2001) said, “We need a simple, coherent alternative to the old machine model before we can work responsibly in the complex environments of today and tomorrow” (p. 6). They advocated the concepts of complex adaptive systems to escape the limitations of the Newtonian and Industrial paradigms. “The emerging science of complex adaptive systems offers such a paradigm. It provides metaphors and models that articulate and make meaning out of the emerging adaptive nature of organizations” (p. 19). The concepts and imagery of

complex adaptive systems invite thinking about continuous, self-organizing instead of episodic, engineered change.

Morphing and Concepts of Change from Other Cultures

The search for new concepts to help explain and address continuous whole-system change need not be limited to the Western tradition. Insights and ideas from other cultures and eras where cosmologies of continuous change are the established worldview might also prove helpful in developing new theories and practices to address continuous whole-system change. One such possibility comes from Eastern mysticism, which Capra (1976) equates with the ideas of the new sciences. In Taoist and Confucian philosophy the universe is composed of constantly changing interdependent manifestations of one entity and change is both spontaneous and cyclical. "According to Aristotle, it is normal for all things to be at rest, whereas for the Chinese, in contrast, universal dynamism is the primary assumption (Gernet, 1985, p. 210). Furthermore, chaos is a needed aspect of transformation. "...Daoism is based upon the affirmation rather than the negation of chaos. In the Anglo-European tradition, chaos as emptiness, separation, or confusion is to be overcome. In Daoism, the chaotic aspect of things is to be left alone to contribute spontaneity to the process of transformation" (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 236).

"In Taoist and Confucian philosophy the universe is composed of constantly changing interdependent manifestations of one entity and change is both spontaneous and cyclical."

An analysis of the Confucian and Taoist worldviews reveals an alternative set of assumptions and orientations about change that can help guide how to address continuous whole-system change or morphing (Marshak, 1993; 1994). Among other differences, there is a primary assumption that change is continuous and cyclical with a resulting orientation towards attending to the past-present-future, knowing how to let go and realign, maintaining balance and harmony, thinking of both/and, cultivating system self-renewal, thinking holistically, using artistry and composition, and being values or principles centered. This orientation represents a shift in mindsets from desires for the presumed certainty provided by planning and control to greater comfort with more spontaneous alignments based on maintaining harmony and equilibrium while adhering to a few core principles during the continuous cycles of organizational change. A more Confucian or Taoist orientation is also consistent with recent research characterizing the dynamic capabilities required for success in hyperactive environments. "Simple principles and limited routines enable firms to self-organize, which in turn enables them to respond to rapid change" (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000, p. 1274). See Table 6 for a summary analysis of some of the differing East-West historical worldviews, assumptions and orientations about the dynamics of change.

Finally, some succinct advice on continuous change and morphing is provided by the Taoist sage Zhuangzi (399–295? BCE) and the Confucian sage Ch'eng Yi (1033–1107 CE):

The life of things passes by like a galloping horse. With no activity is it not changing, and at no time is it not moving. What shall we do? What shall we not do? The thing to do is to leave it to self-

Table 6: Summary Analysis of Some East-West Concepts of Change

Traditional Western European	Chinese Taoist and Confucian
<p>Worldview: The universe is composed of separate, independent entities normally in static or equilibrium states. Movement results when things act on each other. The universe had a beginning and will have an end. Progress or evolution is expected over time.</p>	<p>Worldview: The universe is composed of constantly changing, interdependent manifestations of one entity. The universe is. Change is both spontaneous and cyclical.</p>
<p>Assumptions that change is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linear • Progressive • Destination oriented • Based on creating disequilibrium • Planned and managed by people who are separate from and act on things to achieve their goals • Unusual, because everything is normally in a quasi-stationary or static state 	<p>Assumptions that change is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyclical • Processional • Journey oriented • Based on maintaining equilibrium • Followed by people who are one with all and must act correctly to maintain harmony in the universe • Usual, because everything is normally in a continually changing dynamic state
<p>Resulting change orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the future • Assume satisfied people hold on • Overcome resistance • Think in terms of either/or • Plan and manage change • Think analytically • Use reason and logic • Measure progress 	<p>Resulting change orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to the past-present-future • Wise people let go and realign • Maintain balance and harmony • Think in terms of both/and • Cultivate system self-renewal • Think holistically • Use artistry and composition • Be values centered

Source: Marshak, 1993 & 1994

transformation (Zhuangzi in Chan, 1963, p. 206)

Thus being long lasting does not mean being in a fixed and definite state. Being fixed and definite, a thing cannot last long. The way to be constant is to change according to circumstances. (Ch'eng Yi in Chan, 1963, p. 571)

“The way to be constant is to change according to circumstances.”

Concluding Comments

As we move into the twenty-first century, organizational change is changing and so must the theories, concepts, practices and word imagery used by managers and organization development consultants in leading change

efforts. This change will require a conscious shift from our implicit biases for stability and start-stop models of change to adopting alternative theories and assumptions that better support thinking and acting within the concept of continuous whole-system change. We will also need to be mindful that an episodic shift in our theories and mindsets, no matter how dramatic, may not remain effective for very long. Instead, it is likely that continuous and comprehensive changes to our concepts and practices will be needed to stay aligned with the rapidly changing organizational contexts and dynamics of the twenty-first century.

“ . . . it is likely that continuous and comprehensive changes to our concepts and practices will be needed to stay aligned with the rapidly changing organizational contexts and dynamics of the twenty-first century.”

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