Organisational culture and change
Possibilities and limits for planned organisation development

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About the paper:

This article is an adaptation of a previous one written in 1992 and based on my experiences as manager, management trainer and consultant, and member and chair of several Boards of Governors in the educational sector. Since that time, questions on the manageability of organisation development (OD) processes have arisen during my work as an OD consultant in the area of international co-operation in various sectors. Inspiration and new insights were, in particular, found during joint work with OD facilitators and NGO leaders in Papua New Guinea in March 2003.

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Contents

▶ Introduction 5
  • Why I wrote this article 5
  • Overview of the contents 6

▶ Organisational culture 7
  • Mind, behaviour and power 7
  • The dynamics of an organisational culture 9

▶ How does a culture come into being? 10
  • The dynamics of an organisational culture 11

▶ Cultural change 12
  • What forces can set cultural change in motion? 12
  • What forces hold back cultural change? 15
  • How do organisational cultures change? 16

▶ Managing cultural change 18
  • How can an organisational culture be influenced? 18
  • Which approach works when? 20
  • Factors influencing the effectiveness of an approach 22

▶ An invitation for debate 26

▶ Epilogue 28

▶ Bibliography 29
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Introduction

Improvements in programmes, administration and management, internal and external relationships and even in learning capacity of NGOs, will not always be enough to remedy such problems as a lack of focus, low cost-effectiveness, and a lack of accountability. These or other problems will resurface, unless the deeper causes are tackled. These causes are often rooted in the organisational culture. But is a planned process of organisation development\(^1\) that reaches the deeper levels of the organisation possible? What are the possibilities and limits to be faced in attempting to change an organisational culture?

“Organisational culture” will be the focal concept for this article, which attempts to demonstrate that organisation development is a social and political, and therefore a dynamic and complex process – it is a people’s process. The concept “organisational culture” is also used to convey the idea that no one involved with an organisation can just stand back and look at “it”. Everyone, as management or as staff (but also as donor, consultant, expert or technical adviser), plays an active, but not always conscious part in defining the organisation’s character or “culture”. However, this does not imply that we can manage and manipulate an organisational culture as easy as it is often suggested.

This article is a plea to honour modesty and to foster the skill of reading rather than constructing reality.

Why I wrote this article

It is widely agreed that too many development NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations), in particular those supported by foreign donors, do not serve their purpose (any longer) – they are at best contributing only marginally towards development or justice, and in some cases their efforts have become even counter-productive.\(^2\) This is acknowledged by people working within the NGOs themselves and from the donor community as well, although NGOs and donors will state the problem differently. The emotions involved will also differ.

Considerable resources and efforts are put into remedying specific problems such as insufficient relevance, limited impact, low cost-effectiveness, and lack of accountability and transparency. Donors invite or even strongly urge their “partners” to invest time in organisation development, improving PME (Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation) systems, developing gender policies, networking, etc. They offer conferences and training courses, exposure and study visits; they recommend or require external evaluations, and sometimes send experts and technical assistance. Donors themselves invest time in policy making on these issues, and in discussing ways to stimulate their partners to participate in the above-mentioned activities. They also occasionally attend conferences and meetings on these topics.

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\(^1\) Organisation development and organisational strengthening are used interchangeably in this text.

\(^2\) This general problem of not serving a specific purpose (any longer) can be attributed to various factors such as how the NGO came into being, its leadership orientation, its ability to collect feedback on its impact, the level of its (perceived) dependence on outside funders and the level of freedom enjoyed by the civil society sector.
In light of all these ongoing efforts, it is necessary to analyse the impact of what has been undertaken so far. What effect has organisation development had? Has sustainable improvement been achieved by organisations that have gone through an organisation development process (disregarding for the moment the question of what kind of improvement we are focussing on)? And if so: what was it that made them move on, change, improve? Was it the organisation development process as such, or did other events or trends force organisations to rethink their positions and operations? To what extent did changes in an organisation’s thinking and doing result from conscious decisions, and to what extent is change only noticeable in hindsight?

My concern is that planned organisation development is too often seen as a panacea for all kinds of problems with and within NGOs. Reality, however, calls for more modesty. At the same time donors, and to a lesser extent consultants, should also be much more aware of their actual power in directing their partners’ or clients’ behaviour.

Overview of the contents

Assuming that both NGOs (or a single NGO) and the donor community (or the donors supporting a particular NGO) view planned organisation development as a way to solve specific problems such as a lack of focus or weak accountability and learning, how should this process be approached? To what extent will it be about moving forward once the goals and routes for organisation development are clearly defined, and to what extent will it involve ongoing path-finding?

This article looks at organisational culture to see if the culture perspective can provide some answers to these questions. Starting from the perspective that organisations are living organisms made up of people, we can attempt to understand a bit more of the complex and dynamic character of the life of an organisation.

Culture is not understood as something an organisation has, because this would suggest that organisational culture is something you can examine, evaluate, and discard or exchange, like a coat. This would be a too simplistic presentation of reality. Talking instead about the culture as what the organisation is will reveal the dynamic and complex character of the organisation. It also shows the interrelation between the different aspects and components of an organisation.

This article first takes a brief look at organisational culture as such, without any evaluation or normative direction. It discusses how an organisational culture comes into being. It then focusses on how organisational change takes place, and what the possibilities and limits are in managing organisational culture, reaching out a bit to more general questions on planning institutional and societal change.

The conclusions are presented under the heading “An Invitation for Debate”, as the objective of this article is to contribute to a re-thinking of organisation development. The “Epilogue” is a more personal closure of this article.

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3 In no way do I want to suggest that organisation development should only be seen as a means to solve problems. Systematic, qualitative, informed reflections on position, performances and organisational setup should be encouraged for all organisations from time to time.
4 Culture as a subsystem in addition to structure, procedures, etc.
5 Culture as a metaphor.
Organisational culture

Mind, behaviour and power

In observing an organisation as a culture we can distinguish three dimensions:
• the mental dimension: the way we see the world and what we consider important;
• the behavioural dimension: our actions and reactions, both day-to-day actions and special ceremonies;
• the power dimension: the hierarchy and (distribution of) obligations and expectations within our relationships, etc.

Neglecting any one of these aspects when preparing for organisational change and plotting possible courses for change is not only naive, but will inevitably lead to disappointment and frustration.

Mind

Focussing only on the mental dimension, we can regard an organisational culture as a shared collection of constructions of reality: how we see the world, how we define ourselves in relation to others, our relation with time, nature, and hierarchy, etc. Some people use the word “paradigm” to refer to the coherence in these mental models.

People differ in the way they see the same reality, but they share their perspective with others belonging to the same “culture”, as defined by their position in society, their gender, cultural background, upbringing, educational/professional background, etc. There is a culture shared amongst people living on the edges of society, a culture shared by women, a lawyers’ culture, a family X culture, etc. And there is a culture shared by people working in a specific organisation, which is called organisational culture.

This view of culture considers it to be a system of ideas: the mental “baggage” of a group of people. That baggage consists of answers to basic human questions:
• values: what is right and wrong?
• norms: what should and should not be done?
• meanings: how should reality be understood and what is my/our position in reality?
• expectations: what will and will not happen (to me, to us)?
• objectives: what may/can we/I aim for and what is outside of our/my scope?

Some cultures provide more specific answers to these questions, while others have either lost touch with their specific answers, or have found that old answers are no longer applicable under new circumstances. In this case, members of the group have to find their own answers in concrete situations without any backing from their original culture.

Schein (1985) reserves the concept of organisational culture for the most deep-rooted levels of this mental “baggage”. These are interpretations of reality, values and norms that cannot be given direct conscious expression, as people are not (or are no longer) aware of them. These assumptions are taken for granted, but they nevertheless form the basis for our actions and reactions. The openly avowed norms and values (“espoused values”) or the official philosophy or vision and mission of an organisation may sometimes be in conflict with these actual values, which are noticeable in day-to-day actions (“values in action”).
Culture, viewed from the mental perspective, can thus be regarded as a more or less coherent mental model (Senge, 1990) “carried” by a group, an organisation, a society. It is called more or less coherent because a culture always reveals at least one, but more often many, systems of logic based on the context, history, etc.

This mental model perspective suggests that in order to effect change, we will have to change the way people think. Changes in behaviour will then inevitably follow.

**Behaviour**

Organisational culture can also be seen as a socio-cultural system: the way people actually deal with nature, time, money, friendship, promises, privacy, leadership, hierarchy and so on, as demonstrated by their behaviour.

If you accept the definition of culture as a socio-cultural system, it should be possible to observe culture directly by looking at the behaviour. This is not possible if you regard culture as a system of ideas. A description and analysis of the organisational culture then demands the far more difficult process of penetrating through to its sources, which will take time and requires a willingness to really see and listen, to “be” there.

From the behavioural perspective, organisational change is about changing what people do, and how they do it.

**Power**

Organisational culture is often seen as “something” that is shared by everybody in the organisation. Shared orientations, values, etc., indeed can often be observed within an organisation, but at the same time every individual person has his/her own views, values, standards and ways of acting and reacting. Over-emphasising consensus not only frequently glides over important differences or “latent cultures” within the organisation (and over important differences between individuals), but it also denies the existence of a power dimension in the concept of culture.

There is always a dominant group, or sometimes just one or a few persons, that – to put it simply – won the ideological struggle on the important organisational issues: what are we here for, how should we organise our work and how should we relate to others? However, the victory always remains a shaky one. As soon as there is a shift in the balance of power, for whatever reason (the key person leaves for instance), this can put pressure on the ruling culture.

Organisational change in this perspective requires shaking the power balance. In planning cultural change people often make use of this insight, by replacing key persons for example.

This will be further discussed later on.

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6 It is not always necessary to be physically present; ‘being’ there mentally by viewing reality from someone else’s perspective will also open up the mind for real understanding.

7 The metaphor ‘struggle’ should not be taken in all its aspects, it is just to indicate that power is involved in terms of differences in the possibility to influence and control yourself, others and the world.
The dynamics of an organisational culture

What are the dynamics of organisational culture, looking at it with these three dimensions in mind?

Schein (1985) considers culture to be the result of living and working together in a specific ecological, economical, political and social context. In that organisational context people face problems together and they find (temporary) solutions.

These problems – when we look at the organisational level – always have something to do with the reason for the organisation’s existence, with its internal organisation and with internal and external relationships: what are we here for, how do we organise our work and how do we define and maintain our internal and external relationships? The answers to these questions come from a mixture of rational reflections and analyses on the one hand, and interpersonal and intra-personal conflict resolution processes on the other hand. Processes of problem identification, problem analysis and problem solving, including processes of reflecting, strategising or planning, which are by their very nature problem solving processes, therefore always involve mental, emotional and power aspects. The balance between these aspects, however, might vary for several reasons. In some situations power relations dominate, while in other situations power relations or emotions and personal interests do not interfere that much in behaviour and decision making.

The above view of culture, as a more or less shared understanding of the world, including more or less shared values and norms, implies that culture is not that stable as it is often suggested. It is in fact a fragile balance. Simply referring to “our culture” to indicate that changes cannot take place denies the dynamic character of culture. History clearly demonstrates that cultures change over time in response to various forces originating from different corners and challenges8, although the deeper levels of a culture can be very persistent. Referring to “their” or “our” culture just indicates a superficial understanding of reality. Such an approach does not bring us any closer to understanding (organisational) culture, and in the context of an organisation, it creates the wrong mind-set: it allows people to focus on how to keep outsiders out rather than on how to understand the impact of outside interference on the organisation.

How does a culture come into being?

If we take a closer look at the dynamics of an organisational culture we can observe that a specific organisational culture is the more or less fragile, but always temporary (unless the culture can manifest itself in total isolation) outcome of three processes:

• normative integration;
• social learning; and
• conflict resolution.

People are, in general, not aware of these processes until someone (such as an OD consultant or facilitator) asks them to reflect on this.

Normative integration

Comparative research between organisations with branches in different countries has shown that employees bring their local culture into the branches. These local cultures differ on such issues as the way people see the relationship between themselves and nature, and the value afforded to time, loyalty, intimacy, and hierarchy or power relations. The organisational culture seen in particular branches clearly reflects this local culture, despite the specific organisational policies, rules and regulations that are common to all branches. This is much less the case, however, if expatriates hold positions of power in that branch, although this may cause a feeling of powerlessness among “the locals”. Expatriates set, sometimes unconsciously and unintentionally, the behavioural rules, which do not necessarily touch the deeper levels of the local culture.

Normative integration is not optional for most organisations. To survive, an organisation must integrate with its environment. In other words, there must be a match between the internal norms, values and behaviour (or culture) of the organisation and the local culture. This is less important for organisations that can continue to survive more or less independently of their surroundings. This is the case, for instance, with organisations that are heavily sponsored by foreign donors. They have to adopt (the outer layers of) their donors’ cultures to a certain extent and by so doing can alienate themselves from their surroundings without serious consequences for their survival as an organisation, which depends more on these donors than on their position in their own environment or society. However, this does have serious consequences for their ability to become rooted in and legitimised by their own society.

Social learning

Organisations can also be seen as living organisms that instil certain forms of behaviour via the mechanism of reward and punishment. Certain patterns of action and reaction, which brought about success, are repeated and reinforced, while others are “punished” because they do not lead to the desired results. This process has been described by Schein (1985). He makes an interesting distinction between the repetition of behaviour that leads to desirable results, and the repetition of behaviour to avoid undesirable results. The latter is called “avoidance learning”. Avoidance learning is based on fear and is far more persistent than behaviour which is directed at gaining positive results. Avoidance behaviour can be repeated.

without there being “proof” on each occasion that it is indeed the most rational thing to do: “The donors are not commenting so it is good that we presented our plans in logframe matrices ...” This action may thus be repeated even if there is no evidence that the donors would indeed comment and withdraw if the organisation presented their plans differently.

This process of learning through positive and negative consequences or feedback related to certain behaviour is known as social learning. People who work together share common experiences. They inevitably also encounter problems, which they have to resolve together. Through resolving those problems, people develop (unspoken) rules on how to deal with personal differences, intimacy, power, control, etc.

They have to solve these problems, firstly because the survival of their group or organisation depends on it, and secondly because they want to avoid basic human fears, such as the fear of chaos, unpredictability and exclusion. In coping with these fears we can also notice cultural, organisational and interpersonal differences\(^\text{10}\). However, in solving these problems some people or groups are more powerful than others, which brings us to the third mechanism.

**Conflict resolution**

Finally, there is the process of achieving a balance of power. A culture is born out of a struggle between people or groups of people on what the best solutions are for the above-mentioned problems. Viewed from this perspective, an existing culture always involves compromises and reveals a temporary balance of power between different solutions. This is why an organisational culture is not always logical, and inevitably incorporates inconsistencies. A shift in the internal or external balance of power, for instance when a new director is appointed, can bring such inconsistencies to the forefront. Then suddenly old, almost forgotten opinions and emotions or painful memories come to the surface. In those situations the dominant culture could come under pressure.

The culture of the aid industry (reflected in the jargon, for instance in the word “partner”) is also such a temporary, fragile solution to solve specific problems of interdependency, differences in resources and information, differences in access to and control over communication means, etc.

**Role of the leader (or leaders) in these processes**

The role of the leader, which is generally considered to be crucial, can be interpreted from the perspective of normative integration and social learning, and in terms of the processes involved in achieving a balance of power. The leader is the “founder” and the exemplification of values and norms (normative integration), and s/he provides examples of a good solution for organisational problems (social learning): “This is how we deal with this here”. However, s/he is also in a position to impose on the staff his view of reality, his answers to basic issues, and his way of reacting to important events through the mechanism of reward and (subtle) punishment, such as through inclusion and exclusion.

This role is not demanded by the leader, but voluntarily granted to him (in addition to his formal duties) particularly in the early development stages of an organisation and also in times of crisis. In these cases dependency on the leader is greater than in more mature stages or in less fearful situations.

Cultural change

When and how does culture change? We can look at it as a field of forces. Some forces set the organisational culture in motion towards change and others work in the opposite direction to maintain the status quo.

What forces can set cultural change in motion?

These are forces which “rock” a culture. They are discussed below in no particular order.

Macroeconomic circumstances

The “no-nonsense” culture and “tough” business-like management values were (and may still be) deeply ingrained in many managers in the Western world during times of economic scarcity, when performance counted (result-orientation) more than consideration (for people or processes). The ideology of business-like management was embraced, but (fortunately perhaps) this was not always reflected in behaviour.

The influence of political-economic circumstances on human values and norms is clearly seen on this macro level. Maternal ideologies in Northern Europe, for example, have fluctuated with particular periods of economic decline or growth. Stay-at-home mothers are much more valued in economically difficult times, when competition for the jobs available to men becomes more fierce.

Socio-cultural developments

Ideologies are changing over time, whether the link with macroeconomic developments is obvious or not. Ideological developments, such as the high value placed on internal democracy and participation in the Western world in the seventies, have not passed organisations by. Current attempts to modernise these concepts will also have – and already have had – a bearing on organisational cultures. For example, the concept of “result-oriented management”, which questions the impact of all the funds and efforts put into “development” over recent decades, is currently being promoted in the aid industry despite doubts as to its value among NGO staff and others.

Organisational growth

The larger an organisation becomes, the less satisfactory a culture of authority centred around a single leader will become, unless this “Zeus” (see page 22 for a brief description of this culture typology) appoints clones on the lower levels, or operates in a very authoritarian way (“power culture”).

A very large organisation is too complex for this Zeus approach, unless all sorts of power mechanisms are used. So with growing organisations we see a tendency to develop a “role” culture (“Apollo culture”), in which authority and tasks are clearly distributed, and everyone is supposed to know what his or her role is. This tendency is reinforced after rapid expansions because of the increased need for control and the need to remove confusion and uncertainty for
both staff and management (and donors). The interests of management and staff are then temporarily on the same track. The tendency towards a role culture is also seen when “big” money comes in accompanied by a lot of administrational pressures and conditions set by the donors, while the organisation is not yet ready for it.

Change in the organisational strategic situation

Values and norms, as well as behaviour or routines, may cease to be effective and appropriate in a new strategic situation. This will, however, not always automatically lead to changes in the organisational culture. Some routines will continue, not because they produce anything but because – it is assumed – they avoid something (avoidance learning). Routines do not automatically change in response to changes in the strategic situation, because that would assume a certain capacity to reflect on one’s own culture, and the ability to weigh alternatives. But culture is not purely rational, and it “does” more than just help people know what to think and what to do.

Quality reflection is not to be expected without external assistance: you cannot expect the fish to see the relevance of thinking through the advantages of being in or out of the water. Even when people become aware of the peculiarities of their culture, it is not that easy to really change deeply rooted beliefs and values, simply as an act of will. However, changes in the strategic situation of an organisation will force the organisation, sooner or later, to change its position, focus, relations, operations and so on.

New leader

In the early stages of the development of an organisation, people look to the leader to find out how to deal with new situations, which are especially numerous for a young organisation. It is natural to follow the leader’s example at the beginning. Eventually, a culture develops which no longer has to be maintained by the leader alone. That is, unless the culture has not developed out of an open debate and struggle around these issues, but is maintained by coercion. In such oppressive circumstances the “culture” will collapse when the leader leaves, but in normal circumstances the culture will persist.

This does not mean that a new leader cannot effect a cultural change. On the contrary, a new leader – also in later stages of the development of an organisation – can demonstrate new norms through his actions: what are the key words he uses, what is worth the effort, what/who deserves attention, what causes concern, what is a cause for celebration, when do we reprimand somebody and for what, etc.

Structural change

Sometimes changes in organisational structure, administration and governance, decision making procedures, etc., are necessary because, for example, new tasks or external pressures and conditions require them. These new conditions and pressures might not only affect these administrative issues, but also rock the deeper levels of the culture. Many aspects, including values and norms of the organisation, and not only those linked to these new demands, become open for debate. This may worry people: what will happen to me, my job, my position, and also: did I see it all wrong, did I really do the wrong things? Such insecurity might cause the opposite of what is needed to adapt to new demands.
People tend to have defensive attitudes and may prefer to stick to the present values and habits rather than question the current culture in the light of the new developments and challenges. Defensive behaviour will be triggered more readily if the staff does not trust and have confidence in the capacity and the integrity of the management.

Crisis

Organisations that are in danger of losing their image as credible and effective partners, and therefore of losing their funding, often undergo cultural change. In a financial or other crisis old and trusted patterns of responses and actions are no longer sufficient. A crisis may furthermore present an organisation with new challenges for which rules and routines do not yet exist. It is perhaps in some way comparable to the development of human beings into adulthood. According to the theory of many developmental psychologists, one can only enter a new phase of development after working through a crisis.

A crisis is characterised by the fact that internal and external information can no longer be processed following old blueprints, and re-interpreting that information does not provide a way out either. More radical shifts in the mental models and values are needed, which is often a painful process. A crisis, such as a really devastating external evaluation report, provides excellent grounds for culture shocks: what we always believed in, what we thought and did is no longer valid nor appreciated! What comes after the shock depends on how the leadership interprets the situation, or rather, whether they interpret it at all; in other words whether they pay any particular attention to it. Do they make frenetic efforts to rationalise the present way of thinking and doing, or are they the first to admit that the organisation has carried on too long with the old ways of doing things, and that the time has come to really change, instead of just improve on the edges?

Chance events

This force shows some similarities with the previous one, or at least the mechanism is similar. As a result of a chance event the organisation discovers that old beliefs no longer apply, or that trusted methods of working, which had been considered essential, turn out to be less important. This can happen, for example, if a key person in the organisation suddenly becomes ill, or if a core donor withdraws without advance notice, but also when representatives of the organisation unexpectedly meet “soul mates” at an international conference. Unexpected follow-ups on these situations or events may usher in a new era: the butterfly that causes a storm.

Confrontation with other cultures

The discovery of another culture involves recognising that it can all be done differently than the way you do it yourself. Doubts about one’s own culture can arise when members of the organisation are confronted with different ways of thinking and acting by people in situations that are comparable to their own in many important respects. This last point, the requirement of some sort of resemblance, is important: discovering that people who hunt reindeer in Lapland have different hierarchical relationships than we have in our sugar processing companies does not appear to be relevant. The more aspects the two groups have in common – area of work, programmes, strategic situation, size, geographical location – the more of a challenge the other culture can pose. One of the most important pillars is then cut from under the prevailing culture, namely its self-evidence.
Confrontation may, however, also lead to rigidity, polarisation and intolerance, coupled with a further emphasis on the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The perception of a threat to the rationale of one’s own existence probably plays a part in the effect of the confrontation: it may determine whether an organisation chooses to question or defend its own culture, and thus whether real learning will take place or old, familiar mental models will prevail.

Critical mass

The concept of critical mass is used in literature about transformations to indicate that the chance of cultural change is greater when the number of supporters of an alternative culture that are within or near the organisation reaches a certain percentage. Often 30% is indicated as the point at which a critical mass has been reached. This force corresponds with the idea that the organisational culture is a temporary balance of conflicting interests. Social movements in Europe in the previous century clearly demonstrated the importance of critical mass.

What forces hold back cultural change?

Why does an organisational culture have a tendency to persist, even when – to outsiders – it is abundantly clear that something has to change? Here, too, a number of forces come into play.

Functionality of the old culture

An organisational culture should be looked at from the functional perspective: it did not develop arbitrarily. The problems the organisation encountered in the past were resolved in a particular way. Formal and documented rules for decision making were needed to reduce the exclusive power of the executive director, for example.

Even when the danger or problem no longer exists, old modes of conduct and thinking serve a particular – often altered – function. They can at least provide people within an organisation with a sense of security, predictability and togetherness.

Why should we change?

There is usually little feedback on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a particular culture. External evaluation teams seldom explicate the relation between effectiveness or impact and organisational culture. Donors sometimes question specific aspects of the organisational culture (transparency, gender-sensitivity), but often just from a normative point of view. The relationship between organisational culture and effectiveness of programmes is, for a lot of development interventions, not easy to demonstrate. The benefits to be expected from cultural change are difficult to imagine, and therefore also difficult to debate.

Why go through all that trouble? Is so much effort and pain really necessary? Maybe the donor will be placated and continue to support us if we just present him with a gender policy paper.
What needs to be done?

Research into change processes has shown that some aspects of the character of the change process itself influence its success: unpredictable consequences and processes that cannot be fully planned have little power to convince others. This makes great demands on peoples' imagination, creativity and their ability to look beyond day-to-day matters. This also makes it difficult to find financial resources to support the process of change and to find new ways of doing things.

A necessary phase of disengagement

Cultural change, beyond the level of minor adjustments, is a form of transformation: letting go of the old in order to embrace the new. This means that people have to be able to let go before they have something new to grab hold of. This calls for confidence in themselves and their leaders. This also calls for a basic feeling of trust. Many people working in organisations that are supported financially by foreign donors do not live in a world of trust.

It is conceivable that people will postpone that moment of uncertainty, even if they know deep down that it is necessary to adapt or even change their present ways of doing things. Not knowing what the transformation holds in store for them will keep them from “going with the flow” to see where it brings them. Confidence in the leadership, based on integrity among other things, is then especially important.

The manager as a counter-force

Only if you are able to distance yourself from day-to-day affairs are you able to use your imagination and creativity and think about how things could be done differently. Only from a distance can you notice that the organisation is at risk because of its way of seeing the world and its way of doing things. The schedule of the average manager often does not leave room for a broader overview and time for reflection. He proceeds straight from one deadline to the next. He does not allocate time to reflect. He lets administrative leadership dominate strategic leadership: the average manager is too much of an administrator, planner and controller, rather than a visionary leader, focussed on setting the right conditions for in-depth reflection. He thinks that it suffices if the staff learn.

The manager is also likely to be the core bearer and promoter of the current organisational culture and will likely want to hold onto it as long as possible. Moreover, the existing culture offers him all sorts of benefits, which he will not give up easily.

How do organisational cultures change?

Weggeman (1988) outlined a number of stages, based on the assumption that a cultural change implies that an organisation is temporarily out of balance. We are not concerned here with very gradual (first order) changes, but the more radical ones that touch the deeper rooted values, norms and mental models. Weggeman distinguishes the following stages, which can also be seen in change processes beyond the level of just one organisation. After each stage the initiative can fade away, sometimes just leaving some frustrated and disappointed individuals behind and even strengthening the existing culture.
1. Taking the initiative

A number of individuals – not necessarily or even seldom the top management – are motivated to seek a different way of working. Their motivation releases energy, leading them to take the initiative to actually do something, even if it is only to talk to other people about it, whether or not the time is right. That creates supporters and opponents of the ideas put forward by them.

2. Maintaining the status quo

The dominant forces, which may comprise both management and a large section of the staff try to curtail the extent of the change, sometimes by incorporating some of the ideas into the present way of working. This releases yet more energy, (informal) channels of information are strengthened and the situation becomes more complicated.

3. The system gets out of balance

A point of no return is approaching. The deepest point of the imbalance coincides with the point at which the dominant forces become paralysed, and can no longer maintain control. Now it can go either of two ways: a return to the old culture (regression) or renaissance.

4. Finding a new balance: renaissance or regression

A new balance is found and in the case of renaissance the “dissidents of yesterday become the managers of today” as Weggeman (1988) puts it. However, it is also possible that the organisation (or the system, if we look beyond the level of just one organisation) returns to its old behaviour, because the opponents are silenced. Even then, the organisation will never be the same as it was before: values and behaviour are no longer consistent, and the management has no choice but to continue to use bureaucracy or power to stay in control.

The duration of such a change process cannot be predicted: sometimes a radical shift is seen in less than a month, but more often it takes over 10 years. In some cases a culture is so ingrained in all the levels of the organisation that only a re-birth can bring meaningful and sustainable change.

Weggeman’s description preludes already that planning organisational change is not as easy as one might think. How can one define a logframe to capture this process, and more importantly: who should do it? The initiators of change and the ones in power will not easily reach a workable compromise on this point!
Managing cultural change

Is the process of managing and changing organisational culture magic, or is it an ordinary, rational process which can be planned systematically, using the same strategies and means as change processes focussed on the more outer layers of an organisation, such as structure, division of tasks, accounting procedures? Are these two processes radically different or do we often just forget that these latter changes could also somehow touch the deeper levels?

Could strategies like convincing the staff, appealing to their rational thinking, training them in new concepts and skills, providing hands-on support or putting pressure on them bring about change in the organisational culture? Likewise, could means such as changing recruitment, selection and appraisal criteria, re-defining vision and mission statements, changing the distribution of tasks and authorities serve the same goal? Or only under specific conditions?

How can an organisational culture be influenced?

Having suggested that participatory logframe planning will not do here, which means can be used and by whom to change an organisational culture, apart from the possible ways to manipulate the forces mentioned in the previous section?

Schein (1985:224) speaks in this regard about primary and secondary mechanisms:

Primary mechanisms

- Anything that the leader\(^{11}\) pays attention to: what he sees as worthwhile, what he is keeping his eye on, what he means when he says things are going well, what he talks about. Consistency in his behaviour and statements is more important here than frequency or intensity.
- The way management reacts or fails to react to critical events, crises, unexpected challenges and opportunities.
- The overall example given by management: the leader as role model, teacher, personification of certain ways of interpreting the world, and of specific norms and values.
- The criteria for granting status and rewards and how that is done.
- The criteria for recruitment, selection, allocation of tasks, promotion, laying off people.

Secondary mechanisms

- The organisational organogram, formal lines of command and consultation and policy making structures.
- Procedures and rules.
- Allocation of office space, privileges for certain groups or persons, etc.
- Myths, especially about persons from the past; what was special (positive or negative) about that person?
- Formal documents about philosophy, vision and mission, approaches, principles, etc.

\(^{11}\) Where Schein (1985) refers to “leader” he also includes “leadership” or “governance”.
In essence, the same means can be used as would be the case with any other planned change process. However, there is a paradox in bureaucratically planning something that is essentially an adventure.

From the range of ways to facilitate, rather than plan, cultural change there is a noticeable emphasis on:

**Rituals, symbols, new myths or re-writing of history**

A change in culture is made visible and underpinned by such things as a new way of setting the stage in meetings, new heroes from the past, different stories about what happened in the organisation’s history. Greater attention is paid to consistency between “talk” and “walk” during a culture transformation. Stories and heroes might help achieve this, as they provide concrete examples of behaviour.

**Rites of passage**

These changes represent a clear sign that the old times have gone, that it is time for the caterpillar to become a butterfly.

**Link between the old and the new**

This link is needed to counterbalance the ways mentioned above, which were all about marking the transformation. Management, however, also indicates what is to be retained from the original mission and basic values, and shows how the new culture will not affect these basic values and drives.

**People as driving forces**

Management uses “hybrids”: respected members of the old culture who, at the same time, represent the new values are given key positions and roles. The management furthermore rewards champions and sponsors of the new culture. Taking on new people and initiating them into the new desirable culture, and also side-lining people who do not fit anymore into the new style, are part of this strategy of “using” people.

**Language**

Cultural change means changing the way we think and the way we construe reality. The jargon used illustrates how we interpret certain situations and how we define problems: “co-ordinators” become “directors”, community “trainers” become community “workers”. This new mentality is also reflected in normative management approaches: “quality management” is out, “result-oriented management” is in. This explains why people often have strong emotions attached to specific concepts or jargon. They are strongly connected to values, while at the same time a debate on these values is often oppressed.
The leader

The role of the leader is of crucial importance. He leads the whole process: setting the direction, facilitating and supporting, informing, convincing people, exposing them to new skills and concepts, pressuring them where needed and monitoring whether they stay on the main path, while closing off side paths.

In the case of cultural change a specific aspect of leadership comes to the fore: the leader as an example, and as a model. There is greater emphasis on his integrity, his vision and his consideration for people. This is probably associated with the disengagement phase, when people are more liable to place their confidence in the leader. Leadership integrity is then essential.

Which approach works when?

Strategies and approaches

If the way things are done needs to change, a strategy whereby rules and regulations are adapted is likely to facilitate that change. However, in professional organisations the way the work is done is guided only to a limited extent by rules and regulations. Planning documents, which should guide at least the organisation’s direction, often do not serve that purpose either. More important are the (unconscious) opinions and theories of the staff on what they believe is the right way to achieve the organisational goals and the (also often unconscious) values that tell them how to work together and relate to others. Thus, the thinking that underlies organisational behaviour also needs to change.

What strategies and approaches are seen in attempts to change the organisational thinking and doing?

Rational strategy

If opinions and values need to change in order to make cultural change happen, a strategy which shows that the current theories and opinions are no longer valid (or never have been) could bring about the necessary motion: this is referred to as the “rational strategy” in publications on management of change. People can be made aware that the present culture and way of working let many opportunities go by, or is even a threat to the success of an organisation (or the sector as a whole), and thereby also to the people they are intending to serve. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to come up with facts and figures to demonstrate that the current practices are not effective and may even harm the target group in the long run (make them dependent for instance).

Moreover, culture lies at a deeper level. As we saw earlier, it consists of assumptions and values about the work, which are difficult to communicate. Hanging on to these beliefs and values may also keep certain people in power, who are not readily willing to give up this position.
Learning strategy

Much use is also made of a learning strategy\(^{12}\): helping staff (and management!) to say farewell to typical beliefs and behaviour and to adopt new values, learn new concepts, skills, methods of working, etc.

In many organisation development processes aimed at cultural change both external and in-house training is organised for staff (management is often forgotten or forgets itself). In most cases these are more or less technical training courses, aimed at learning new, additional concepts and skills, such as “project cycle management”, “goal-oriented budgeting” or “gender” and “PME” (Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation).

It is even more important, however, to focus on awareness raising and linking “old” and “new” ideas, and on allowing people time to learn how to deal with the old issues in a new way. Seeing good examples of how they could work differently to achieve a greater impact will strongly enhance their willingness and capacity to change.

Power strategy

Another strategy to complement the rational and the learning strategies is that of “gentle pressure”. Gentle pressure, through for instance setting new conditions or new rules and regulations, is needed to replace the old culture, which gave people confidence by helping them achieve a certain level of comfortable mastery. Furthermore, the responses of management, colleagues (and donors) used to be predictable, which also added to the level of comfort. Most people will not give up these benefits of sticking to the old behaviour voluntarily or easily, let alone when personal benefits (or benefits for their inner circle) are involved. Under gentle pressure, such as changes in reward systems and even “carrot and stick” strategies, change can certainly be promoted. This is the main strategy in the hands of a donor.

Facilitating strategies

All these strategies need to be supported by “facilitating” strategies: setting the organisational and financial conditions needed to allow people to reflect on what they have done so far, trying out new ways of operating, helping people to further enhance the skills needed for the new behaviour, and preventing them from falling back into the old patterns. Also here the donors can contribute a lot.

People can be willing and skilled enough to change, but if the conditions do not support, or even prevent such change, it will not happen. Paradoxically, it is sometimes the management that forgets to set the right conditions, while promoting change in their “talk”.

None of these strategies guarantee the changes desired by management, donors, or consultants. They only set the conditions, for instance by manipulating some of the factors mentioned on pages 12-16 and using the mechanisms listed on pages 18-20.

\(^{12}\) Also known as “re-education strategy”.
Factors influencing the effectiveness of an approach

The effectiveness of one or the other approach largely depends on a number of factors, such as the existing dominant culture, the age of the organisation, the (felt) urgency of the need for change, how homogeneous the culture is, how long the present managers have been in their posts, and how successful the organisation has been.

The existing, dominant organisational culture

Every organisational culture has its own way of accepting change. This can be understood through the well-known typology of organisational cultures (see the work of Handy, 1987).

- The Zeus culture – in which the leader is a spider at the centre of the web – is set in motion by changing, or rather replacing, people. People are the links in a cultural chain. “If one link fails – replace him” (Handy, 1987: 54). Management itself is likely to have to be replaced sooner in a Zeus culture than is the case in other types of organisational cultures. The Zeus culture is not that open for rational arguments. It falls for charisma. So it is important who delivers the message.

- The Apollo culture is a culture of roles, where the primary emphasis is on formal policies, rules and regulations. It is more susceptible to legitimate authority and formal mandates. Here, too, it is important who delivers the message, but this person’s influence is derived from his or her formal position rather than personality. The obvious approach here is to alter mandates, procedures, rules and structures, administrative and rewards systems. Apollo people also feel rewarded by a rise in their status, expressed through all kinds of privileges. Changing people, either through retraining or replacement, is less important.

- A Dionysus culture, or people culture, where the organisation is there for the staff and not the other way around, is difficult to influence. It is composed of loosely connected individuals, who value their freedom to do what they think is best. Any infringement on this freedom, either through a powerful leader, or through procedures or an organisational (or department) policy, will arouse dislike. The most difficult adjustment for a Dionysus staff member is to move away from the idea that “the organisation offers me opportunities to...” to the idea that “I am here to contribute to...”. If he is unable to make this shift in his mind and heart, then the only option left is that he be replaced.

- Finally, there is the Athens culture, or task-based culture, where effectiveness and impact count above all else. Managing change in this culture involves defining (or re-defining) the problems and re-defining accountability systems. Athenian people are susceptible to analyses by experts and comparisons of results. Cultural change is only possible if the staff understand that change is needed, based on objective analyses. For Athens staff the rational strategy, accompanied by a bit of learning and gentle pressure strategies, will be effective.

The above distinctions are not intended to suggest that in reality organisations fit into one category or another. A mixture can be observed, although dominant features of one or the other will often be clearly evident. Particularly in larger organisations, the units or departments may show different cultures: administration and finance might look a bit more like an Apollo culture, while the educational department for example has more of an Athens culture.
When asked to look at their organisation with these metaphors of Greek Gods in mind, most people, and in particular management, will assess their culture as being an Athens culture, even if it is not. The assessment is distorted by “politically correct” notions. A bureaucracy crisis in an organisation can be indicated by a big difference in how the organisational culture is evaluated: if management sees only the Athens aspects and (professional) staff the Apollo aspects, this almost certainly signals such a crisis.

Paradoxically, a genuine cultural turnaround, for example from an Apollo to an Athens culture, can only be achieved if the people’s susceptibilities to particular strategies and particular entry points change. If one wants to change an Apollo organisation into one with an Athens culture, people must become more sensitive to comparisons of results and less focussed on procedures, rules and regulations, formal positions, representation, etc.

Managing the “turning point” is crucial: the moment at which the old culture becomes shaky new space is created for something new. If at that point in time the old beliefs and emotions gain the upper hand again (for all kinds of understandable reasons), or the struggle is won by the representative of the old culture, the critical moment will pass and the opportunity will be lost. Possible advocates for a new way of seeing and doing things will either leave or set themselves apart.

Complexity, arising out of different cultures in different departments will also add to the difficulty in finding a good entry point and good approaches to bring about change on the corporate level.

The age of the organisation

One of the ways to distinguish the stages in the life cycle of organisations is through the different mechanisms that can bring about cultural change. In the first stages the values and norms of the leader predominate. The organisation is building up a sense of direction, a vision and mission, an identity, values, guiding principles, etc. Strengthening the organisational culture is vitally important at this stage. Intentionally influencing an organisational culture from the outside, other than through the leader, is difficult unless some “carrots” can be offered.

Changes do take place as the organisation grows and adapts to the demands that accompany growth. Typically, there may be a development towards a more role-based culture. Some people consider losing sight of the original drives to be an almost inevitable side effect of growth, as “administration”, “rules and regulations”, “policies” or “bureaucracy” creep in and take over the role of leadership in guiding people, i.e. keeping them focussed on the goals. However, some (peace, women’s, and environmental) movements or groups that are not formally registered, are therefore not bound to governance structures set by law for that specific registration, and that do not have their own bank accounts (so they are not “imprisoned”) have proven that it is possible to stay away from bureaucracy!

In addition to leadership inspiration and role-modelling, as seen in the earlier stages, rational strategies, as well as the (temporary) appointment of outsiders to key positions, or the involvement of outsiders as “technical assistants” or “internal advisers” are in this stage likely to support organisational change.

In the next stage, that of stabilising or maturing, subcultures may develop, mainly due to further growth in size and differentiation of programmes, which is often seen if an organisation is
discovered by donors. The original drives, vision and identity might recede into the background. In this stage one can influence the organisational culture to a certain extent, although the subcultures in the different departments may already be very strong. Organisation-broad, planned change processes are often seen in this stage, but sometimes a more ‘step-by-step’ process is opted for, which only management (and their consultants) may be aware of.

During this stage, crises, scandals or other unexpected events can be important triggers for change.

The stage of “middle age” is the most important for cultural change. It is the point at which you either sink or swim. Some patterns of behaviour and thinking have become dysfunctional, but people may still cling to them because they represent the glories of the past or bring them benefits. Cultural change is necessary but difficult in this stage. Now, more than ever, it becomes clear that the time for disengagement is approaching. Managing cultural change means putting a lot of effort in convincing people that there is no other option than to change, offering people support so that they can say farewell to old (and no longer valuable) beliefs and behaviour, and also cutting off the escape routes.

Sometimes, a culture is so ingrained that a complete turnaround (which can seldom be led by the management in place) or even closing down is needed.

Sense of urgency

As a general rule cultural change takes time, although surprisingly fast change processes can also be seen. This means that the management should indicate well in advance that change is required. However, the managers themselves are often the strongest supporters of the prevailing culture, and for that reason the chance of encountering blind spots is not insignificant. Signals of a downward spiral are often given in the early stages, both from inside (for example a loss of trust in management or gossip) and from outside, but these are frequently not recognised or seriously considered within the organisation. This is particularly the case where the capacities of self-reflection, self-regulation and self-control are weakly developed. Signals that change is needed are also sometimes denied, because the management is afraid of losing power or other benefits (which often go with power), or because they do not know how to respond to the signals and to handle the situation.

The strengths of the existing, dominant culture

A culture is stronger when almost every aspect of the “organisational life” is guided by a clear and specific focus, values, norms, beliefs, rules, etc., and when there are hardly any subcultures (for instance differences between departments, or between management and field staff), or latent cultures (emerging or oppressed cultures) present. Sometimes, the culture is very strong and homogenous. Such cultures will be difficult to change, because they involve not just the way things are done, but are a way of life, which is shared by many people from the top to the field.

A longer period of incumbency of the management and success of the organisation will certainly contribute to the growth of a strong culture. Culture develops when people solve problems as a group. Certain patterns appear to produce rewards and are repeated, others fall into disuse because they are ineffective. The longer the (management) team operates,
the more certain aspects of the culture are taken for granted. This is reinforced even more if the organisation is also externally very much appreciated.

When cultural change becomes necessary despite this success, due to changes in the context for instance, it is difficult for people to accept. Rational arguments and facts and figures usually do not help in this situation. If time allows, learning strategies may help, but more often tougher methods like pressure, structural change and the replacement of key figures are necessary.
An invitation for debate

The boom in articles, conferences, seminars and training on “organisational culture” began in the second half of the eighties as a response to the following questions:

• Why are some organisations far more successful than others?
• Why is it that some organisations (or people in organisations) do not change even when the need is obvious and even when it is clear that change will benefit them in the end (which, by the way, is not always the case for everyone in the organisation)?

The eventual conclusion (based on in-depth analysis of several cases) was that innovation and change have to do with organisational culture, and success of the organisation is therefore more related to organisational culture than to official strategies and planning documents, resources, technology, and methodology.

At first, the phenomenon was simply put under the microscope: what is organisational culture and what does it do in relation to change? Soon afterwards, the key question arose: how can we manage and change it? This question came in particular from managers and consultants, while academics were much more realistic in their understanding that culture is not manageable.

Many managers, consultants and development practitioners still adhere to the premise that (organisational) culture cannot just be observed, but also manipulated and managed. They consequently believe it is possible to lay out strategies, fixed in a programme, that will lead to a well-described end situation: planned change of the organisational culture. Cultural change – from this perspective – can be planned in steps: raising awareness, re-defining strategic values, re-defining vision and mission statements and strategies, (re-)planning programmes, re-organising structures, systems, procedures, accompanied by training and other types of support for skills, knowledge and methodologies. This is all that is needed!

This approach utilises logframe planning or logframe analysis (at least when submitting a funding proposal to donors), where the people involved try to predict the future by describing as specifically as possible the goal, the roads and resources: specific objectives, strategies, programmes, activities, and inputs. This reflects the classical Newtonian framework of change.

A degree of modesty is, however, called for here when it comes to changing the organisational culture. Some of the forces mentioned in the section on cultural change (pages 12-17) certainly can be manipulated in certain circumstances. However, it is not always easy to predict in which direction the results or effects will go. In the course of the journey of (organisational) change unexpected and unplanned processes, challenges and opportunities will arise, and unplanned effects will be seen. Furthermore, the simple fact that some actors indeed have the accumulated power to manipulate (through money and information) organisation development processes of their “partners” undermines the organisational strengthening of these partner organisations!

What seems to be equally important (to logframe planning), or even more important, is the capacity to read and open up for the future: to listen and appropriately respond to all the signals and cues along the journey that indicate whether you are on track, whether the desired future is coming closer or moving further away: are we approaching our objectives, are we achieving our goals? Also, a good

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13 It has been known for years (see ‘Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning’, Henry Mintzberg) that some 80% of the strategic decisions, directions and activities (in hindsight) were not found in planning documents. Mintzberg introduced the concept “emerging strategy”.

“nose” for opportunities and threats encountered during the journey, and the courage, creativity and flexibility to deal with these, are needed.

In particular, where we cannot be sure which paths will bring us to the desired future, we need to be more keen on quality reflection and learning (or monitoring and evaluating) and watching out for opportunities and threats, for real allies and for “evil” coming from different corners. Alertness, intuition, imagination, courage and above all a genuine focus on and eagerness to see this future come true will in that case be more important than just mastering logframe planning as a technique.

Turning back to the question of whether it is possible to manage and change the organisational culture, or to what extent you can change the mental models, values and how things are done in societies, institutions or organisations, the best you can say is that opening up the existing, dominant culture and ways of doing things for discussion will create space for something new\textsuperscript{15}. It is not as easy to steer the process in a clear and well-described direction as managers and donors, and even organisation development (and other) consultants, think. The concept of culture and the notion of how it develops clearly show that an organisation is not a thing, a machine that can be made, controlled and changed.

Despite the prevailing notion that living social-political systems, such as organisations, are non-linear and dynamically complex systems, and despite universal recognition that it is people who make up an organisation, and that people differ in their values and interests, people are – in the prevailing Newtonian paradigm – still seen as objects, hindrances or problems for those who are trying to bring about change. Although no one would be willing to admit this, it is reflected in concepts like the culture of an organisation, referring to something the organisation has instead of is, and it is reflected in managerial questions like: “How to deal with (their!) resistance?”, or “How can we (they!) become a learning organisation?”

When speaking of changing the organisational culture we run the risk of treating the organisation as a thing, despite all the participatory and bottom up approaches. This happens if we simply apply planning methods, concepts and managerial styles, normally used for technical or infra-structural change, to this area of more complex processes. This is not to say that concepts and (planning) methodologies, borrowed from more simple, technical changes are of no value for the more complex, social changes, but they need to be scrutinised from the perspective that organisations (and communities and societies) are living organisms, so that we do not lose sight of the specific dynamics and the multi-interest character of cultural changes.

The dominant organisational (or community or other) culture is the result of finding solutions to problems, both through consensus and through conflicts. It results in temporary compromises, which by their very nature rest on a shaky equilibrium. Because of this, culture can be surprisingly changeable, which is not to say that it is easy to change.

\textsuperscript{15} This is what I/C Consult means by “working from an organisation development perspective”, be it as donors, expert consultants, external evaluators, organisational development facilitators, or whatever label is glued on the person who is “opening up the existing organisational or institutional culture for debate”, or helping people to reflect on what they do and to learn from that.
Epilogue

This article is based on an article I wrote in 1992 on the possibilities and limits to manipulate and change an organisational culture.

Four interesting publications have emerged since then that are most recommended for reading: the paper by David Harding in which he presents two paradigms for change; the report by Rick James revealing the importance of leadership in organisational change processes; the book by Jared Diamond on the basic question of why history unfolded so differently on different continents; and Van Veen’s analysis of why Africa’s development stagnated while some Asian countries managed to show an amazingly fast economic growth. Schein’s book on Organisational Culture and Leadership remains also very much recommended.

Both the new publications and my experiences with I/C Consult have convinced me that the time has come to really question our approach in planning, promoting and facilitating organisation development, and maybe even to question our approach in facilitating development in general.

This article is presented with the strong desire to generate a debate on the role of different actors in capacity building, civil society building, institutional strengthening or organisation development, realising that “money and information can be more powerful than guns”. The debate should be based upon real cases, not on normative notions. I hope that such a debate somehow will fit in the logframes of colleagues, NGOs and donors.

This article was not consciously planned in advance. I must admit that I cannot remember when the idea was first conceived, nor can I remember or be suitably grateful to all those who planted the seeds of thought that led to its fruition, but I know for sure that all my colleagues and clients are to be thanked for it since they invited me to be part of their personal and organisational change processes.
Bibliography

Not all the literature used for the earlier article is listed in the bibliography, just the publications mentioned in this re-written version and some new, very inspiring ones.


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