

# Viral Change

## Leandro Herrero

### The Big Idea

Many people have the idea that organizational change is a long, agonizing, drawn-out process, and this is indeed true in many cases.

However, there is another face of change - one that can rapidly take place in small, incremental steps. Moreover, it need be initiated neither by large groups of people and/or influential individuals; positive change can come not only from the people on top, but can be effected by just one person. In addition, change is inevitable, so openness to it is key; large corporations usually get into trouble because of their inflexibility and non-acceptance of change, considering the dynamic nature of industries.

### Why You Need This Book

*Viral Change* is about how a small number of people can initiate a small set of behaviors that could bring about sustainable change. It can thus serve as a companion for today's leaders, especially those who are focusing on dealing with "change management", and can even be used as an interesting guide for creating change in one's own workplace. It will help readers understand how and why organizations are evolving and how to adjust to these changes in order for them to lead and manage.

Author Leandro Herrero once again proves why people and their ways should be open to going beyond tried-and-true solutions to overcome problems. This insightful book will remind you that it's time to move on.

### Making Success Fashionable

- The concept of Viral Change is all about contagious behaviors that spread. They reach a tipping point and become 'the norm' - and this can be achieved with a relatively small number of such behaviors.
- In addition, specific networks of a relatively small number of individuals also help with this spread by carrying the infection and creating the fashion.
- Fashions and infections have many things in common. After all, fashion is the infection of ideas or habits.
- Viral Change is a fundamentally different way of understanding not only how organizations work but also how change is induced and made sustainable. The differences between Viral Change and traditional change management are articulated in the graph on the following page:

### The Change Management 'Speak'

- Caius Petronius wrote in AD 65, "*We trained hard... but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up in teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later on in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization.*"
- Machiavelli stated in *The Prince*, "*There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.*"
- There is no other statement more used in management conversations than 'people are resistant to change'. By repeating this like parrots, people end up taking it at face value.

## How to Fail Expensively

The following three are the main reasons why many 'change management' processes fail:

1. *Wrong focus of attention* - a premium is placed on technology instead of people's behaviors
2. *Wrong assumptions about the role of behaviors* - they are simply expected to 'appear' as a result of new processes
3. *A cluttered corporate environment* is usually maintained where multiple initiatives and 'processes' are running in parallel

## Small Worlds Inside

- In the real world, everybody is linked to everybody else.
- Everybody thinks that they have small worlds around them, and this is both true and false:
  - *True* , because it's correct that everyone has connections with a finite universe and it feels small.
  - *False* , because if you apply the principle of the six degrees of separation, you are closer than you think to anybody you can think of.
- What the 'six degrees/small world' would tell you, of course, is that this is only your perception. In reality there are many other 'small worlds' inside the contact list, or clusters of people with 'strong ties'.

## Language

Language is the first dimension in Viral Change. It plays four overlapping roles:

1. The (obvious) vehicle for reaching out to people.
2. The tool to imagine futures and visualize the changes, the benefits of doing it and the cost of not doing it.
3. Framing: the construction of a mental and social reference that acts as provider of 'the borders' and 'the maps' for the changes.
4. The core of one of the best mechanisms of social learning: stories.

## New Behaviors

- The bad news is that contrary to what they might have others think, people don't really know how to use most of the rich vocabulary they employ in day-to-day management, including management of change, other than enjoy it in conversation. The good news is that if people translate it into behaviors, then they do know a lot more about what to do (do=expect=manage=measure=progress).
- In day-to-day management, and in management of change initiatives, people constantly use labels and language that have poor value in terms of getting everyone all together on the same unequivocal path. If you are interested in creating change, you'll need to make sure that you clean up your management vocabulary first.
- The following map will help you describe a process to 'uncover' which behaviors are needed and how to make them available to the organization:

## Tipping Points

The infectious power of a new behavior or pattern which eventually leads to major organizational change depends on three variables:

1. **The ‘contact’ between infective people and receptive people.** As in disease epidemics, susceptible people need to be in contact with infective people.
2. **The number of people interacting.** The number of people interacting will create a critical mass above a threshold that makes the behavioral pattern visible.
3. **Enough low threshold people.** In these small worlds, there must be a sufficient number of people with a low threshold for adoption, who will probably just copy or mirror a new behavior from another colleague or small group.

## Change Champions; Infection by Design

Here is a menu of people you can choose from to help boost any effort of yours you want to push virally:

**Movers, Shakers, and Activists.** These people are well-known because of their ability to ‘move things forward’, to perhaps question the status quo, to stimulate and sometimes irritate.

**Mirrors.** People literally ‘look at them’ for endorsement, or for the opposite: signs of non-commitment.

**Super-nodes .** They have extensive links with everybody and seem to navigate the organization with clear knowledge of its hidden map. Often, but not always, these people have been around for a while.

**Simply healthy restless people .** They portray themselves with a mixture of that frustration and at the same time commitment to make things better, to change.

## Cultures

Remember: Behaviors shape culture, not the other way around.

Think of culture as a point of destination.

Only think of culture as a point of departure when you’re visualizing a future.

Think short-term: Which behavioral changes can be made now to start triggering ‘the infection’?

When you describe your culture, use any labels you feel appropriate, but make sure to attach the behaviors behind those labels.

To achieve change, focus your energy on behavioral change, not process change. Let behaviors, not processes, drive the ‘new culture’.

Spot any ‘new routines’, desirable or undesirable, created via tipping points and try to understand the viral network behind them.

For any ‘cultural change’, map your approach both via traditional change management and through Viral Change. Make sure you see the differences in focus, pathways, levers, and players. Then choose.

## 15 Change Management Assumptions Revisited

Here are 15 of the most prevalent assumptions change management holds dear and how viral change nullifies them.

**“Big change requires big actions.”** Viral Change banks on the power of a small set of levers - behaviors - that can generate great change in a non-linear way.

**“Only change at the top can ensure change within the organization.”** ‘Change at the top’ is obviously desirable, but Viral Change does not wait until this is happening to take place itself.

**“People are resistant to change.”** Viral Change proves that behaviors that could be called resistant disappear when alternative behaviors are reinforced.

**“Cultural change is a slow and painful long-term affair.”** Viral Change is adamant that if we can’t see those ‘cultural changes’ happening in short timeframes, something is wrong.

**“Everybody needs to be involved in the change.”** Viral Change uses the power of internal networks to effectively reach everybody, but communication-to-all is actually the most ineffective way to do so. A small percentage of the organization is highly connected and of high influence and they can be the ones directly reached instead.

**“Communication and training are the vital components of change.”** Viral Change tells us that communication and training are components of the change, but that we really need to focus on behaviors.

**“New processes and systems will create the new necessary behaviors.”** Viral Change tells us that the assumption is wrong. We need to have new behaviors in place in order to support new processes and systems.

**“People are rational and will react to logical and rational requests for change.”** Viral Change tells us that what really matters is behavioral change and that this is only going to happen if particular behaviors are reinforced.

**“There is no point in creating change in one division without the rest of the company participating.”** Viral Change focuses on the spread of changes via internal viral networks.

**“Skeptical people and enemies of change need to be sidelined.”** Viral Change has the following words of wisdom: suspend judgment, be willing to be surprised and, above all, don’t write off assets that quickly.

**“Vision for change needs to come from the top and cascade down.”** In Viral Change, initial vision may come from the top leadership itself, but it doesn’t follow the forces of gravity.

**“After change you need a period of stability and consolidation.”** Viral Change provides a mechanism for a continuum between changes (from tipping points) and establishment of new behaviors as a routine.

**“Short-term wins are tactical but they do not usually represent real change.”** A central tenet of Viral Change is of course that small changes can lead to a big impact; it is but natural that short-term wins be part of the picture.

**“There will always be casualties - people not accepting change - and you need to identify and deal with them.”** Viral Change asks you not to make early assumptions. From those who finally exclude themselves, we can learn not only what was ‘wrong’, but perhaps also what is going so well that they can’t integrate it!

**“People used to not complying with norms will be even worse at accepting change.”** Viral Change is using completely different highways to establish ‘norms’. Non-normative people often make good champions!

## **Final Warning**

This concept may prove so infective that your understanding of organizations and management of change will never be the same.

If you become infected, you will want to spread the practices by infecting others in your organization.

To combat the infection, you can also try 'not in many years!' or 'the CEO won't like it.'

If you don't treat the infection, you will become a carrier and transmit it all over.

Viral Change can surely bring you success in whatever organization you work for - In creating a fashion for success, creating wealth and building an environment where people are looking forward to Monday morning.