Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach
II. First and Second Order Change

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Before proceeding with an analysis of four models of consultation in the next few essays, we will pause and reflect in this essay on the nature of change itself—examining in particular two different kinds (or levels) of change. We identify these two kinds of change as "first order" and "second order." We begin this analysis with a brief interchange between Fred and Alan.

Fred: "Why don't you just try harder."

Alan: "Would you get off my back! I'm already working as hard as I can! It just won't work."

Fred: "O.K., maybe we should add one or two more people to your crew."

Alan: "No! That would only make things worse. I would have to devote all of my time to training these new guys."

Fred: "Well, I give up . . . what do you think could be done?"

Alan: "I don't know . . . but I'm getting desperate . . . I guess like you must feel. Maybe we need to change the goal . . . be a little less ambitious. Or maybe we've taken on the wrong job . . . maybe our division is simply unable to meet this goal. Or even more basically, maybe we've approached this problem in an entirely wrong way."

This discussion between Fred and Alan is typical of those that occur in many organizations from time to time. A problem resists solution. More (or less) of the same thing is tried with no results. People try harder or they ease off a bit. No difference. More money is thrown in or a significant amount of money is pulled out of the project—still no appreciable effect.

Someone like Alan comes along to suggest the unthinkable—maybe the problem itself should be reviewed and even redefined. Maybe a goal was set too high or too low, or a person or department is

conceived as a barrier when actually a resource (or vice versa). This reconceptualization of a problem requires a "second order" change, instead of the "first order" change that usually is initiated when a problem is encountered.

The notion of first and second order change finds its origins in two unlikely fields of study: linguistics and experimental psychology. We will briefly detour to these two fields in order to better explain the nature and use of the powerful techniques associated with second-order change.

Meta-Language and Learning How to Learn

One of the dilemmas faced by linguistics, semanticists and philosophers in recent years who study languages and their use is that one must use language in order to discuss language. In discussing the inability of most languages to describe ongoing, organic processes, for instance, one must make use of a specific language which is itself limited, static and unyielding to an accurate and vivid description of these dynamic processes. This paradoxical condition concerning the use of language to talk about language was addressed by Bertrand Russell in his Theory of Logical Types. The noted philosopher and social activist observed that any system, words, or taxonomies that are being used to describe a particular collection of objects, experiences and so forth, cannot itself be a part of this collection. In other words, we must somehow move outside of a system when we are trying to describe it.

Gregory Bateson has noted that a map of a territory is not itself the territory. A map of Seattle Washington, for instance, is not Seattle, but only a map. Similarly, the word "cat" cannot scratch you. The word "chair" is not actually a chair, but only a representation of this type of furniture. These examples are obvious, and even absurd. Yet, often we find ourselves in the difficult and puzzling situation of not being sure whether we are addressing the real problem or only a representation of the problem. We encounter people (often ourselves) who confuse the concept (e.g. "superego") with the reality that this concept is supposed to represent. Thus, we search for the location of the superego in the cerebral cortex, rather than accepting the concept as a useful metaphor to describe a complex set of human activities and experiences. We must somehow be able to distinguish between the map and territory, between words and things, between "first-order" language that describes things and "second-order" language that describes how we use language.

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In an entirely different field, experimental psychology, a similar problem was confronted in the 1940s and 1950s. Animals which were being run through a maze not only learned how to execute this particular maze more rapidly and with fewer errors over time, they also were able to run through a new maze more rapidly and with fewer errors. Apparently, these animals learned not only how to run a specific maze, but also learned how to run mazes in general. This same phenomenon has been observed in the learning of many other types of tasks and puzzles by human as well as nonhuman subjects. This phenomenon has been labeled "the establishment of a learning set" or, more simply, "learning how to learn."

A short, but insightful statement about multi-level learning is provided by Gregory Bateson, A more traditional and expanded account is to be found in the work of Ernest Hilgard and in the case of both meta-language and "learning how to learn", two levels of activity seem to be taking place simultaneously. On the one level, people are using language and are learning how to perform certain tasks. On the second level, they are talking about language and learning about how they learn to perform certain tasks. Similarly, there are two levels at which change seems to be taking place.

First and Second Order

At one level, the function of any planned change effort can be conceived as the acceleration (facilitation) of a desired transition or deceleration (blocking) of an undesirable transition that has already begun in an organization. A first-order change effort, for example, might involve increasing the efficiency of an accounting system that is already in place or extending the length of a training workshop from three to four days. This type of change requires only that a person or organization do more or less of something than now is the case. Such a change can usually be measured in quantitative terms. It is rather easily observed and understood. First-order change occurs frequently in the life of individuals and organizations. Often it is hardly even noticed if the quantity of change is minimal.

At a second level, planned change can be conceived as the transformation of some structure, process or attitude in the organization. A transformation process involves a qualitative shift. Something is altered in form, such that the old ways of measuring it no longer hold. An organization, for instance, installs a new accounting system rather than seeking to improve the current system. The training program is abandoned, in favor of structural-technical consultation, rather than being lengthened.

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Second-order change is always abrupt and noticeable. It may arise from a series of smaller, first-order changes that eventually require a second-order change: "the straw that broke the camel's back." To keep with the straw metaphor, one piece of straw which is placed on the ground becomes two pieces of straw when a second piece is set down beside it. At some point, when a certain number of pieces of straw are laid on top of one another, we no longer have pieces of straw, but rather a haystack. The haystack is a single, coherent whole—a system of sorts—that can be identified by a single word. A qualitative, second-order change has taken place, based on several, incremental first-order changes. Similarly, a child at some point becomes an adult. A group of people become an organization. A set of minor irritations become a problem.

First-order change involves gradual evolutionary alteration in some system. Second-order change involves abrupt revolutionary alteration. Typically, the changes we make in any social institution or in our own individual lives are either evolutionary or revolutionary in nature. While the end of a first-order, evolutionary change may represent a qualitative difference from the beginning, each change that is made will be minimal and may represent no qualitative difference from the immediately preceding change. The change can be considered transitional rather than transformational—in Thomas Kuhn's terms, a part of "normal science" rather than a "paradigm shift". Thus, the change is likely to be more acceptable and less stressful for a greater number of people than would be the case if the change were large and abrupt. This incremental strategy of personal and social change holds one major disadvantage. In the slow, progressive movement toward some change goal, the sense of direction and motivation to be found at the beginning of the change initiative may be lost. As a result, the change effort may simply fade away before the goal is attained ("not with a bang, but a whimper") or the change effort may become misguided and end at a quite different point from that first intended.

Second-order, revolutionary change represents a profound transformation in the person or institution—a paradigm shift. Because the change is abrupt, the motivation to begin the change and a sense of the direction that the change should take is usually not lost during the course of the change. Levels of stress, however, and resistance to this transformational change will be great. Typically, power and manipulation are required to bring about this type of change. Alternatively, one can adopt a strategy that involves careful movement between first and second order change between evolution and revolution. It

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is a real challenge to find this strategy of movement between first and second order change. An effective (and appreciative) consultant can be of great value in helping to guide this movement, as we will try to demonstrate throughout this series of essays.