

Knowing Change Preferences Is a Boon for Leaders

Christopher Musselwhite

How people deal with change—both creating it and responding to it—is a function of identifiable individual preferences. Whether people see change as a danger, a challenge, or an opportunity, they have individual preferences that reflect their relationship to structure, rules, and authority.

Gaining knowledge of these preferences can enable leaders to manage groups and organizations more effectively in situations of change and to better understand disagreements with others in such situations. Leaders can leverage this knowledge to create the powerful advantage of collaboration—directing collective energy into creating and producing desired outcomes rather than letting it go into blaming, defending, and fighting about the change process itself.

For ages people have debated over the best way to approach change. People in various arenas, from politics to economics and from business to education, have argued over evolution versus revolution, incrementalism versus innovation, reform versus reinvention, and total quality management versus reengineering. Often these debates have had an either-or quality; one approach is right and the other is wrong. Such a framework for change frequently produces conflict,

misunderstanding, strong-arming, and missed opportunities—not the outcomes envisioned by the change initiators.

Taking the time to understand the contributions of each of three individual change style types—*conservers*, *pragmatists*, and *originators*—can help leaders become better at recognizing and managing the effective

To create improvements, conservers prefer working within existing policies, processes, and procedures.

Conservers favor a total quality management and continuous improvement approach to organizational change. They may, in fact, see the need for substantial systemic changes but prefer to make such changes gradually. Conservers want to keep the current system working smoothly and will resist decisions and efforts that they perceive will create chaos.

Conservers will ask the hard questions of proposed change: How will this be better than what we have now? Why is the standard practice we have followed all this time no longer acceptable? Who will be affected by this proposed change? What are the political implications of the change? What will this cost? What is the return on investment? What is the loss in organizational productivity and effectiveness resulting from these changes?

Used effectively, these questions are beneficial to any organization undergoing change. Used ineffectively, they create the appearance of obstruction and foot-dragging.

Understanding the contributions of each of three individual change style types can help leaders facilitate collaboration and teamwork.

and ineffective behaviors of each preference and, as a result, at facilitating collaboration and teamwork.

THE EVOLUTIONISTS

At one end of the change style continuum are the conservers. They are good at defining and clarifying current reality. Working together to build on what is already working is the preferred path to change for a conserver.

THE SITUATIONALISTS

Pragmatists tend to focus more on viable results—getting the job done—than on challenging or preserving existing structures. They often see merit in both an evolutionary and a revolutionary approach and are moti-

Editor's note: In Focus is an occasional series that takes close looks at specific topics of importance to leadership and leaders.

vated more to find adequate and timely solutions to problems than to advance ideologies.

Eric Schmidt, currently chairman and CEO of Google, was appointed CEO of networking software maker Novell in 1997. He faced a daunting turnaround—the company was in dire straits, with Microsoft’s Windows NT operating system competing aggressively for the same market. In the face of this crisis, Schmidt said his biggest challenge was retaining the smartest employees. His strategy was captured in a 2001 *Harvard Business Review* interview:

I’ve found that the best way to manage smart people is to let them self-organize so they can operate both inside and outside the management hierarchy. They report to a manager but they also have the latitude to work on projects that interest them, regardless of whether they originate with their own manager. You tell them: “Look, I don’t know how to solve this problem, so why don’t you throw yourself at it and figure it out? Take the time and resources you need, and get it right.” If they get frustrated and need to blow off steam, you invite them to talk with you directly—no go-betweens. At the same time, you discuss this new component of the person’s work directly with his or her manager, and there are no reprisals when a smart person works outside a manager’s jurisdiction.

Pragmatists tend to focus on the actions required to move a situation from the current or past reality toward a new desired outcome. They want to solve problems and bring plausible ideas into reality. They tend to seek a balanced inquiry through an exploration of multiple perspectives.

THE REVOLUTIONARIES

Originators like to challenge current structures and systems. They encour-

age the exploration of new and alternative ideas and suggest possibilities that others have not imagined.

Strategy guru Gary Hamel is a strong advocate of revolutionary change. In his book *Leading the Revolution* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000), he writes:

We live in a world where precedent has lost much of its imperial power. Rather than wasting energy in

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defending incrementalism against an imagined foe, corporate leaders should be working to build an innovative pipeline that is chock full of the kind of precedent-busting ideas that have the power to transform industries and to create new wealth. Oh, and on a final word to shareholders: Beware of the CEOs whose ambitions stretch no further than the incremental.

Originators tend to focus on new possibilities, vision, and direction. They encourage organizations to begin new tasks sooner rather than later. They often show a propensity for action but may not be effective implementers.

FREQUENT ENCOUNTERS

The three change style preferences fall along a linear continuum extending from conservers at one extreme to originators at the other, with pragmatists in the middle. About 25 percent of the general population are conservers and another 25 percent are originators; the rest are pragmatists.

Change style preferences are collections of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and thought processes that describe how people accept, manage, and instigate change. People encounter these preferences in various degrees every day in their dealings with others and exhibit their own preferences just as readily when faced with an opportunity for change.

Now that we know the characteristics of conservers, pragmatists, and originators, let’s explore how they deal with change.

Conservers prefer to work within the existing structure and to create incremental changes. When facing change, conservers

- Generally appear deliberate, disciplined, and organized.
- Prefer change that maintains the current structure.
- May operate from conventional assumptions.
- Enjoy predictability.
- May appear cautious and inflexible.
- Honor tradition and established practice.

Here’s a scenario that we can use to compare the typical viewpoints of conservers, pragmatists, and originators.

You are headed home late at night on a familiar stretch of highway. Yours is the only car on the road. As you approach the intersection the light changes from green to yellow. You feel a momentary frustration because you know from experience that this light has a long cycle and seems to stay red forever. What do you do?

If you are a conserver, you regard traffic lights as essential. Conservers appreciate the rules and value traffic lights for what they represent (a system for ensuring safety and order). They value the rules not so much for the sake of rules but for what rules represent. They know that without rules to guide drivers, roads would be chaotic places. Traffic lights bring order to the roadways and ensure against chaos. As a consequence, conservers will likely sit through a red light late at night with no other cars in sight and wait patiently until the light changes before proceeding.

Conservers also

- Prefer gradual and incremental change. They are evolutionists rather than revolutionists. They want to see the existing structure retained with improvements. They prefer to solve problems and to improve efficiency while maintaining the continuity and stability of current systems and structure.

- Prefer a secure work environment that is free from unexpected disruptions and surprise changes. They prefer predictability and are attracted to stable, structured, and orderly workplaces. They like to be rewarded for contributing at a steady and consistent pace. They appreciate having the time and a place for reflection.

- Appear disciplined and organized. They notice details and act deliberately. They know the rules, regulations, and policies of the domains in which they live and work. They prefer to live by these rules.

- Prefer tested and proven solutions. They look for proven examples of what has worked elsewhere. They want to see a track record with evidence of effective performance. They embrace tradition and convention and rely on the predictability that experience affords.

Pragmatists deal in outcomes and seek practical, functional solutions to

problems. When facing change, pragmatists

- May appear practical, agreeable, and flexible.
- Operate as mediators and catalysts for understanding.
- Are open to both sides of an argument.
- May take a middle-of-the-road approach.
- Appear team oriented.

Pragmatists respect the purpose of the traffic light but also appreciate when it is appropriate and when it is not. Late at night, with no other cars in sight, a pragmatist is likely to come to a full stop, look carefully for cross traffic and for a police car, then pro-

Pragmatists seek compromise to arrive at a solution that provides a workable outcome.

ceed. Pragmatists do not object to breaking the rules on moral grounds; they just want to ensure that the purpose of the rule has been served and that they do not get caught. For the pragmatist, the go-no-go decision may not be so much about the merits of traffic lights and laws as it is about the consequences of breaching the rules.

Pragmatists also

- Are the peacemakers and the middle-of-the-roaders. They seek compromise to arrive at a solution that provides a workable outcome. If necessary, they will settle for a solution that is less than optimal rather than be stuck in a no-action situation.
- Often appear to be reasonable and practical. They listen to support-

ing arguments and look for practical results that accomplish the intended goals, often without regard to politics or egos.

- Are usually agreeable and flexible. They can see arguments from different perspectives and can value the contributions of others. At the same time, their flexibility may allow them to be pulled in many directions and can appear to be indecisiveness. In their willingness to seek a compromise position, pragmatists sometimes appear to be noncommittal. Others may regard them as too quick to compromise.

- Like change that emphasizes practical and workable outcomes. They focus on the results and the effective functioning of the organizational system rather than on the organizational structure or politics. If adjusting the existing structure rather than reengineering it presents a workable solution, pragmatists will favor this solution because it is faster to implement. If the simple solution is not workable, they will readily accept making a more radical change.

- Appear to be more team oriented than do either conservers or originators. Pragmatists are interested in hearing all ideas and getting everyone's perceptions on the table for the group's consideration.

- Are less likely than originators or conservers to have hidden agendas. Pragmatists tend to have fewer axes to grind and points to prove than those who are committed to maintaining or challenging the status quo.

- Are mediators. Because pragmatists see the views of both conservers and originators, they often serve as bridges of understanding between the two groups. The merit they are willing to grant to both perspectives also supports their unique role in bridging between factions and in providing objective critiques.

- Like an action-oriented workplace that engages others in a harmonious and participative atmosphere. Pragmatists prefer an environment

that is flexible and adaptive, one that responds to current pressures. They also like to be involved in hands-on experiences rather than theoretical discussions. They want adequate opportunities to discuss various options with co-workers. When harmony is not possible, pragmatists may withdraw from the debate or settle for a less-than-optimal solution.

Originators sometimes favor something that's different simply because it is different. When facing change, originators

- May appear unorganized, undisciplined, unconventional, and spontaneous.
- Prefer change that challenges current structure.
- Will likely challenge accepted assumptions.
- Enjoy risk and uncertainty.
- May appear visionary and systemic in their thinking.
- May be impractical and miss important details.
- Can treat accepted policies and procedures with little regard.

Originators see the traffic light as serving the specific purpose of controlling traffic so people do not get hurt. They respect the purpose, not the rule. From their perspective, the traffic light imposes limitations on their freedom to drive. These limitations are acceptable to them when danger is present. If they do not perceive that a danger is present, then the traffic light has no intrinsic value to them. They believe they should not be penalized for moving through the red light if no cars are coming. "I can decide when it's safe to proceed," they say.

Originators also

- Prefer quick and expansive change. They favor revolution over evolution. They approach life as an imperative to discard the old and to bring in the new as often and as

quickly as possible. They will add to and build on the ideas of others, taking the thinking in directions that others may not see as helpful or connected, even though the originator's logic makes perfect sense to him or her.

- Are often viewed in organizations as change agents. They may be the ones who cause new things to happen and encourage goals to be accomplished in new ways.

• Tend to loathe repetitive tasks. Doing the same job in the same way with the expectation of getting the same result holds no charm for origi-

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nators. When a job does not require creativity or ingenuity, they may look for an alternative way to do the job. If they cannot find one, they may abandon the job.

- May appear to be undisciplined and unconventional. They may seem to be making up rules as they go along and perhaps experimenting. Desks may be cluttered and work spaces chaotic, suggesting disorganization. However, an originator can often reach into an overwhelming pile of papers and books and produce the very document he or she was asked to retrieve. Originators may simply have a different system of organization.

• Often challenge existing assumptions, rules, and regulations. Tradition and history are of less value to originators than are future possibilities.

- Are often regarded as visionary, out-of-the-box thinkers. They frequently attempt to solve problems in

ways that challenge existing norms. They tend to favor the new and the different, the innovative and the adventurous. They like to try untested solutions, convinced by their own evaluations that these ideas will work.

- May appear to be impulsive. They are often ready and eager to move ahead, even though it appears that they have not closely considered the consequences of the proposed change. Originators may take new and unexpected directions.

• Are risk takers. They are willing to take a calculated risk to test out new methods and approaches when they are convinced of an idea's value.

EACH ADDS VALUE

Although leaders may be closely described by the characteristics of a particular change style, they are not limited to only those behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Change styles are preferences. As is the case with left-handedness or right-handedness, leaders have distinct and natural preferences, but they also maintain the capacity to develop other skills through conscious effort.

To consciously choose to behave differently, leaders must first be aware of their personal preferences. With that awareness, they can practice behaviors that are appropriate for the situation at hand, as opposed to unconsciously doing whatever comes naturally. Effective leaders realize that no one change style is better than another or more preferable from an organization's perspective. Indeed, each change style preference adds value to the organization when it is used and managed effectively. ✍

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