



A Good, Simple Theory for Change

By Otis White

There's a saying that "nothing is as practical as a good theory." I'd add to that "a good, simple theory." So let me share with you a good, simple theory that has helped me endless times in my work with organizations and communities: $Change = D \times M \times P$.

I'll explain the algebra shortly. But first, let me tell you why this theory is so valuable. Nearly all the work I do involves facilitating change of some sort.

The change can be clearly understood — a group of leaders knows the local economy is in shambles and action is needed right now — or it can be a vague feeling that something isn't right. Either way, my job is to help narrow the agenda to a few high-priority items, connect this agenda with the public's needs and wishes, and come up with strategies for implementation.

If this sounds simple, it isn't. Communities and broader jurisdictions, like regions and states, are complex, ever-shifting environments, devilishly difficult to read accurately. What I've needed is a good, simple theory to help keep my bearings on what I've done so far to create change — and what still needs to be done.

Hence, $Change = D \times M \times P$.

Harvard Change Model

I was introduced to the theory by David Connell, an executive at Georgia Power Co., and former head of the corporate university at Southern Co., Georgia Power's parent. David learned the theory from consultants who pioneered it and other change theories at Harvard Business School. (It is commonly called the Harvard Change Model.) David has used it scores of times within Southern Co., and business consultants have used it in hundreds of corporations. All I've done is apply it to a different setting, communities.

Here's what it means. Change is a function of (D) *dissatisfaction with the status quo*, (M) a clear, accepted *model for the future*, and (P) a well-designed *plan of implementation*. Without these three elements — dissatisfaction, a model of the way things could be and a step-by-step plan for getting from the present situation to that model — there will be no change.

David is an engineer by training, and he likes to point out that this is a formula. "If any of these elements is zero, what do you get?" he asks. "Zero. No change."



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The Magic of Multiplication

But the real magic, he goes on, is in the multiplication. If you could set values for these elements — the amount and scope of dissatisfaction, the quality of the model, the clarity and acceptance of the plan of implementation — you'd find the level of change would rise and fall dramatically.

Putting it in mathematical terms, if dissatisfaction is rated 1, the model's quality is 1, and the plan is 1, then the amount of change you can expect is 1, very low ($1 = 1 \times 1 \times 1$). But if you could raise only slightly the level of dissatisfaction, the quality of the model and the acceptance of the plan, wonderful things would happen ($12 = 2 \times 3 \times 2$). Raise them more and truly astonishing things occur ($120 = 5 \times 6 \times 4$).

Don't be sidetracked by the math, though. The power of this good, simple theory is that it keeps you focused on the three critical elements, D, M and P.

Three Important Uses

I use it three ways. Before I get involved in a project, I use it to measure the likelihood of success. (Who is dissatisfied with the current situation? If we could fix this problem, how would things be different? What are the most important first steps to take?)

In the midst of projects, I use it to track our progress. (Have we established a case for change? Are enough people convinced? Have participants described convincingly what the future might look like if these problems are solved? Do we know step-by-step how to pull together resources and apply them to these problems?)

And at the end, I use the theory to judge my own performance. If I'm disappointed with the level of change, I review each element to see where we could have done a better job.

Staying Focused on the Basics

There are limits to even the best theories. This one doesn't, for example, take into consideration the fractiousness of organizations or communities.

In some places, social capital is so low that the only dissatisfaction that's felt among leaders is the anger they feel toward each other. Getting these low-trust places to focus on any other sources of dissatisfaction is difficult; getting them to suspend their ancient rivalries to work on a model for the future and a plan of implementation is even more difficult.

Still, I recommend this good, simple theory for anyone who's contemplating large-scale change. It will keep you focused on the basics. And that's what the best theories are for.

About Civic Strategies

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