

## **Change Management Adventures**



# **Change Management Adventures**

**28 STORIES TO DEVELOP  
YOUR EXPERTISE**

**Jaap Boonstra**

**Warden Press**

*For everyone who desires change*

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Travelling is looking at yourself against a different background.



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# About this book

Change: many of us are right in the thick of it. Organisations are on the move in full swing, and that is certainly something we notice, as managers, employees, advisors and leaders. We are changing too, because we follow our dreams and ambitions or because our dream is suddenly disrupted. People have even become professionals in change. They work on change in positions such as change manager, project leader, organisation advisor, entrepreneur and administrator. The lessons in this book are reflections and inspiration for people involved in change. There are various ways you can read this book.

*Are you a manager, entrepreneur or administrator?*

Take your time to look through the book. There is a good chance you will pick up ideas you can use in the changes you are involved in. The reflections in this book help you give shape to change processes and invite you to reflect on your own role. You will probably recognise yourself in some of the stories.

*Are you a change manager, project leader or advisor?*

First take a look at what stage of the change you are working on, and start with the chapter which best suits that stage. From there you can look ahead so you can avoid pitfalls, or you can look back to use the stories as a learning experience. The lessons help you bring about those

changes successfully, and also help you develop further as a professional.

*Are you an employee in a company?*

Maybe an organisational change has just been announced, or you are in the middle of one; choose the lesson whose title stimulates or appeals to you the most. There is a good chance you will recognise things in the story. The lessons can help you not to wait and see, but to play a role yourself in the change.

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*Are you a student who is interested in organisational change?*

In that case, it will be useful to read the book from cover to cover. The stories will give you a good impression of how a change process is built up and all the things it involves. If you want an overview first, you can also start with the reflections at the back. When you read some stories, you could be surprised at how simple change can be. Yet other stories will amaze you with the invisible complexities of change.

*Are you the partner of a manager or advisor?*

It is fun to read what all those people in organisations get so fussed about (and why your partner has to stay behind and work late so often!) There is certainly enough to laugh about in the stories in this book.

# Change is an adventure

Every year I go on a hike for a few weeks in the mountains to build up energy again. This trip gives me the space to contemplate and look back on the past year. I always ask myself three questions: What gave me pleasure and energy? Am I happy with what I am doing and who I am? What route do I envisage for myself for the coming year and the years after that? Hiking in the mountains is a real passion of mine: I love the beauty of nature and the peace it gives me while I am busy physically. For me, a mountain trip is an adventure I like to experience together with friends.

Changing organisations is also an adventure for me, just like a mountain trip through an unknown landscape. It is like an unorganised trip you tackle if you are well prepared yourself. It is rare to work on change alone, and that definitely does not happen in organisations. You look for your fellow travellers and companions and you set out together. According to a Chinese proverb, before you set out on a trip, you have to sit down. You wonder what the landscape looks like and what the climate is like. You choose your companions and ask them to travel with you. You check the map for differences in altitude and think about the possible routes. You discuss the nicest route with your companions and agree on what you will take with you.

You leave early on the first day: you want to enjoy the trip and you don't want to have to put your tent up too late. The map is useful for finding your way. But the map is

not the landscape. The landscape is more colourful, more impressive, more changeable too. And what your map certainly doesn't show is the weather. The weather makes a big difference on a trip. A glorious day puts the whole landscape in a clear perspective and offers the most beautiful views. On a cloudy, rainy day you have no view any more, and you can't see the path properly. It can be rough, and you don't really want to relax in this weather. And yet, this kind of day with its hardships can also have its charm – although usually not till afterwards. If you are travelling through unknown territory, it is essential to keep a good eye on the weather conditions. If there is a snowstorm or thunderstorm, it can be wise to seek shelter and mark time. Of course you have a destination you want to reach, and you have planned your stages and rest days carefully. But it is not so much the destination which counts as the trip itself which provides enjoyment, which demands stamina, and in which you can enjoy the views.

If you prefer an organised trip with an agreed arrangement decided in advance, then this book is not right for you. But you do want to tackle the adventure? Well, come along on this trip with me. There are seven stages to our trip:

1. Orientation of the area;
2. Getting to the bottom of the area;
3. Imagining ambitions;
4. Travelling in the unknown;
5. Tackling the unexpected;
6. Looking for places to cross;
7. Resting and recuperating.

Would you like to come along?

# **Orientation of the land**

When we set out on a journey, we start by familiarising ourselves with the area. We gather information and try to form a picture for ourselves. We look where the nicest views are and the most difficult parts. We examine the options with an open mind. What is our idea, what do we have in mind? What kind of landscape or area do we want to explore, and what kind of adventure do we want to take on? We exchange pictures and experiences and choose where our journey will start.

# Strategically naïve

## *The quality of untamed curiosity*

At university I learned you should make a competition analysis before you map out a route for organisational change. So it was only logical for me in my first change assignment to ask the board chairman, Richard, whether I could have the annual reports of the most important rivals for the past five years. Richard hesitated briefly before answering.

'Ah... yes, of course. I'll make sure you have them within two weeks.'

And indeed, within two weeks I had a pile of annual reports of the competition on my desk. It was very exciting to analyse those reports. Richard was also extremely interested in the analyses I made, and we had absorbing discussions about them. It was my own personal fascination to go deeply into the effects of new information systems on people's work and the organisation of the work processes. I found it curious that so few people had a picture of the work processes. All of them had various diagrams with organisation charts, but I didn't find these all that interesting. It was more fascinating to find out how a question or wish of a customer went through all kinds of departments and what those departments did with them. I had wonderful conversations with everyone I asked about what they did precisely. It did amaze me that the work had to go through so many channels, and that it took such a long time before a customer got answers to their ques-

tion. Richard's attention was riveted each time I shared my observations with him.

I was surprised when Richard asked whether I would like to join the team which was supervising a merger. Without really thinking about the question, I replied immediately: 'Yes, that would be nice.'

Four weeks later, Richard asked me how things were going in the merger team.

18 'Well, you can forget the word "team", because that is one thing it certainly is not,' I answered impulsively.

'What do you mean, not a team?' he asked me.

'Nobody is working together. There is a *leaden-footed* member in the team who doesn't want to change anything at all, a *scaredy-cat* who won't take any risks, and a *watch-dog* who just protects his own interests.'

After listening to my answer, Richard gave me a penetrating look. A smile appeared on his face: 'Wouldn't you like to be project leader of the merger team?'

'Yes, sure,' I answered, 'but then it has to be a different team.'

And that is how I became project leader of a merger process. At the time I thought it was quite normal, even though I had only just turned twenty-six.

The merger was completed successfully, and of course I was proud of the result achieved. At the end, I looked back over the period with Richard. I asked him why he had hesitated when reacting to my request for the annual reports of rival companies, and why he had asked me to be project leader. His answers taught me a great deal.

'We didn't have any reports at all of our rivals. Your question made me realise that in our company we didn't understand our market and our rivals enough, and that the strategy department was not working on competitive strategy in any case. Your question was very helpful for me and for the company. I asked you to be project leader

because your youthful enthusiasm and frankness are stimulating for others. What's more, you were the only person in the company who was not worried about jobs and what the tools should look like, and the only person who really understood the work processes and the best way to organise them. And you asked the right questions every time: the questions we never ask ourselves because it is all so self-evident. But in mergers nothing is self-evident, that's when you have to reinvent everything. I thought the best moment was when you came to me, dejected, because of a conflict you had with one of the directors. When you explained to me so openly what had gone wrong, I realised that it very rarely happens that someone comes to me to tell me about something he hasn't done right. Since that time I have been much more conscious in my dealings with weak signals, and I have delved more deeply into discussions. You taught me a great deal with your untamed curiosity and your open questions.'

I have retained my curiosity and I still ask frank questions. Mapping out work processes continues to fascinate me, as does talking with people who do the work. Knowledge of customer processes and work processes is essential if you want to achieve change. It doesn't hurt to know your rivals and what is going on in the wider surroundings. Untamed curiosity is necessary where change is concerned.

It was only later that I realised that the merger's success was not due to me, but that I had been coached almost invisibly by someone who gave me confidence and enjoyed seeing others grow in their role. Richard gave me the space and confidence and was always available if I sometimes didn't know any more what I was doing. I learned a lot from him.

## Despondent

*Taking your feelings seriously and getting involved*

20 At a certain moment, I received a call from a bank director. Whether he could invite me for a discussion about a change process happening at the bank. He wanted to hear my opinion. He already hinted during the telephone call that the change was not going entirely according to plan. That aroused my curiosity, and I decided to accept his invitation.

I reported to the bank reception on a Tuesday afternoon. It was a stately hall with classical paintings of beautiful landscapes and portraits of dignified people. Someone came for me quickly, and I was taken to a room where an older gentleman came towards me.

'Good of you to come. I would like to hear your view on a change process we are working on here.' And he got straight down to business. 'We are working on the integration of bank and insurance activities. We are convinced that this is the future. It is how we can serve our customers better and offer them more products. We started off well and explained everything clearly. But once we started on the implementation, it turned out that not a lot was actually clear. We didn't get a step further.'

I asked professionally: 'What exactly did you do?'

His answer showed that the new business concept had been presented firmly. A project group had been appointed with managers from both sections, and they had been given clear instructions.

'How did it go then?' I asked calmly.

This question was followed by a deep sigh. 'We did all kinds of things. The business processes were identified and listed, we set up a front office and a back office, sales managers were appointed and trained, we developed new services and put them on the market.' As the director said this, I started feeling worried. 'What did these actions result in?'

There was a moment of anxious silence. 'In a big mess. We have not made any progress at all. The people from the bank business didn't want anything to do with insurance. And the insurers had all kinds of reasons why they believed banks and insurances could not go together. The director of bank affairs and the director of insurance no longer speak to each other, the integration is stuck and the project leader is at home with a serious nervous breakdown.'

My worried feeling grew and while I thought about how awkwardly they had tackled this, I asked: 'Has the customer noticed anything?'

The director looked gloomy. 'Nothing... well, nothing positive. The wealthy customers especially have complaints. They say they have to deal with too many people and they are offered products they don't want. Actually they are very clear: they want convenience, but they get fuss.'

I began to feel increasingly despondent, but still asked another question. 'What have you done yourself about this so far?'

Another silence, which now became painful. 'Hmm, I managed the strategy process together with the external agency. I appointed the project leader and gave him a clear assignment, and of course I told the directors that they really had to cooperate with each other.'

While he spoke, I could only think: this is terrible. This man earns six hundred thousand a year and has done

everything clumsily. He has no vision and does not assume leadership. I felt despondent and everything in me screamed that I should not want to be involved in this change in any way. At the same time, I felt a knot in my stomach and I realised that I could not behave professionally if I felt that way about him. What do you do in that kind of situation?

I reacted from my feelings. 'Your story makes me feel very despondent. I don't see any role for myself in this.'

22 The director gave me a surprised look. 'Do you feel that way too? I thought I was the only one.'

His look changed and his posture now revealed dismay. So there we sat.

He continued quietly: 'What makes you feel despondent?'

I told him I had the impression that everything had been tackled extremely stupidly, that I had been working for years to share knowledge about change and that I had apparently not succeeded in that.

The director was visibly shocked. After a moment, he asked with an emotional voice: 'But don't you want to share your knowledge precisely in this situation?'

Once there is some rapprochement on an emotional level and you have looked each other deep in the eyes, you have laid the basis of the relationship, and it is difficult to break that. Only when everyone dares to reveal their weak side in a discussion does it become worthwhile to get down to work together. I took on the change process at this bank together with the director, and we learned a lot from the process and from each other. The most important learning experience is perhaps that new energy can arise from despondency and appreciation can grow from rapprochement. It is precisely at the start of a change process that relationships of trust are essential so that you can make something of it.

## Know what you stand for

### *Open-minded observation and appreciative inquiry*

After fifteen years of consultancy work in the financial sector, I wanted to direct my efforts towards education, youth care and safety in neighbourhoods and districts. At the time there was a shortage of teachers and high rates of student dropouts and violence in education. My attention was drawn by a series of newspaper articles about a private school in a rural area.

'A capitalistic profiteer who must be stopped' was one headline. 'This is a typical example of a divide in society where rich people can organise good education for their children and other children remain disadvantaged,' was the line of another newspaper article. 'As far as special education is concerned, there has to be space for it and otherwise it should be forbidden,' was a third opinion.

Clearly something was going on here, since the newspapers were full of it. Because education fascinated me, I decided to contact the principal of that private school.

'Good afternoon. This is Jaap Boonstra. I have worked for some time on issues in education. You and your school are currently in all the newspapers. I wondered whether I might be able to come and talk with you.'

The voice on the other end of the line was friendly. 'Of course! You are very welcome. When would you like to come?'

I was a little surprised by this reaction. 'But aren't you very busy? You are in all the newspapers.'

The answer was striking: 'Oh Mr Boonstra, I may be in all the newspapers and they may talk a lot about me, but nobody talks with me. You are the first person to call. You are very welcome.'

One Wednesday afternoon I went to the school. The school gave a familiar impression. I was greeted by David, the principal. In his office, I opened the conversation to break the ice: 'May I ask you something: why did you start a private school?'

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David looked at me: 'That's a long story. You should know that education is my life's passion. It energises me to see the future in the eyes of children. I am a teacher, and that is what I stand for. I used to be a principal at a small school in the province of Friesland. That was fantastic. You knew all the children and all the parents. The school was part of the community. But at a certain moment the school became too small to qualify for funding. We merged with another school, and I was principal of the merged school. That process repeated itself six times. I ended up being principal of a combined school with 900 students. All I was doing was rosters, regulations, building maintenance, funding, educational innovation, you name it. But I never saw students any more. I lost my passion, and I had a serious breakdown. That gave me the chance to reflect on what I actually stand for. I am a teacher and I want to contribute to the future of children. That is my profession, and that is what I want to do. My dream was to work again in a small school where I would know all the parents. Because if you know the parents, you know the students. You know what is happening and you can experience the children in person in their development. The school becomes part of the community again. I calculated that I can know about 150 parents personally. That works out at a school of around 100 students. But that didn't work, because it wasn't in line with the guidelines.

I tried everything: discussions at the ministry, compensation arrangements, experiment requests. Nothing was possible. The only thing I could do was start my own private school.'

I was impressed by his story. I asked David: 'But what about the shortage of teachers?'

'Well, I don't have that problem at all. The news that here we really pay attention to the students again is spreading like wildfire. I get twelve open applications every week from people who want to come and work here.'

'And sickness absence? How do you cope with that? That was another argument for large-scale education.'

That was not a problem according to David. 'Absence is due mainly to pregnancy. Well, you know that months in advance, so you can arrange things. And for long-term sickness absence you can also find solutions fairly fast. It is absolutely no problem to take care of short-term absence: those are the best lessons of all.'

I looked at him in astonishment. 'Yes, that's when we ask parents to jump in. We know them all. They come and give lessons about their profession or their passion. You couldn't wish for better career information. Often they are the most inspiring lessons. And the parents feel even more involved with the school that way too.'

'And violence at school?'

Now David looked at me in astonishment: 'We know all the students and their parents. We know what kinds of issues are at hand. Violence doesn't happen here. If it were to happen, we would see it coming and work on it.'

The idea that this was a capitalist profiteer could be thrown out. There was no question of a divide in education. Special education or not, that was beside the point. David knows who he is and what he wants to be. He took the initiative on his own and made renewal possible. If you know what you stand for, you are prepared to go against