

## AN INTRODUCTION TO VIRAL CHANGE™:

AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONVENTIONAL CULTURAL CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

By Leandro Herrero

The traditional way of looking at cultural change is to define the desired culture up front and to map the necessary processes to achieve it. This approach usually includes massive communication programmes aimed at reaching all corners of the organization. It takes a rather logical and sequential view of things consistent with a traditional view of the organization as a cascade-down hierarchic system. It is generally assumed that the process will be slow and painful. However, it is well-known that many so-called cultural change programmes, or 'change management' in general, fail to achieve the original objectives..

There is an alternative way to install change and shape a new culture, which we call Viral Change™. Several principles sustain this different and successful approach:

**1. Behaviours take priority.** There is no change unless there is behavioural change. Change in processes and systems but with people continuing to act like before is not real change. The conventional approach assumes that behaviours will 'appear' as a consequence of the creation of new processes. From the behavioural sciences perspective - which is embedded in Viral Change™ - the reality is exactly the opposite. We first need to have the new behaviours in place in order to sustain the changes in working practices perhaps associated with a new structure.

**2. Behaviours create the culture.** The idea of 'culture' as a conceptual container that has beliefs, attitudes and other 'contents' is well embedded in our managerial thinking, but it is not terribly operational. In behavioural terms, the only visible things of 'a culture' are behaviours: what people do or don't do, what is or isn't allowed, what is or isn't rewarded, what will or won't take them places. Those norms are behavioural norms. If we want to create 'a culture', we need to install/change behaviours. A culture of accountability, for example, doesn't exist in the same way as buildings or departments do. We have individuals and groups behaving in particular and distinctive ways, which, if established as routines, allow us to label that culture in such a way.

**3. The organization is seen as networks of influence,** some of them visible, others not. Superimposed to the well-structured organization as pictured in organization charts, there is a network structure (people talking to each other, seeking information from others 'outside the team', loose conversations on common interests, stories going around, clusters of influence built upon prestige, experience, trust, etc.) which accounts for as much as 75% of the day-to-day organizational life. In fact, it has been proven that this network structure is responsible for a great deal of innovation, which the structured part of the organization (teams, committees and task forces) cannot provide so easily.

**4. A fascinating convergence of social (behavioural) sciences and better understanding of how networks work,** allow us to see change, management of change and/or cultural change with a new, fresh perspective. For example, network theory tells us that the distribution of nodes and connections within any network (people and the mechanisms of influence in the case of the internal social networks) is not a normal distribution, but a logarithmic one, a power law. That means: a few people have a high number of connections and therefore potential influence, and the majority of people have only few connections and consequently less influence.

**5. New behaviours** – which we have said are at the core of creating a new culture – **travel faster and better through the networks of influence** than through the traditional communication and training channels. Why? Because behaviours are very sensitive to imitation, role modelling and social copying. We can lecture about the merits of new behaviours and indeed create a sizeable communication programme for everybody to understand the rationale of those behaviours, but they will only become established once they are practiced by a critical mass of people and then progressively imitated.

**6. If behaviours travel better through influence, imitation and social copying, then networks of influence must play a key role in the spread of those behaviours.** As we said before, that influence is not distributed normally and evenly, so we must conclude that new behaviours will travel faster through those individuals with high

levels of influence and high connections. If we could identify those individuals and appeal to them (not to the entire organization) for help in the spread of the new ideas and the new behaviours, and make a compelling case for these people to help, we would be bypassing many months of painful 'communication to all'-processes and rational appeal. Peer-to-peer influence is far more powerful than management discourse.

**7. The spread of new behaviours** (to create a new culture) through networks of influence **has great similarities with** the spread of fashions, fads, new ideas (including scientific ones) or 'new processes'. Incidentally, it has a mathematical basis that mirrors the one behind what we know about **spread of physical infections**. Viral Change™ becomes de facto the creation of an internal epidemic of success – in whatever form 'success' has been defined, with its associated set of behaviours.

**8.** Due to the 'non-linear' characteristic of the organizational life (small events often create big reactions, trust is built slowly and can be destroyed after just a small breach, etc.), **we only need a small set of behaviours to create significant change**. For example, if 90% of the managers asked the routine question, "*Is there a better way of doing this?*" every single time in meetings, reviews, decision making processes, executions of strategies, etc.; and if that behaviour was progressively imitated in other less formal gatherings and/or in peer-to-peer interactions, we would de facto be creating an incredibly strong cultural platform for innovation, whether continuous improvement or discontinuous innovation. And we would be doing

so without the need to establish a formal 'programme for innovation'

**9. The group of individuals** who have the power to trigger the social infection (even if it's later spread further by others with lesser influential power) can be identified by various methods. But, very often, management can easily respond to the question, "*Do you know and have any of those people?*" In many cases, these people are well-known, they are present all across the organization and are not necessarily found in managerial ranks or even in high performance positions (although it is unlikely that the opposite is true, because poor performers don't tend to hold high credibility and exert great influence, at least not in a sustainable manner).

**10.** So whilst in the conventional change management approach a big set of objectives is communicated to all people via all management levels and over a lengthy period, **in Viral Change™ a small set of behaviours is initially spread by a small number of highly connected and influential people ('champions')**. Via endorsement, imitation and other forms of social copying, new routines and ways of doing are created that de facto constitute 'the new culture'.

Viral Change™ provides a sound - and proven successful – alternative way to many frustrating attempts to create change the traditional method. However, it requires a new style of leadership with focus on supporting the community of champions versus a more traditional command and control.

There are more theoretical and practical considerations around how change happens in Viral Change™ mode. These can't all be presented here due to limited space. To learn more about Viral Change™ you have several options:

1. You can **read a more comprehensive article** (8 pages) called *Changing the way we think about change: How does Viral Change™ work?* It can be downloaded from [www.thechalfontproject.com](http://www.thechalfontproject.com) (Home page)
2. You can **watch and listen to an audiovisual presentation** *Viral Change: the alternative to slow, painful and unsuccessful management of change in organizations* (25'). This can be also be found at [www.thechalfontproject.com](http://www.thechalfontproject.com)
3. You can **read a book** of the same title: *Viral Change: the alternative to slow, painful and unsuccessful management of change in organizations*, by Leandro Herrero (meetingminds, 2006). It can be found in major online bookshops such as [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk), [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com), etc.
4. You can **engage in a conversation with The Chalfont Project Ltd**, organizational architects. This can be requested through the contact section at [www.thechalfontproject.com](http://www.thechalfontproject.com).