Interview with Leandro Herrero
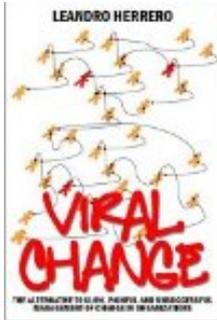
Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Leandro Herrero, who is here to talk about his new book "Viral Change: the Alternative to Slow, Painful and Unsuccessful Management of Change."

Leandro Herrero was a practicing psychiatrist for many years before holding senior leadership positions in top league business organizations. He currently leads The Chalfont Project Ltd, an international consulting group of organizational architects, which focuses on organizational innovation, behavioral change management, leadership and human collaboration.

Tyler: Welcome, Leandro. To begin, will you tell us a little bit of your own personal background and what inspired you to write "Viral Change"?

Leandro: I am an organizational architect, consulting with organizations to improve their capabilities for innovation, effectiveness, leadership and ability to implement change, including cultural change. As you said, I am also a medical doctor and I began my career with 15 years in medical/psychiatric practice followed by another 15 years in senior management of several pharmaceutical companies. Six years ago I embarked on my third career when I founded The Chalfont Project, now an international consulting group. My vision for The Chalfont Project really began when I was writing the thesis for my business degree; I took the opportunity to stand back and assess what had worked for me and most importantly WHY it had worked. I became evangelical about my findings, writing widely and accepting an appointment as Visiting Professor for a prestigious business school in Mexico before taking the step to found The Chalfont Project.
During my years of hands on experience in leading companies, I have been interested in one single theme with many different angles: why the organizational fabric of a company determines how productive, innovative and attractive to people it is going to be. In particular, I focus on the role behaviors play in that organizational fabric.

"Viral change" is one of three management books I have written in recent years, drawing on the results of my consulting practice, business experience and the application of my behavioural and social sciences background.

Tyler: Leandro, your book's subtitle says the book is the "Alternative to Slow, Painful and Unsuccessful Management of Change." You are basically saying that most conventional change management programs fail. Would you explain why that is the case?

Leandro: The track record of so-called 'change management programmes,' whether broad, concerted or systematic attempts to 'manage change,' is not great. People have traditionally taken a mechano-hydraulic approach to these programs: push from the top, get at the bottom. It may all be well mapped in terms of processes, usually sequential, but many

initiatives of this kind fail. Take cultural change. We have been taught that this is something very difficult, long term, hard and painful. However, there are numerous examples where significant cultural changes have happened almost overnight. A new CEO, for example, may consciously or not, install a series of norms, often very simple, that are rapidly imitated, spreading and transforming life in the organization. There is one of these examples at the beginning of my book. It seems as if we see these things happening everyday but when we try to formalize 'a programme' for the organization, it all becomes slow and painful. People see change management as a well orchestrated chain of events, usually with massive communications, trying to involve everybody in the firm. It doesn't work I am afraid. I am proposing an alternative model that works faster, creates more sustainable changes and is not top-down. Incidentally, the terminology itself is very contaminated. IT has skillfully hijacked the term and in that context it is associated with the implementation of large scale IT programmes.

Tyler: Why did you choose the word "Viral" for part of your title?

Leandro: Because the methodology explained follows the same principles as a viral infection which in itself is similar to the 'production' of a fashion. I am interested in creating internal infections of success, where success—in whatever form the firm defines it—becomes a fashion. The process is viral, almost appearing random, not a sequential top-down communication and training programme. This is the key to change in understanding how new ideas, new ways of working, spread. The viral route is the one that makes sense once you have understood how organizations work and how their internal networks behave.

Tyler: You begin "Viral Change" by listing some of the key assumptions people have about change which are not true. Will you tell us about a couple of the most significant of these assumptions and why these assumptions are incorrect?

Leandro: One assumption repeated constantly is that 'people are resistant to change.' This is nonsense from a biological viewpoint: we are change. I often begin some of my public or in-house programmes with a series of questions projected on a big screen: who (in the audience) has moved house more than once? Who has moved countries? Who has learnt a second language? Who has children? Who has seen their parents decline? Who has moved jobs? Who has moved to a new industry? Invariably I get lots and lots of hands up. I am trying to make the point that we have participated in these actions, not resisted. They weren't done to us with us resisting all the way. We are in constant change. So why do we keep repeating the mantra like parrots? We see people doing things that look like resistance to change, that is true, but that is a different thing. And people do this largely when they feel they lose control over their lives or change has been imposed. Then, they 'resist,' but not because they are resistant. You see, the linguistic trick is in the 'are.' By accepting this a priori, then anything we do is going to be against it, against this 'natural condition' of 'being naturally resistant.' It is going to be difficult and slow—and probably expensive. This is a fantastic alibi to justify managerial incompetence!

Another assumption is that change must start from the top. Again, just by opening the corporate windows to the external world, people can see multiple places—political, social— where change has started, far from the top, from the peripheral of things! Many cultural changes or 'new ideas change' start at grass roots, or simply, by the existence of a critical mass of people doing things in a different way. When we get to the corporate world, we look up in the organization chart and say, it must start 'there' and then come down. Why? It seems that we have a set of laws for the corporate world and another set for the rest of 'life'!

Tyler: Leandro, what about "Viral Change" is different from most change management programs?

Leandro: In traditional change management mode, given a big problem or set of problems or challenges, it is assumed that they will need a big set of actions and multiple initiatives cascaded down, involving all levels of management usually in the form of a massive communication system. In "Viral Change" mode a small set of behaviors, endorsed, modeled and spread by a small number of people with some degree of influence, creates rapid diffusion of these new ideas and subsequent sustainable change. We do not need to 'touch' every single person in the organization. Changes spread and get established via the internal viral networks of influence. In the book I call the traditional way 'the tsunami' approach in contrast to the 'butterfly approach' that is represented by Viral Change. These approaches are opposite both in philosophy and action.

Tyler: What made you decide to put your philosophy about creating change into a book?

Leandro: When a particular theoretical, solid ground framework is tested in real life and it works extraordinarily well, it is the right time to articulate it properly, don't you think? This is the case of Viral Change!

Tyler: What happens if people within the organization are trying to create change, yet the people in management oppose it? How do people remain motivated without the support they need from above them? I am wondering if most people think it has to start at the top because they fear otherwise it will be squashed by management.

Leandro: There is little doubt that the ideal situation is one of full support form the top. Full support is not equal to 'start at the top.' As I said before, change can start anywhere. So effectively you have all sorts of combinations—start, trigger, support, sequence—from which full support at the top and simultaneously champions/activists starting the spread is the ideal. If the top totally opposes or blocks change, it is going to be very difficult but not totally impossible because the 'internal infection' could start anyway and eventually spread up to the top. In some cases the top then realizes that some good is coming from the 'grass roots movement'—to use another terminology—and they eventually jump in, 'suddenly' embracing the new good ideas. This is a more painful route of course and many people within the organization would be put off at the idea of swimming upstream in the river. But as I say, this is far from impossible: social and political activism often swims against the tide. There is a mirror question to this that is often put to me. What is the real role of the top leadership? Do we need them at all? Is this all we need? Anything in between? The best answer is that in most cases we need the top leadership for the changes to happen but these changes won't happen with just the top leadership on board. They are necessary but not sufficient in themselves. However, you are right that most people think change has to start at the top because they fear otherwise it will be squashed by management. This is the traditional way of thinking and a legitimate one. Unfortunately, taken to the extreme, the worst case will bring you close to complete paralysis and in the best case, you are in a sequential process that requires all line leadership to be 'converted' first. In 2007 we do not have time for this! It is an academic luxury!

Tyler: If behavioral change rather than a change in processes is required, how can this be accomplished. Can a manager have any control over changing his employees' personalities?

Leandro: Behavioural change is key. So, how can it be created? It is not a question of 'changing personalities.' It is a question of defining which behaviors are needed to, for example, sustain the new processes, and then to reinforce those behaviors, no matter what. Reward and recognition—in multiples ways—of the new behaviors needed create a new behavioral fabric in the organization. We all, managers and non-managers, behave in particular ways because those behaviors are reinforced—by other people, by ourselves, by our code of ethics or values, or our sense of what is good or bad etc; or even by society. Defining which non-negotiable behaviors are needed and making sure that 'the culture' will reinforce these behaviors is the most important aspect of the change process.

New processes are often still needed. The same applies to 'structure.' But the problem is that traditionally people have focused on both as being "all is needed" for change. But there is no change unless there is behavioral change. We can kid ourselves thinking that because we have a new structure and we have mapped new processes, people are going to behave differently. In reality, in many cases people continue behaving as before. We see this in the process of mergers and acquisitions particularly if handled by The Big Consulting Firms: they map all the new structures, they map all the processes, they create a colossal amount of PowerPoint, and then, it is left to the troops (and management) to figure out what happens next. But they haven't explained how Mary and John and Peter are now going to work together. This is like dirty territory that they don't want to touch.

Tyler: In "Viral Change," one of the key points you talk about for creating change is "tipping points." Will you explain what this term means?

Leandro: When a certain critical mass of individuals start behaving in a similar way, for whatever reason, we have a tipping point in which that behavior or behaviors, is de facto a new routine, a new established way of doing. This is how fashions are created and this is how change in the organization should happen. How can you create that critical mass? There are a few ways, and the one we choose in Viral Change is to identify a group of internal champions who spread the new ideas or new behaviors. As soon as a pattern becomes visible, the new behavior tends to be established. Stories are the main vehicle of communication, by the way. "You see that group in the North of the country? They have completely changed the way they do meetings now? Did you see that unit of the company that have now done so and so." These tipping points are very visible.

Tyler: As mentioned earlier, changes are largely viewed by most organizations as being about processes. One of the primary reasons why processes are changing these days is advancements in technology that make process changes necessary. How is your book relevant to changes brought about by technology?

Leandro: It is extraordinarily relevant because process and technology are chicken and egg. A new technology may 'force' people to change a process and behave differently. But unless the technology is bringing visible benefits to people, they will revert to old ways as soon as they can. Technology is very good at triggering new things but only behavioral change can make sure that we use the technology fully. There are numerous examples in corporations where new technology has been installed—a new Enterprise-wide system (ERP), a new customer relationship management system (CRM) etc. and after a while it is clearly underused and very often hated! The underlying behavioral assumption is very often wrong. New processes and systems, and new technology, do not create behavioral change, as people assume. We need behavioral change first to sustain new process and new technology!

Take the example of collaborative tools—technology that allows people to work together better, collaborate and use single data sources, for example. These tools do not create collaboration. You need to have collaboration as a behavior first for the tool to be used and work! If many people in the CRM business realized that, a few multi-million could be saved!

Tyler: Leandro, you talk a lot about how many people in an organization only have a few contacts, while some other people have many contacts. In that scenario, who are the people best able to create effective change?

Leandro: A natural starting point to look for champions of change would be people who are well connected and with some degree of influence, people whom other people will listen to, perhaps with some moral authority, for example. This small number of people has the power to influence many, in various different ways as described in the book. This group is cross-sectional and does not correlate well with 'management.' Management may hold coercive or authoritarian power but not necessarily real-influence power. Being well connected, being someone people will listen to, or watch to take their cue on how to react and behave from etc, does not necessarily correlate with being in the management ranks.

Tyler: Leandro, have you seen your ideas for creating viral change applied in any organizations? If so, what were the results?

Leandro: I have seen significant cultural changes developed in less than four months and stable after a couple of years. I have seen unthinkable transformations that were predicted to be long term happen in half a year. I have seen radical new ways of doing things occurring in months. If you have a change management consulting company that tells you that they need six months to do an assessment, six months to create the conditions— including the famous 'burning platform' and the 'coalition'—six months to 'roll out' the program and a second year and a half to see the cultural changes established, that consulting company is not worth the money.

Tyler: Would you give us a specific example of a change you have seen in an organization using the idea of viral change?

Leandro: One of the best examples, if anything else because a new culture was created so quickly, was the transformation of a pharmaceutical sales force division from a strong individualistic ethos to one where flow of information and sharing of ideas and market insights happened in three months. Two years later the new culture is still delivering success in all counts, including of course market performance. There were other changes associated. It is difficult to summarize here but suffice to say that everybody told us that our chances of success were zero due to 'the strong (individualistic) culture.' The cultural change was soon acknowledged by all the critics. Some of them went on to say, OK, but it won't last. Today they recognize how wrong they were. There are multiple other examples of cultural change appearing as tipping points, once the right ingredients are fixed: new behaviours, application of behavioral reinforcement in a proper way—not the popular psychology style many companies use—right use of language and above all champions.

Tyler: I understand you travel quite a bit and speak to organizations also. What do you feel has been the greatest reward you have received in your work, either in creating change or in response to the publication of your book?

Leandro: The rewards come in many forms and shapes. At the organization level I enjoy champions telling me 'it's about time we do this! This time it is serious!" I also enjoy the skeptical managers coming around and saying either 'it makes sense,' 'it works' or even 'I always thought it was a good idea'—the latter always makes me hide a smile. Seeing groups and organizations transformed and the enthusiasm that this generates is a treat. On the book side I have had many expressions of, let's say, support. But I have enjoyed in particular the ones coming from areas not directly addressed in the book such as education. The book is clearly focused on organizations of any type, but it inevitably has a flavour of business organizations. To see that people have grasped what the wider scope is is a real treat.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Leandro. Before we go, would you tell our readers where they can find more information about "Viral Change" and how to purchase a copy?

Leandro: Thanks Tyler, I enjoyed talking to you! Our website, www.thechalfontproject.com, has quite a lot of information, including a short audio presentation on Viral Change. The book itself can be purchased through any major online store such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Blackwell's, Borders etc.

Tyler: Thank you, Leandro. I hope many people benefit from positive change as the result of reading your book. I wish you lots of success.

Interview by Tyler Tichelaar for Reader Views (Oct. 2007)
Reviewed by Cherie Fisher for Reader Views (6/07)