

CHANGE FATIGUE AMONG CHANGE AGENTS: Seeing it and attending to it

14 June 2021

Change processes are experienced differently depending on where you are in a 'system'. So too is change fatigue.

Change fatigue under the waterfall

Change fatigue is most mentioned regarding employees in an organisation that are subjected to too many change initiatives driven by senior management. Top-down change initiatives are one manifestation of more general 'waterfall management' practices. Change fatigue among employees is the result of change overload: too many changes at the same time or in quick succession.

Change fatigue is one component of that famous '*resistance to change*'. It can be associated with distrust in those driving the change. Who, subjected to constant organisational restructuring processes, has not felt doubt about the motives or competencies of senior managers, who seem to lose interest and belief in previous internal change processes before they even have had time to consolidate? Who has not wondered whether senior managers have any sense of practical realities, when they seek to drive three of four significant change processes at the same time? It may take ten minutes to have a good change idea, but ten months (or more) to get it not only 'rolled out' but also absorbed into new ways of working (and thinking).

Change fatigue can manifest itself in many ways, some clear and explicit, others more subtly. It is both cause and an indicator of employee- or stakeholder disengagement. And should be a clear warning signal: change processes that fail to bring a significant proportion of different stakeholder groups along are bound to fail – at least in the sense that they will not deliver the promised benefits and definitely not within the time span envisaged. Slowing down, genuinely listening to those concerned and affected and seeking their involvement are wise moves. Be prepared to delay or cut down on change initiatives when there are clear messages about change overload. Heed the African proverb: "*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*"

In our GMI work, we are in constant conversation with different drivers of change, accompany and advice some change processes, and teach fundamentals of change management. This has drawn our attention to a much less recognised phenomenon: also those who are drivers of change can feel deep change fatigue.

Change fatigue among organisational intrapreneurs

We see, hear, and feel it among those who seek to be change catalysts within their own organisations (or coalitions of organisations) but do not have the formal top authority. There is a term for them now: *intrapreneurs*. They are under the waterfall but seek to change its flow. Duncan Green, many years with Oxfam and author of 'From Poverty to Power' and 'How Change Happens', has long advocated organisations need to hire intrapreneurs or '*outliers*' as he calls them, and cherish them as a vitally needed resource. Outliers have the mindsets that can help an organisation reinvent itself. "*Do people get promoted on their ability to conform, or to disrupt?*" is one question he puts on the table. ⁱ

We have advice from intrapreneurs who reflect on their experiences.

Helen Bevan, speaking from experience as Chief Transformation Officer with the National Health Service in the UK offers some good advice on tactics for intrapreneurs.ⁱⁱ The first one is: start with yourself and develop some tactics for yourself. You will face serious challenges, some of which get personal. Expect that many around you will not like your initiative, will not understand it, will be skeptical and stay on the sideline, may question the integrity of your motives and yes, may criticise you

behind your back or even in public. How are you going to maintain your own wellbeing and positive energy, so that you can engage others that you must bring on board: being a lone voice is not effective!

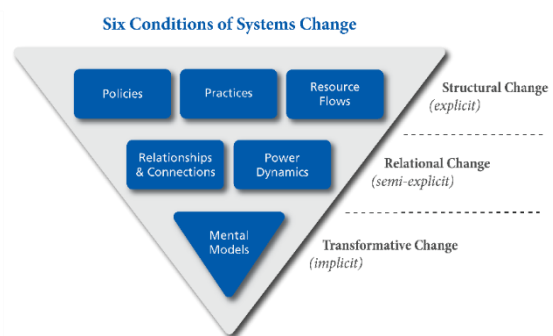
David Gram, who showed his intrapreneur skills with Lego, has also reflected on what it takes to be an effective intrapreneur. He summarised his advice as the ability to be a ‘*diplomatic rebel*’.ⁱⁱⁱ And became the co-founder of a larger network and community of intrapreneurs (www.diplomaticrebels.com)

What if the CEO or Executive Director is not on board and cannot see it? From his experience, Frederic Laloux suggests that you will not be able to get the organisation to reinvent itself. Adjust your ambitions (and hopes): A more realistic objective will be to help it be the healthiest version of its current paradigm.^{iv} And do not be a martyr: ‘*When your horse dies, get off it*’ (Helen Bevan).

Being a system change activist

Larger systems work is drawing more attention in recent years and more practical guidance on how to drive it is becoming available.

At GMI, we have found FSG’s ‘*Six Conditions of System Change*’ very inspirational.^v The diagram shows the different types of condition that hold the system in place. It points out that systems change requires active attention not only to policies, procedures, and resource allocations but also to the quality of relations and the distribution and use of power. Those in turn are, at a deeper level, influenced by mindsets. The diagram helps us to work on the different dimensions in a more structured and intentional manner.



The wider system can be many things, for example our sector of work, the socio-political dynamics in our country, the network or coalition our organisation is part of.

But the challenge of larger-system change is so much greater than smaller system change. There are so many more stakeholders that, through their actions or inaction, shape the situation as it currently is. No one can control even a small proportion of all key players. Trying to influence enough of them feels like a herculean task because each of them acts from their own perspective (interests, emotions, assumptions, world views...); what convinced one will not necessarily convince another.

Adopting a system perspective therefore can be quite deflating: the task suddenly becomes so much harder, so much more impossible. Even if we are leaders and directors at the top of our organisation, in this larger scheme of things, we are small and intrapreneurs without formal authority. Large system changers also come up against the “*forces of inertia and paradigm maintenance*.”^{vi} It can take years of persistent engagement to begin to see some small shift. Significant change may not even happen in our lifetime. Meanwhile, attention and energy are demanded in several environments simultaneously: While acting for change in the wider environment, many system changers also lead, manage, and develop their own organisation; and are usually part of a network of coalition that needs to be mobilised for collective impact and where relationship management also requires constant attention.

Change fatigue among system changers

The risk of change fatigue can be even bigger for those striving for smaller system change. How does change fatigue manifest itself? Some of the frequent signals are: Impatience; diminished ability to genuinely listen to others; feelings of frustration, of anger; too much fighting and not enough charming; too much pushing and not enough inviting; growing cynicism about the motives of other key players; reduced willingness to participate in meetings with other stakeholders; a sharper tone in communications; complaints about lack of experience, commitment, finesse in ways of working and communicating of their team members or staff and hence reluctance to delegate; operating more alone

with less briefings and explanatory communications for colleagues or key stakeholders; feeling overloaded yet working long hours neglecting own physical health and mental wellbeing etc.

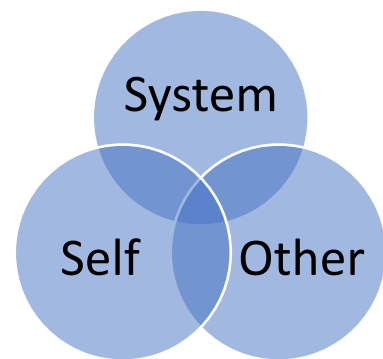
Many negative emotions, much negative energy that is showing through, even if underneath there burns the deep passion of someone who can see a better situation and wants to help bring it about.

Do you recognise some of this? Have you felt it in yourself? Did you look deeper into it? Where it comes from? How it impacts on you? How it impacts on your interaction with others? How it serves your purpose, or not?

Natural as it is, that negative energy can become counterproductive. We may still be strong but speak and act less skillfully. We may start alienating those outside our organisation we need to get engaged with the desired change; we may no longer inspire our immediate colleagues and team members; we can end up in the vicious circle of doing too much ourselves because we believe those around us do not have enough experience – but doing everything yourself means we have no time to mentor those around us, as a result of which they remain inexperienced and we must continue doing everything yourself etc. In the worst case, we burn ourselves out. Burn out is more than cumulative stress. It is a deeper loss of meaning, purpose, hope, positivity. ^{vii}

Whether as intrapreneur or system change activist, nothing is likely to shift until I can build broad support for the change envisaged. I need allies, active followers and others who may be reluctant to act but sympathise and will not stand in the way. And this across a range of stakeholder groups.

If I am in the grip of change fatigue, and in myself wrestle with negative emotions and negative energy, I will find it hard to inspire others and help them overcome their skepticism and doubts. There is a deep interconnectedness then, also at an emotional level, between system, self and other.



To avoid being overcome by change fatigue, we as system change activists need to attend to the source we are acting from. Our own 'source' of inspiration requires regular care and maintenance to keep the clean and refreshing water flowing.

Attending to the source we are acting from

But who is there to share these deeper emotions with, who do we allow to point out to us that our source is carrying quite some negativity? Some system change activists receive such support from family. Others benefit from the presence and advice of a close friend, a few seek support from a personal coach. Others struggle quite alone. And may not realise their waters of system change have become polluted and are no longer refreshing.

In recent months, as GMI, we invited some system change activists to learn with us through different processes and exercises, to go to the level of mindsets. The learning was experiential, and intentionally touched on the personal. When after some meetings our space became 'safe', emotions around change fatigue surfaced. Sharing them became an important part of the meaning of the experience, and a way of re-sourcing.

We realised we need to add another, even deeper element to FSG's diagram. The diagram focuses the attention on what and who else needs to change. But what about the driver of change, the change activist? *What is the source I, change activist, am acting from?* ^{viii}

"The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor."

William O'Brien - CEO Hanover Insurance

We continue to create spaces for system change activists to reflect on their repertoire of tactics and techniques and broaden it. But now intentionally build in attention to and care for possible change

fatigue and the need to address it, for our own wellbeing and the inspirational quality of the work we are called to do.

Are you a driver of change, a change activist? Is there in you some change fatigue? Is it affecting your way of being, of doing? How are you attending to it?

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Suggested citation: GMI June 2021: *Change Fatigue among Change Agents: Seeing it and attending to it*. Begnins, Switzerland

ⁱ Idem p. 247

ⁱⁱ Helen Bevan. The four key tactics for organisational radicals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKeilf1Fp5c>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Gram. Diplomatic Rebel's Top 5 Advice on Intrapreneurship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I9Uh2HiM3o> It pays less attention to the personal stamina that may be required, though the first advice is to expect that many around you will 'hate' your change initiative.

^{iv} F. Laloux 2019: What you can do when the CEO is not on board.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv12BZDkyMc&list=RDCMUCCzSID58oPop62Z2m3zQ&index=1>

^v Kania, J., M. Kramer & P. Senge 2018: *The Waters of Systems Change*. FSG

^{vi} D. Green 2016: *How Change Happens*. Oxford Univ. Press p. 214

^{vii} A. Malach Pines & G. Keinan 2005: *Stress and Burnout: The significant difference*. In Personality and individual differences Vol 39:625-635. Quoted by A. Pigni 2016: *The Idealist's Survival Kit*. Parallax Press

^{viii} Our learning the Being at Full Potential coaching approach was a first pointer at this. The U-Lab Journey of Otto Scharmer and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, helped us appreciate more clearly the importance of our own 'source' we are acting from.