

Thinking about change

Good afternoon everybody.

When Piotr sent me this title;

Sustaining Organisational Change

I thought, "That's very interesting,

because it's quite

an ambiguous three words really."

I thought, "Does it mean

that an organisation changes something,

such as the way it trains volunteers

and then we want it to stay that way,

we want the change to stick, we want

the change itself to be sustained?"

Or does it mean that keeping

the organisation in a state

of perpetual change is the aim?

In other words, it's the process of change

and not just a particular change

that is sustained.

In fact, I think, people and organisations

need both of these things.

We all need a degree of stability

and we seek certainty and continuity

because that helps us

to feel safe and secure.

It's a basic human need.

But we also seek adventure

and stimulation.

That is another basic human need.

The novelist William Boyd put it

rather well in one of his books

where a father is explaining life

to his son and he says,

"the thing is, when you're out

on the mountain you want to be

by the fireside and when you are

by the fireside you want to be

out on the mountain."

And organisational life

sometimes feels a bit like that.

So to some extent we change

because we want to.

But there's also another reason

why we change

and that is because the context

around us changes.

And we have to either anticipate

or respond to that environment.

And that type of change

is often unwelcome.

And it's uncomfortable.

But failing to recognise

the need for it is dangerous.

I'm sure you're all familiar

with the gruesome story
about frogs who will
boil to death in a pan of water
because they don't understand
the significance
of the slowly rising temperature.

And it's like that

for a lot of organisations.

So we need both continuity and change.

But taken to extremes,

both of those are unhealthy.

People and organisations

that stand still are moribund,

but organizations that are in a state

of permanent revolution

are chaotic, unstable, and doomed.

The conclusion from all of that, I think,

is that when it comes to sustainability

the aim, which is a paradoxical one,

and the big challenge, is to embrace

both continuity and change.

Creativity and stability.

Patience and urgency. At the same time.

It's a bit like riding a bicycle,

because riding a bicycle,

you can only achieve balance

through the right amount of momentum.

And I particularly like
this analogy of riding a bicycle
because riding a bicycle is something
that you have to do for yourself,
nobody can ride it for you.

And in the same way you can't outsource
organisational or personal change.

Outsiders can help but ultimately only you
can change your own way of being.

And the change happens
here in your head and here in your heart.

Nobody else can do that for you.

So when I talk about sustaining
organisational change, what I mean
is achieving a state when the organisation
and the people involved in it are able
to pursue their aims efficiently
and effectively over a long period of time.

And to adapt themselves
to their environment,
responding quickly and easily
to any challenges that they face.

In our specific context today it involves,
as the Our Museum project says,
"Embedding participatory practice,
facilitating organisational change
so that participatory work becomes

core, embedded, sustainable

and less at risk of being marginalised

when specific funding streams run out."

I translate that out of museum speak

into everyday language as meaning,

"that people can carry on working well

together under their own steam."

Now I have to say up front

that sustaining organisational change

is not at all easy and straight forward.

In fact, it's very, very difficult.

All of the evidence that I've seen

suggests that in every type

of organisation; whether it's public,

charitable, or commercial,

the success rate for change programmes

is lower than 30%.

And the number that can be counted

as very successful is small indeed.

Why is that, why should it be so hard?

Well, I went to the academic literature

for guidance and discovered

this explanation in an article called

No Going Back: A Review of the Literature

on Sustaining Organisational Change

in the International Journal

of Management Reviews.

Here is what the authors say:

Well, I hope you all
find that very helpful.

I don't find that kind
of language helpful at all.

And fortunately, it's not the end of the story,
because personally I've been lucky enough
to be involved in a piece of research
into sustained organisational change
at the Royal Shakespeare Company,
that was, in fact, remarkably successful
and I think it holds some useful lessons
that I want to share with you.

I can't go into the detail of every aspect
of it today but if you want
to go into it further, you can download
this Demos pamphlet free
from the website, from the Demos website.

It's called All Together:

A Creative Approach
to Organisational Change.

And you'll find in there
an awful lot more than I'm able
to say this afternoon.

But if you're thinking, "Oh no,
that's a really big organisation
and we're relatively small."

Then let me disabuse you
because being relatively small
is an advantage not a disadvantage
when it comes to change and adaptation.
In fact, it's when organisations
get bigger than about 150 people
that it seems to be that they start
to have real problems with all of this.