



Change has changed

Not so long ago organisational change was an exceptional process, and change management was bridge building – from the current situation to a desired future state. But change is no longer “just” a matter of realigning an organisation’s status quo. Today and tomorrow the challenge of change is the challenge of continuous, ongoing adaptation. In this article Kate Gilmore shares her headline thoughts on the high level challenges facing charities, INGOs and other civil society actors.

Change has changed

Not so long ago organisational change was an exceptional process and change management was “just” bridge building – bridging the current situation to an alternative more desired future state. Change was a choice, not an inevitability. Its imperative was improved future performance while the organisation’s overall form was treated as a constant. But change is no longer “just” a matter of realigning the organisation’s status quo. Today and tomorrow the challenge of change is the challenge of continuous, ongoing adaptation.

For international NGOs, the implications are profound. It means rethinking and maturing their working approach to change leadership. However, more than this, it means confronting the transformed and transformative nature of change itself. Finance; technology; climate; people movement; the contest for resources; communications; public accountability; regulation; the size, professionalisation, governance and consumption of the NGO sector; the relationship between the public and the private sectors; global political and economic power; the West’s moral authority; the global South’s frustration: none of these dynamics is or will be as it was a mere decade ago. Yet, each is a volatile and potent force acting in concert or separately, directly and indirectly, on the best (and the worst) endeavors of charities and INGOs.

In the face of this “changing change”, the concepts and methods of civil society itself must evolve. Sitting at the heart of managing this “change to change” lies a deep challenge that few management guides prepare them for. Organisations must re-consider the value they assign to their “original position” or “genesis moment”. Conventional wisdom holds that a first principle of effective organisational change management is to: renew your mission; renew your vision; clarify your values then change your structure. But many organisations undertake these processes by primarily building on the past. They look back to their own founding or genesis to renew these elements in a linear way and, sometimes fatally, give far less weight to that which lies outside and to that which lies ahead. They find themselves drawn inwards and backwards just when they need to be externally oriented and forward looking. They become memory-led when actually, they need to be future-led.

Understanding the history and internal realities of an organisation, engaging internal audiences, these things are important. But first, organisations need to focus not only on the external environment in which they act but also on the basis of their claim to be entitled to act. We cannot and must no longer allow organisations to confuse doing good with feeling good. The effectiveness and sustainability of their external impact – measured by the lived experience of their beneficiaries – must drive their decision-making, their priority setting and their resource allocation.

In short, an organisation's loyalty to the future and to the future outcomes of the work should be stronger than any loyalty to their past. History did not end with the first years of an organisation's establishment. An openness to moving beyond its founding heritage is essential. In the interests of future relevance and effectiveness, organisations must ensure that their legacy is stripped of any "sacred cow" status. The option of radically re-working, if not abandoning it, must be clearly placed on the table.

Very practical implications emerge if civil society leaders are willing to disturb conventional thinking about organisational change and its leadership. For example, in the long-term interests of a coherent, inclusive and effective civil society, perhaps they should be looking for their organisation's collaborative rather than competitive advantage. Transforming their approach to accountability into a dynamic relationship with organisational strategy can leverage their effectiveness. But it may also require them to relate very differently to their principal beneficiaries.

Understanding the pace and breadth of change and its dynamics can help change leaders move beyond static organisational models. They might transform the range of competencies they ask of their staff and reshape the mandate they give to them through their job descriptions: spotlighting, for example, the skills and behaviours of adaptation rather than replication. Are they really thinking about the competencies that enable people to work effectively in the face of rapid change?

Focussing on the dynamic external environment may uncover core issues about an organisation's underlying strategy and operating methods. Does their theory of social change, upon which their strategy depends, actually work as they claim? This probing enables leaders to expose their organisation's cherished assumptions and then subject them more transparently to the intellectual scrutiny they deserve.

The leaders of charities, civil society organisations and international NGOs in particular, are not just responsible for securing the durability of their organisation and its approaches to social change. They have a deeper responsibility, which is to the just durability and sustainability of the world they serve. Leaders must be willing to contemplate the heresy that social change and social justice may be far better served if they did not work as they do, if they were not formed as were, if they did not take what they take, did not act as they had: if they did not exist in the way they do.

A searching, even courageous, humility is the perhaps the best companion for the strident well-meaning leaders in global philanthropy. Their quest must be an ethical answer to "what does the world need from us?" rather than only a firm answer to "what do we want to give the world?"

About the Author

Kate Gilmore is the Principal Management Consultant at The Management Centre (=mc). She was previously Executive Deputy Secretary General at Amnesty International for 10 years. She was responsible, with Irene Khan, Secretary General, for a range of transformational changes to the work and business model of Amnesty globally.

In subsequent articles Kate Gilmore explores the practical implications of the challenges faced by charities, INGOs and other civil society actors.

You can contact Kate by calling the office on +44 (0) 20 7978 1516 or emailing her at kate@managementcentre.co.uk

Further help

Kate Gilmore leads a team of unrivalled management consultants able to offer practical help and support with change, strategy and innovation. Between us we share experience in small and large charity work, international development, arts and culture, disability and the environment. **=mc** consultants have worked with many of the UK's major charities on their strategy. We're proud to have helped **Oxfam, WSPA, Wateraid, UNICEF, Concern Worldwide, Greenpeace International, NSPCC** and the **British Red Cross**.

To find out how we've helped these organisations – and how we could help you – call us on **+44 (0) 20 7978 1516** or visit www.managementcentre.co.uk/consultancy.

We hope you found this download useful and enjoyable.

If you want to access more downloads, visit www.managementcentre.co.uk/knowledgebase where you can search for a range of management and fundraising tools, ideas and case studies.

About =mc

The Management Centre (**=mc**) is an international management training and consultancy agency working exclusively for not-for-profit organisations worldwide. We provide help in management consultancy, fundraising consultancy and training.

To find out more about us, please visit our website at www.managementcentre.com