

Will McWhinney's Paths of Change: A Comprehensive Framework

Theoretical Foundation

McWhinney outlines a new foundation for theories of change, initiating a discipline of praxis using concepts from psychology, sociology, anthropology and new methods of working with ontological and narrative concepts to produce intentional changes in society. This meta-theory (meta-praxis) explains and guides the choice of an effective strategy of issue resolution and social change.

The theory is based on the ancient Navajo Pollen Path and has proven to be a perfect meta-theory to map and understand all kinds of different physical and social sciences, connecting to theories like Interpersonal Theory, Game Theory, Conflict Theory, the cycles in history, the Tarot, the Four Humors, the Zodiac, the four Forces of Nature, the Archetypes of Jung, the Myers Briggs test, and many other ancient and modern theories.

The Four Realities Framework

The four realities are: Unitary, Sensory, Social, and Mythic. Understanding these worldviews will aid an organization going through change to accept and initiate change, choose the correct leader for change, deal with conflict which is a companion of change, and organize and plan solutions to problems.

1. Unitary Reality

Characterized by assumptions, truth, principles, rules, theory, clarification, belief systems, and policies. This is the deterministic and monistic worldview focused on external factors beyond our will. Associated with the "Warrior" archetype and thinking function.

2. Sensory Reality

Involves objects, resources, behavior, facts, material, action, data, statistics, sensation, experience, and situations. This represents the deterministic and pluralistic perspective. Connected to the "King" archetype and sensing function.

3. Social Reality

Encompasses preferences, what matters, wants, attitude, ethics, values, purpose, appreciation, feelings, and motivation. This is the volitional and pluralistic dimension. Linked to the "Mother" archetype and feeling function.

4. Mythic Reality

Includes opportunity, metaphors, dreams, inspiration, symbols, creations, vision, ideas, inventions, and meaning. This represents the volitional and monistic perspective focused on self-will. Associated with the "Visionary" archetype and intuition function.

The Six Modes of Change

The different modes of change include Analytic, Assertive, Influential, Evaluative, Inventive and Emergent. These are formed by combining the four realities into six distinct combinations:

1. Analytic Mode (Unitary + Sensory)

The engineer who designs more fuel efficient vehicles. Involves the sensory 'reality', where the game is played and the unitary 'reality' within which the rules are defined.

2. Assertive/Imperative Mode (Unitary + Mythic)

An architect designing a hyper modern progressive building. Transformation achieved from the leadership authority position, where the change is compliant with the coercive power strategy.

3. Influential Mode (Social + Unitary)

An advocacy group who blocks the destruction of the environment. Change achieved by acceptance of new values, either through the imposition of a truth by an authority or through the adoption of a value by a population.

4. Evaluative/Participative Mode (Social + Sensory)

A practical business manager who uses their people skills to evaluate, balance and allocate resources. The board three game of ethics where purpose is set and values assigned.

5. Inventive Mode (Mythic + Sensory)

An inventor or an artist painting a picture. Change achieved through the material realization of a new (creative) idea. In a pure form there is no recognition of values or social truth, though the idea may attain acceptance for its value.

6. Emergent Mode (Mythic + Social)

A story teller who creates meaning that cultivates values. Change achieved through creating and accepting a new idea that may have originated with an idea leader or emerged from the involved group.

The Two Grand Paths of Change

McWhinney describes two archetypal main paths which cover all four realities: The Renaissance which matches the path of 'return-for-a-better-start', and the path of Revitalization which matches the patriloical model commonly used in Western cultures.

Revitalization Path

Goes from Action (Evaluative), to Policy (Analytic) to Visions (Assertive) to Values (Emergent). Four modes of change are employed in turn: analytic, imperative, emergent, and participative.

Examples include the American revolution and organizational transformation guided by the vision of 'excellence'.

Renaissance Path

A path of death and rebirth, proceeding through all four 'realities' and the same four modes of change, but in a reversed order. It starts with a loss of direction, an ideological vacuum being realized in a participative mode, and proceeds to a search for new meaning in an emergent mode. Starting from loss of meaning: Elicit what matters (Evaluative), work together to create images that reflect their values (Emergent), leader develops policies that express the vision (Assertive), put new policies into action (Analytic).

Conflict and Change Management

Conflict arises out of the clash of incongruous attempts and programmes; hence, conflict is considered as primary, self-generating, self-feeding, since it is implied in our human means of coping with our social and natural environment and in the pluralism of 'realities' within our minds.

When a major organizational change conflicts with existing organizational culture, the culture most often prevails and the change effort dies. This happens when change agents and their sponsors fail to understand that most planned change interventions require an organization to move into a new collective reality. The symptom we call "resistance" develops as underlying conflicts between old and new worldviews surface.

Leadership and Implementation

The components of his theory include: a map of four alternative realities, a guidance theory based on two great myths that have been used in many cultures over the past millennia, and the qualities required to deal courageously with the paradoxes of change and resolution efforts. He indicates the critical role of leaders and followers, and of the coevolution of cultures that must accompany efforts to resolve major issues.

The six modes of change also connote six leadership styles, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how different types of leaders can effectively navigate organizational transformation.

Practical Applications

Will's legend shows four reality perceptions, six modes of change and twelve directional methods with about over 50 different tools. You can map all tools and techniques on this legend, as you can travel by all sorts of means.

By using an instrument called "The Reality Inventory," one can learn how his/her personal worldview maps over McWhinney's model. This is useful for understanding how interpersonal conflicts are often not as much fueled by divergent issues and interests, but by different mental models that influence how people define issues and communicate their interests.

Meta-Theoretical Significance

McWhinney's theory doesn't tell you what will happen – like the laws in a classical theory – but what may happen, what could become – it's also a metatheory. The theory consists of "you", your theory, your attitude determines how you perceive your situation.

This comprehensive framework provides organizations and change agents with a sophisticated understanding of the multiple dimensions of reality that influence change processes, offering both diagnostic tools and strategic pathways for effective transformation initiatives.

Key Insights

- **Four Reality Archetypes:** Each represents a different worldview that influences how people perceive and approach change
- **Six Modes of Change:** Practical approaches that combine different realities to create specific change strategies
- **Two Grand Paths:** Comprehensive frameworks for major organizational transformation
- **Conflict as Natural:** Understanding that resistance often stems from clashing worldviews rather than substantive disagreements
- **Leadership Styles:** Each mode of change corresponds to a different leadership approach
- **Meta-Praxis:** A theory about theories that helps practitioners choose appropriate change strategies based on context and worldviews involved

This framework has been extensively tested and applied across various organizational and social change contexts, providing a robust foundation for understanding and managing complex transformation processes.