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Four General Strategies for Changing Human Systems

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In this chapter we articulate a new general strategy for effecting change in human systems. To do this, we return to the fundamental assumptions of organization development (OD). In examining the early arguments in the field, we identify an essential strategy that has never been made explicit. By developing this strategy, we open avenues for research and provide an action framework that will increase the effectiveness of change agents.

FOUNDATIONS OF OD

We begin with a review of the seminal paper published in 1969 by Chin and Benne, “General Strategies for Effecting Changes in Human Systems.” In the paper, Chin and Benne outline three general strategies for changing human systems: empirical–rational, power–coercive, and normative–reeducative.

The empirical–rational strategy considers people to be rationally self-interested. An organization member adopts a proposed change if the following two conditions are met: The proposed change is rationally justified, and the change agent demonstrates the benefits of the change to the change target. In short, the rational–empirical approach emphasizes that if the target has a justifiable reason to change (i.e., if it is in his or her self-interest), change comes from simply telling the target about the change.

Chin and Benne call their second strategy power–coercive. This approach focuses on change efforts in which a more powerful person imposes his or her will on a less powerful person. The change agent ostensibly exercises coercion that ranges from subtle manipulation to the direct use of physical force. The main advantage of this approach is that it delivers effective results rapidly. However, these benefits

come at the expense of damaging relationships, destroying trust, and forfeiting voluntary commitment.

The normative–reeducative strategy also views people as rationally self-interested. But unlike the previous two strategies, the normative–reeducative view emphasizes changes in a target’s values, skills, and relationships. This is in contrast to transmitting information or exercising force. The normative–reeducative view understands people as inherently social, guided by a normative culture that influences behaviors. For change to occur under this view, the target not only undergoes rational informational processing (as in the empirical–rational view) but also reconsiders habits and values, normative structures, institutionalized roles and relationships, and cognitive and perceptual orientations. In order to guide the change agent through the complex process of normative reassessment, the normative–reeducative method usually relies on trainers, therapists, or other change agents. These experts’ success depends in part on how well they learn to work collaboratively with the client. Collaboration is essential because the normative–reeducative approach focuses on experience-based learning, whereby the expert works with the client to help the change targets learn from their own experiences.

Chin and Benne argue that the empirical–rational and power–coercive strategies are well established but that the normative–reeducative strategy had emerged more recently. The normative–reeducative strategy, which stresses participation, trust, emergent processes, and win–win negotiation, serves as a foundation for OD.

THE NORMAL AND THE EXCEPTIONAL

For simplicity, we refer to these three strategies as the telling strategy, the forcing strategy, and the participating strategy. For most people, everyday experiences with change usually involve the telling or forcing strategies. When we

seek to change others, our first tactic involves explaining why the target needs to change (telling; e.g., “Pat, if you do not put your bike away, someone may run over it.”). This strategy works when a target has only loose ties to a given behavioral pattern. However, in many cases people hold stronger commitments to their behavioral patterns (Staw & Ross, 1987). Consequently, the telling strategy routinely fails. When the telling strategy fails, frustration increases, and most people’s inclination leads them to use their resources, such as power (forcing). Power may range from subtle manipulation to brute force (e.g., “Pat, if you do not put your bike away right now, I am going to lock it up for a month.”). This increase in leverage works initially, but it comes at the expense of trust and undermines commitment. When monitoring ends and the change target is beyond the reach of the change agent, the target tends to revert to the original behavior.

The telling and forcing strategies are so frequently used that they make up what we call normal patterns of change. In a social world where we assume self-interest and transactional norms of exchange (i.e., based on self-interest), we expect to see people using these first two strategies. They are quick and easy and focus on solving short-term problems. They become part of normal or natural patterns of action. People use the normal strategies within and outside the corporate world.

The normative–reeducative or participating strategy is less common than the other two strategies. When change agents successfully use the participating strategy, we view the results as extraordinary or even unnatural. Why? The participating strategy is more time-consuming, takes greater skill, and defies our normal assumptions about the need for control. Stephen Covey tells the story of a CEO who told him, “Every time I try win–win, I lose.” Covey replied, “Then you did not do win–win” (Covey, 1989, pp. 204–234). It is difficult for even the best educated and most experienced managers to comprehend that surrendering control and pursuing the common good can result in a positive

outcome for both parties. In OD interventions, we often hear the phrase “trust the process.” To most people, this phrase is incomprehensible.

Given managers’ need for control, we often see the participating strategy corrupted and used as a form of manipulation. It is reduced to a forcing strategy. An authority figure presents himself as open and tolerant. But these attributes become contingent on the participants’ arriving at the authority figure’s predetermined answer. The manager espouses participation only to the extent that the results of the change process cohere with what the manager would have forced the change targets to do in the first place.

As difficult and rare as the third strategy may be, there is an even more difficult fourth strategy, an approach that takes greater effort and commitment but will lead to long-term, sustainable, and deep change. We also consider this strategy to be more basic, essential, and powerful than the other three strategies.

THE FOURTH STRATEGY

In their original paper, Chin and Benne observe that a minority can change a majority. They do this by using a power-coercive or forcing strategy. The minority uses moral power to shame the majority into changing. In illustrating the argument, Chin and Benne cite the examples of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. However, Chin and Benne overlook the most unique aspect of the change strategies used by Gandhi and King. A deeper examination reveals a fourth strategy that cannot be accessed from transactional assumptions. It can be seen and understood only if we leave the normal assumptions of transaction and self-interest and move to the extraordinary assumptions of transformation.

Quinn (2000) reports an analysis of the common change practices of Gandhi, King, and Jesus Christ. He does not focus on their religious orientation but on the change practices they held in common. From this examination, he articulates a body of change principles

called advanced change theory (ACT). At the heart of ACT is what we call self-transcendence or the transforming strategy. Here is the fundamental argument.

First, we begin with the assumption that all systems must acquire energy from the external environment. To do this the system must be aligned with the continuously changing external environment. As a system loses such alignment it tends toward entropy, or the loss of productive energy. All individuals, groups, and organizations tend toward entropy or slow death. Individuals and collectives seek to avoid change and preserve equilibrium. As a result, we all move toward entropy or slow death (Quinn, 1996).

Second, we are all hypocrites. We espouse values at one level and exhibit incongruent behaviors at another (Argyris, 1991, 1998). We all have integrity gaps. Hypocrisy is rampant in organizations. We claim to be committed to certain ends, but we are committed only when those ends are consistent with our self-interests. Instead of making self-sacrifice to create extraordinary realignments for the betterment of the system, we collude with others in politically acceptable behavior. Our actual goal is not extraordinary achievement but the preservation of the status quo. We all seek to stay inside our zone of comfort (Quinn, 2000). We live on the path of least resistance (Fritz, 1989). Thus, it is perfectly normal for each of us to live in a transactional, reactive state, in which we are determined by our environment. It’s simply easier.

Third, we can all become more effective change agents. We can enter a proactive state in which we begin to co-create our environment and our future. We do this by reducing integrity gaps. We enter what Quinn (2004) calls the fundamental state of leadership. He argues that leadership is not a function of formal position such as CEO or prime minister but a result of our state of being. Anyone can be a leader or change agent, but most of the time none of us are. We lack the necessary moral power. In OD, if we are to be effective change agents, we must enter this state of leadership.

Fourth, we become effective leaders or change agents when we examine our integrity gaps and make a fundamental commitment to pursue a higher purpose. We then transcend the existing self. In entering the state of leadership, we transcend two polarities: We become more internally driven and more externally open. We become more purpose centered and other focused.

Fifth, when we enter the state of leadership, in the existing transactional system, we become a positive deviant. As we act with greater moral power, we distort the existing system, and others must make sense of us. In the process, some of them join us in the co-creation of new relationships and emergent organizing. We launch an emergent social movement that transcends the current system. This nonlinear process begins with increased integrity and personal risk taking.

NORMAL REACTIONS

We are so steeped in the assumptions of self-interest, and defensive of our hypocrisy, that the fourth strategy tends to be met with cynicism, exemplified by such responses as “Such things never

happen,” “This may occur occasionally, but it is unrealistic and impractical,” “It could never be used in my setting,” “People who do such things are heroes; normal people cannot engage in such behavior,” or “Why would anyone expose himself or herself to such painful demands?”

The fact is that self-transcendence occurs with some frequency. It is not only practical but essential to individual health and collective well-being. Self-transcendence or a transforming strategy can be used in any setting. It can be and is used by the most ordinary people (Quinn & Quinn, 2004). Yet once we use it, we become temporarily extraordinary.

To not embrace the painful demands of self-transcendence is to collude in our own decay or slow death. These are powerful claims but are unlikely to influence the cynic. For this reason we present one of many cases in which normal organization actors report using the fourth strategy. What follows is the case of an internal consultant. Roman J. Wally is an ordinary person who practices self-transcendence and then begins to make surprising changes in a major corporation (Quinn, 2004, pp. 10–11, 190).

CASE: AN INTERNAL CONSULTANT CHOOSES TO LEAD CHANGE

I have always been afraid to make waves. Growing up in a large family with a quick-tempered, domineering father, I chose the peacemaker and jokester roles. I used self-deprecating humor to deflect undue scrutiny, to cover up my fear of inadequacy. Much of that has changed, but the self-deprecating humor remains.

I first read *Deep Change* when I attended a workshop at the University of Michigan. It happened 5 months after my first wife died, and I felt empty inside. The instructor’s life story resonated with my own, but the reflection was twisted as though seen through a melted mirror.

His father died when he was an infant. My first wife, Theresa, died of a rare form of breast cancer when my children were small (ages 10 and 3). He lost a sister he never knew. I almost lost my son to meningococcal encephalitis

a year earlier. My sister, Meg, whom I loved dearly and whose spirit, humor, faith, and medical knowledge sustained Theresa and me through her long illness, was in the early stages of a mysterious illness that would eventually take her life. I felt like I was moving through life as a spectator, I was watching a play that I didn’t like, but I had no power to change the script, or so I thought. I needed meaning, but life seemed to be devoid of it.

It is hard to describe the power and emotional freedom I felt after reading the book and going through the Leading Change seminar. I looked at the script of my life with new eyes. I began to make changes in how I approached my work. I had assumed a new role as an organization effectiveness consultant in Shell and Texaco’s new retail marketing business. I began

to ask tough questions of myself: Did I care enough about the business to risk my job? What was more important: my self-respect or the respect of others? As I reflected on these questions the answers came back with certainty and unassailable logic. It truly was slow death to be working in an organization where I felt uncomfortable asking questions that should be answered. If my self-respect came first, the respect of others would naturally follow.

I began to ask tough questions of senior and executive-level leaders. There was surprise in their eyes when they were asked these questions or presented with data they weren't comfortable with. They began to look at me in a new light. I was increasingly asked to consult on more complex and strategic issues. It was a case of tough love at work.

Another example of tough love stands out in my mind. I was asked to coach a team that was not meeting its deadlines. After opening a meeting with the team, I asked the members what was holding the project back. The answers came back quickly: Upper management kept changing the target. They weren't empowered to make decisions. They were hamstrung. There was no guidance. There were too many demands on their time. I listened for about 5 minutes and then reflected back what I heard. I told them that I didn't have any answers, but as an outside observer I felt I could provide an accurate reflection of their current reality.

Their language was the language of victims. Did they want to own the problem and the outcome? Or did they want someone else to make the decisions for them? Did they want to be creative and come up with solutions that hadn't been considered before, or did they want to arrive at predictable outcomes? There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, the unspoken question hung in the air: Slow death or deep change? The team was staffed by ambitious and bright managers who worked very hard but who hadn't confronted their collective

behavior yet. One by one, they all admitted they hadn't dedicated themselves to the project. A new energy flowed into the room. After a series of meetings the team came to realize its potential. We completed the project on time and received high praise from the executive sponsors.

I am now the training manager of Shell's commercial marketing and distribution business. I achieved this new level of responsibility because of my willingness to ask tough questions, even the ones that I didn't necessarily want to hear the answers to. But the battle to remain true to the concepts of deep change stays with me.

Even now, I am faced with redesigning a new human resource organization that may eliminate my position and roll my responsibilities into another training manager's organization. Our team of four managers has been meeting, trying to decide what our structure should look like. After the first meeting, our initial design still showed four distinct areas of practice, one for each of the managers to head. I have to step back and ask myself, "Is this the right answer or are we all just trying to protect ourselves?" We four, all experienced in "change management," have been resisting change, putting up barriers, and denying our current reality. The irony of the situation is overwhelming if we just let ourselves see it.

Slow death or deep change? The sacrifices that I saw Theresa and Meg make to live their lives to the fullest while they experienced slow death left me with no real choice. They had to face slow death and chose to live life, celebrating its gifts. I should do at least as much, celebrating their gifts to me and celebrating their memories.

The book has had a profound effect on me. I trace much of my professional transition and personal transformation to trying to live the elements that are outlined in the book. I highly recommend it to all who are confronting the moral dilemma of deep change or slow death—in other words, everybody who is open to the quest.

CASE OBSERVATIONS

Note some unusual things about this case. First, Roman is an ordinary man who is not one to make waves. He experiences a series of powerful trigger events. These cause him to reflect on his most deeply held assumptions, and he comes to admit something that most people are unwilling to admit: His life is devoid of meaning. At that point he begins to make some fundamental decisions and then begins to ask tough questions: “Did I care enough about the business to risk my job?” “What was more important: my self-respect or the respect of others?”

As he reflects, he concludes, “It truly was slow death to be working in an organization where I felt uncomfortable asking questions that should be answered. If my self-respect came first, the respect of others would naturally follow.”

He commits himself to the good of the company, becomes more internally directed, and begins to ask tough questions of senior management. Normally we would expect such questions to get a person like Roman fired. Instead Roman reports that authority figures

began to define him in a new light, and they began to invite him to consult on more complex and strategic issues. Roman also challenges other people to stop acting like victims. Again, we are surprised to read that he is successful. In the end Roman is able to question whether his own job should be preserved.

When Roman applies the strategy of self-transcendence or the transforming strategy, he reduces hypocrisy, increases integrity, and begins to attract people to the committed state. Committed people forgo transactional patterns in favor of transformational patterns. Roman was an internal consultant, a change agent. Yet until he engaged the strategy of self-transcendence, he was far from extraordinary. Because he reached a committed state, he was empowering and empowering to his community.

A COMPARISON OF THE FOUR STRATEGIES

In order to get a better grasp of the strategy or self-transcendence, or what we call the transforming strategy, consider Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 A Comparison of the Four General Strategies

	<i>Telling</i>	<i>Forcing</i>	<i>Participating</i>	<i>Transforming</i>
Target	Change target	Change target	Relationship	Change agent
Motivation	Self-interest	Self-interest	Common good	Common good
Levers	Facts	Power	Dialogue	Integrity
Time	Short	Short	Long	Long
Impact	First order	First order	Second order	Second order
Perceived control	High	Highest	Low	Lowest
Actual control	Low	Low	High	Highest
Outcomes	Compliance	Compliance	Emergence	Emergence

Target. In the first two strategies the focus is on the change target. Information is used in the telling strategy and coercion is used in the forcing strategy, with the expectation that the target will change. In the participating strategy, the target is not the other person but the relationship between the agent and the target. As people join in a win-win focus and trust the

process, a new relationship emerges. In the transforming strategy, the focus is on self-transcendence. The change agent is the person who is expected to change by reducing hypocrisy and moving into the committed state. The change agent is the change target.

Motivation. The telling and forcing strategies are based on the transactional view of exchange

and consequently involve rational, self-interested motivations. The participating strategy becomes less transactional and more transformational because of the win–win emphasis. Yet from the perspective of critics, the participating strategy is based on a *modus vivendi*—a strategic compromise between the parties. The strategy works as long as there is a win–win outcome for self-interested parties to pursue. Proponents argue that if participants trust the process, the win–win solution will always emerge. In the transforming strategy, the change agent shifts from self-interest to the collective interest. Because there is a total commitment to creating a given result, the contingency in the participating strategy disappears. Critics argue that the collective interest has simply become the self-interest. Nevertheless, there is a clear shift from simple self-interest in the first two strategies to the collective interests in the latter two strategies.

Lever. In the first two strategies the levers of change wielded by the change agent are facts or information for the telling strategy and leverage or coercion for the forcing strategy. In the participating strategy, the change agent relies on dialogue and the co-creation of a commonly owned future. In the transforming strategy the lever is personal integrity, which gives rise to moral power. By moral power, we are not presenting a single view of the good life. Quite the contrary, each person must find his or her own moral power. This derives from reduced defensiveness, examination of personal hypocrisy, and commitment to a higher purpose such as the good of the relationship or the organization.

Time. The four change strategies require different time investments. The telling and forcing strategies take little time commitment. In the former strategy, the change agent simply transmits more persuasive information to the change target. In the latter strategy, the change agent simply exercises legitimate or illegitimate authority to institute change. The participating strategy takes more time investment. Establishing a win–win, participative dialogue takes much time and effort. The transforming

strategy is also highly time consuming. The change agent has to go through self-reflection and then repeat the process on a regular basis.

Impact. The first two strategies tend to lead to incremental changes, and the second two tend to result in transformational changes. Incremental changes are smaller changes that happen within the underlying paradigm or meaning system. Transformational changes tend to be larger and more dramatic alterations in which the underlying paradigm or meaning system is altered. The modifications in the meaning system lead to new behaviors, and these give rise to new structures and processes. Occasionally one of the first two strategies can lead to transformation, and occasionally the latter two can result in only incremental differences.

Perceived Control. One of the most important dimensions of comparison is the perceived control of the change agent. In the telling and forcing strategies the change agent tends to believe that he or she is in control. This is one reason why these first two strategies receive widespread support. In the telling strategy we control the information we dispense. In the forcing strategy our perceived control seems to reach a peak. The change target must do what we demand. In the participating and transforming strategies, perceived control appears minimal. In the participating strategy, we allow the change targets to influence us, and we trust the dialogue to result in an emergent win–win relationship. In the transforming strategy, we engage in self-change and then allow others complete agency in determining whether they want to respond to the attraction of our increased moral power. We then wait for an emergent process to unfold, recognizing that we have little control over the process at all.

Actual Control. The irony of the telling and forcing strategies is that although these approaches have high perceived control, they result in little actual control. Recipients of the telling strategy rarely change deeply rooted behaviors. In the forcing strategy, where perceived control appears extremely high, we damage the relationship with change targets.

Consequently, as soon as monitoring ceases, compliance disappears. As we become skilled in the participating strategy, we develop an enormous sense of control in that we can turn most situations into win–win outcomes. In the transforming strategy, we have the ability to reach complete control because we are both the change agent and the target. As we reduce our hypocrisy and increase our commitment, others are free to choose their course of action.

Outcomes. The strategies also differ along the dimension of desired outcomes. The first two strategies seek compliance. In the telling strategy, for example, we may provide factual information, such as the scientifically verified relationship between smoking and cancer. We do this hoping that the change targets will comply with our enlightened understanding of healthy living. In the forcing strategy we may seek to pass laws that demand compliance with our understanding of healthy living. In both strategies we have a paradigm of the desired state, and we push change targets to conform with our expectations. In the participating strategy we do not assume that we know the answer or desired outcome. We engage in a process in which the desired future emerges over time. We co-create it. In the transforming strategy we clarify the common good or higher purpose and embrace it. This increase in moral power distorts the existing system and causes others to make sense of us and then make decisions about their own reality. This distortion gives rise to an emergent social system or productive community, one that is more closely tied to external reality and is full of committed people doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND PRACTICE

Courses and workshops in OD provide two main benefits: theoretical background and applied tools and techniques. What makes a traditional OD course unique is that most of the theories, tools, and techniques usually reflect the values of the participating strategy.

Because the values of the transforming strategy are in many ways similar to the values of the participating strategy, we suggest that the fourth strategy should be more readily accepted in OD than in other fields. Given the value congruence between participating and transforming, it is surprising that OD has little focus on self-transcendence. Increasing the emphasis on transforming may lead to increased change effectiveness as change agents harness additional moral power. Consider a common pattern.

It is normal for a change agent or consultant to act out of self-interest. On occasion, powerful figures hire a consultant to help bring about an organization change. As the change process unfolds, it becomes clear that the behavior of the power figure is part of the problem. The behavior of the power figure needs to change. At this point, the power figure sends implicit messages that call for alternative courses of action. The consultant, who seeks to preserve the relationship with the client for financial and professional reasons, then tends to consciously or unconsciously collude with the power figure. In colluding, the two undermine the best interests of the system. When this happens, none of the first three strategies is likely to work. The consultant or change agent lacks the necessary moral power.

The ideas articulated in this chapter can help. In Figure 5.1 we list questions reflecting the self-orientation of the change agent using each of the four strategies. We place particular emphasis on the self-orientation in the transforming strategy. The other strategies often fail. The political perspective, for example, leads to compliance with a set of rules and uses authority to reach goals. But such behaviors are not a long-term strategy that induces commitment to change. The telling strategy also has difficulties. Although using logical arguments is an effective way of persuading, it does not lead to the widespread change often needed. And the interpersonal perspective, though often useful, can be co-opted by the change agent and internal interests to promote

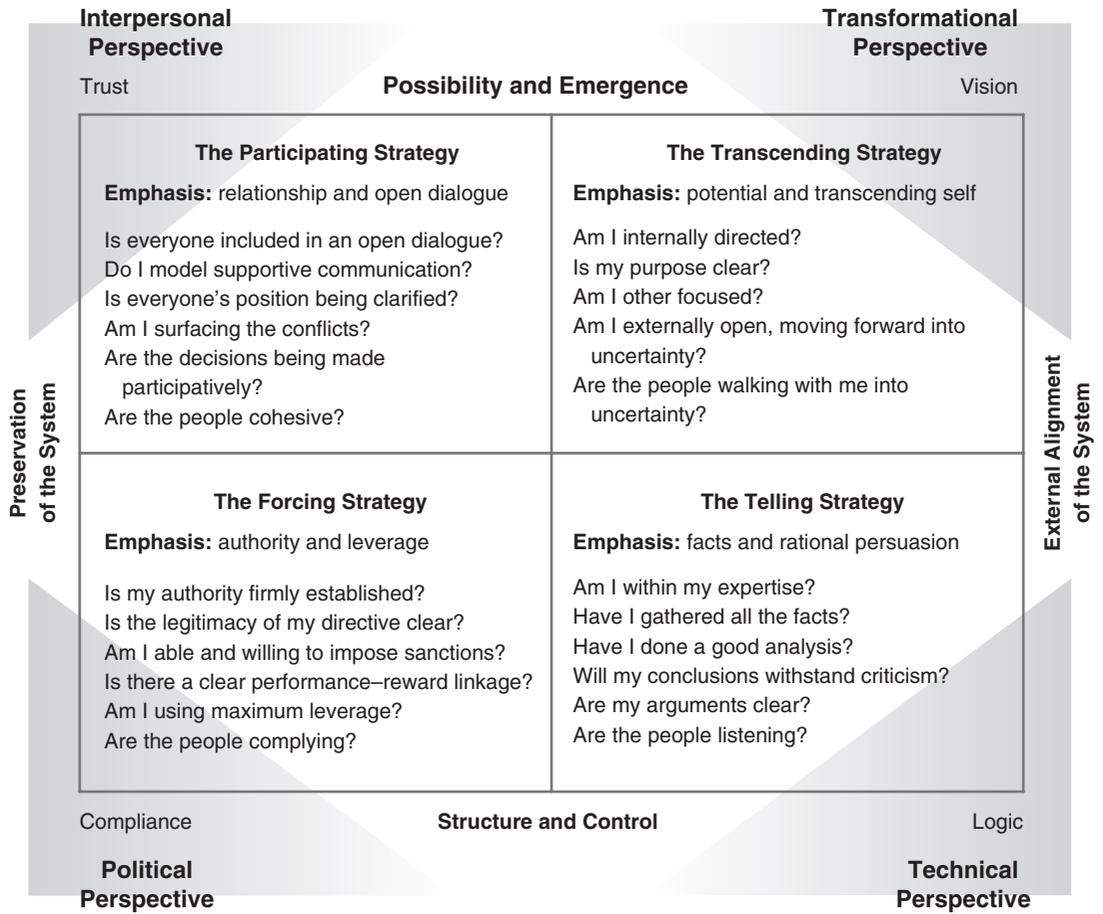


Figure 5.1 Four General Strategies

their own self-interests. On the other hand, the transformational perspective has the capability of leading to the requisite widespread change. Questions such as “Am I internally directed?” and “Is my purpose clear?” are difficult. But these questions lead to the articulation of a vision in which the change agent transcends self-interest. A change agent can use these questions to get into a state of increased moral power and increase the likelihood of organization change (Quinn, 2004).

For the novice, the list of questions is likely to be useful but inadequate. The conceptual jump is large, and people in the normal state of denial have many rationalizations for avoiding the fourth strategy. For this reason Quinn and Quinn (2004) have proposed a process for

helping the novice embrace the fourth strategy. The assumption is that just as it is normal for each of us to live in hypocrisy, it is also normal for each of us to have past experiences in which we have actually experienced self-transcendence. A careful search for and analysis of such moments proves to be a valuable exercise. It gives us vision and courage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The fourth general strategy also has implications for research. To date, OD scholars have not carefully considered the assumptions of self-transcendence. Scholars have also not given due attention to the literature on transformational leadership. Most theories do not conceptualize

change agents as transformational leaders. We suggest that OD researchers reexamine the literature on transformational leadership and reframe that literature around the assumptions of self-transcendence. Afterwards, researchers can look at the questions and propositions that emerge to raise a set of related questions for OD. Although such research will depart from the norm, we contend that a change in the fundamental assumptions of human behavior toward transformation will provide theoretically rich and meaningful approaches to change, leadership, and OD.

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