



Generative Change: A Practical Primer

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GENERATIVE CHANGE: A PRACTICAL PRIMER

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Getting Started | 4 |
| 2. Generative Change: An Introduction | 9 |
| 3. Health for All, Health by All: Generative Change in Action | 22 |
| 4. Generative Asset Building | 28 |
| 5. Collaborative Mindsight | 44 |
| 6. Mastering Dialectical Change | 55 |
| 7. Stepping Up to a Preferred Future | 72 |

1. GETTING STARTED

This little primer is a practical addition to the change leader's toolkit. It introduces you to the principles and practices of generative change. It will help you to:

- Act on complex change challenges.
- Discern what's most needed in *this* situation:
 - to fix what's not working ... *and/or*
 - to become more resourceful and resilient by adapting to conditions that are increasingly complex ... *and/or*
 - to purposefully and mindfully generate a preferred future, a thriving future ... for yourself, your organization, your community.
- Apply the best-fit change technology for *this* change challenge: technical, adaptive or generative.

- Have constructive conversations with colleagues and with community members:
 - How can we work together to generate healthy change?
 - How can we better support thriving ... in kids and adults, in organizations, and in communities ... now and into the future?
 - In the face of so much uncertainty, how can we generate a *preferred* future, and not simply an inherited future?

As change leaders, we're always seeking new and more effective ways of thinking and doing. And yet we are prone to a curious paradox: even when our goal is to catalyze change, we tend to fall back on habitual perspectives and habitual approaches.

Here's a habit you may have noticed: We focus on the problems we'd like to change, and the outcomes we'd like to achieve. But we rarely talk about the process by which positive change occurs. It's time for that conversation.

Another habit: we spend energy and resources on our efforts to solve problems. Thriving, however, is primarily about potential. How can we bring the problem/potential equation into better balance? It's time to have that conversation as well.

And consider this. We acknowledge that we live in an intricately interconnected world, yet we continue to work in silos. So here's a timely conversation topic: How can we engage in change practices that work across *all* professional disciplines, in *all* organizational & community contexts?

Dr. Daniel Siegel encountered a similar challenge some years ago. In a room full of scientists gathered to explore the connections between the mind and the brain, Siegel was startled to learn that these highly educated academics, even those in professional fields that 'heal the mind,' could not articulate a definition of the mind. And so began a conversation that has now grown into the groundbreaking field of interpersonal neurobiology ... a field that is helping to shape our future.

Neuroscience can teach us a lot about change; so can breakthroughs in the complexity sciences, psychology, sustainability and leadership. Insights and innovations in each of these fields point in a promising direction: the emergent practice of generative change.

Why is generative change an essential technology for these times?

- It expands the toolkit of change leaders and citizens who want to make a difference, even as our world grows increasingly complex.
- It's useful in all professional disciplines, and in all organizational and community contexts.
- It will help us bring the problem/potential equation into better balance.

TOOLS TO GENERATE HEALTHY CHANGE

1. GENERATIVE
ASSET BUILDING
2. COLLABORATIVE
MINDSIGHT
3. MASTERING
DIALECTICAL CHANGE

- It will help us to have meaningful conversations about the dynamics and drivers of change, and the impact of those changes on our health and well-being.
- Generative change approaches will help us to create a preferred future – a future we choose and create through our actions – and to leave a legacy that benefits future generations.

2. GENERATIVE CHANGE: AN INTRODUCTION

Rewiring ourselves, rewiring our world

You may have heard about the woman who changed her brain. As a child growing up in small-town Ontario, Barbara Arrowsmith-Young struggled with profound learning disabilities. As a young adult, she turned her life around. Inspired by early research in neuroplasticity,ⁱ she devised a series of cognitive exercises to ‘rewire’ the parts of her brain that didn’t function normally. And it worked. Eventually graduating with a master’s degree in educational psychology, she went on to found a school that serves children with diverse learning disabilities, and is heralded worldwide as an educational pioneer.

Norman Doidge is a psychiatrist who spent years observing students at the Arrowsmith School. The common practice in education, he says, is to help students compensate for their learning disabilities, finding ways to work around the problem. But, he cautions, “every time we choose to work around a brain area, we neglect it, further weakening what it can do.” With the

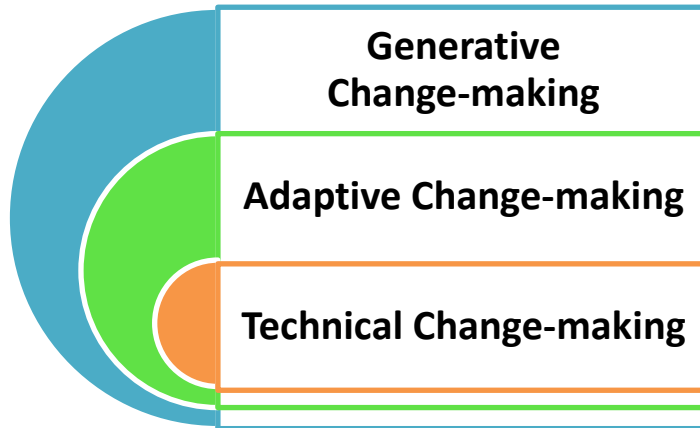
workaround approach, students find ways to adapt to their learning disability. In contrast, the Arrowsmith program sets higher intentions for students; as new neural pathways and connections are generated, the brain changes. And as the brain changes, potential grows and promising new capacities emerge.

What's the connection between neuroplasticity and generative change? With neuroplasticity, scientists are learning how focused attention changes not only the activity of the brain but, eventually, its architecture. Similarly, generative change is a particular way of focusing attention on our change challenges, and to cultivate more of the life conditions that promote thriving. Taking important steps beyond technical and adaptive approaches to change, it is generative change that will empower us to become the architects of a preferred future.

Generate (verb)
To bring into existence;
to be the cause of

Three change technologies: Finding the best fit

Here are three ways to think about the way we approach change: technical, adaptive and generative change.



Technical change is the best fit when:

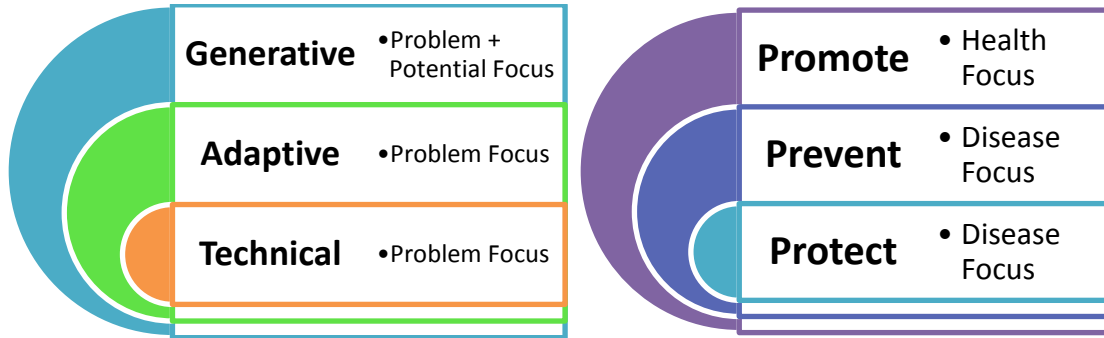
- The problem is clearly defined
- The problem-solving solution is well-known
- The needed skill-set can be learned
- Current ways of thinking are adequate for the complexity of the task
- Our change goal is to fix the problem in order to maintain the system

Adaptive change is the best fit when:

- The change challenge is complex
- There's little agreement on the problem, let alone the solution
- The way we've always done things no longer works; innovation is required
- Old ways of thinking are no longer adequate; what's required is a change of mindⁱⁱ
- Our change goal is to foster resilience and equilibrium in the system by adapting to changing (and often difficult) life conditions

Generative change is the best fit when:

- Our aim is to foster health, well-being & healthy development, now and for future generations
- We're paying attention to problems *and* potentials ... in people, in organizations, in communities
- Resilience is necessary, but not sufficient for our purpose: higher levels of thriving for people, and for the planet
- Our change efforts require adaptive resilience *and* intentional generativity
- Our change goal is equilibrium, *plus* nudging the system toward a preferred future



Generative change: Making the case

Let's try a small thought experiment. Think about a challenge you're chewing on. Would you describe this as a simple challenge? Or is it complex? I'm guessing you'll say "yes, it's definitely complex." Another question: Is the change that's needed going to be simple or complex? Again, I'm anticipating your response will be "complex." And a final question: how many of you are

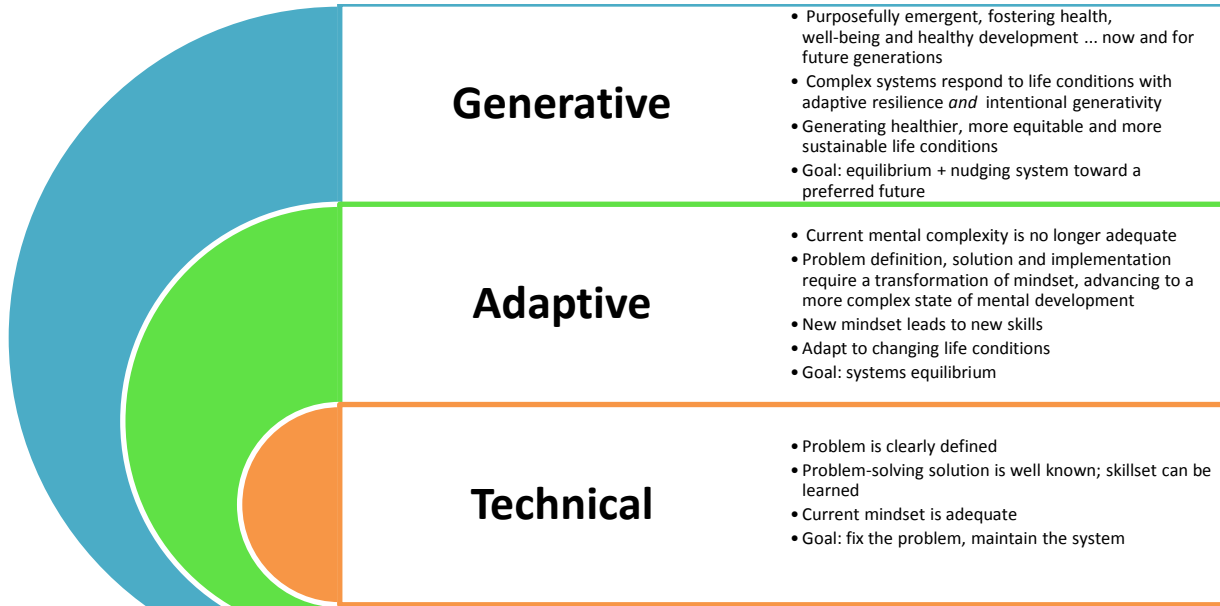
still holding out hope that change-making will one day become simple? Perhaps next week, when that new manager is hired, or next month when funding is received for that new health promotion project? Hmm.

When I've carried out this thought experiment with groups of change leaders, we tend to chuckle at our habitual attempts to make something simple out of that which is complex. When we're being honest, we concede that we continue to act as if the problem were simple to solve, if only we had enough money, time, staff and resources. We'll also acknowledge that technical solutions are our typical default.

Noticing this trend, Ron Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard have made a compelling case for adaptive change practices.ⁱⁱⁱ The most common cause of failure in leadership, they note, is to treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. As a result, we keep doing what we've always done, expecting different results. True.

However, it's equally true that we try to meet generative change challenges through adaptive means ... assuming, for example, that if we could only solve our problems, the potentials would take care of themselves. In this way, we confuse stability with healthy development, we conflate well-being and thriving. And we miss important opportunities to foster higher levels of health, well-being and healthy development – in people, in organizations, in communities – now and into the future.

In fact, generative change is essential if our intention is to create a more promising future. Once again, neuroscience helps to paint the picture, and neuroplasticity offers an inspiring example of generative change in action. Forging new neural connections and pathways, neuroplasticity enables us to reconnect parts to form a healthier whole. It addresses problems *and* potentials, working in harmony with complexity in order to build further capacity. In this way, we transform workaround solutions into health-generating innovations.



Three Change Technologies

Paying attention to problems and potentials

With so many problems in the world, who's got time to pay attention to potential? Actually, with so many problems in the world, we can't afford *not* to pay attention to potential. But first we need to understand why humans are so focused on problems, and why potential seems like a luxury we can't really afford.

Turns out it's not our fault: Evolution has hardwired us for negativity. Since the earliest humans walked the planet, our primary concern has been survival. And, to survive, we needed to be hyper-alert to the dangers around us: to stalk, and not be stalked; to eat, and not be eaten. As a result, our brains developed a *negativity bias*. As Rick Hanson explains, "this world was the womb of the human brain, which was painstakingly adapted to its conditions. The results live on between your ears today, continuing to shape your experiences and guide your actions."^{iv}

And now, in the early years of the 21st century, the good news is that we survived. The not-so-good news is that we tend to face life with negative thinking: For millennia we've been wired to see problems, and to solve problems. It's our default in almost every situation. But new opportunities are on the horizon.

We're now at an important evolutionary crossroads; for the first time in history, humans are becoming aware of the opportunity to change our default responses. It's an opportunity to rebalance the problem/potential equation, giving as much attention to our potentials as we give to our problems. It's important for us, and it's important for the well-being of future generations; every time we pay attention to potentials, as well as problems, we each play a part in the rewiring of our world.

Making change that makes a difference

If you spend much time poking around the internet, you've likely discovered the highly popular animated videos produced by the RSA.^v A disembodied hand appears on-screen and, with the stroke of a pen, world-changing ideas spring to life. These videos are fun and informative, as well as provocative. They make us think.

The Social Brain Project is another innovative RSA initiative. Investigating the growing disconnect between aspiration and actuality, they identify a glaring gap. It's a social aspiration gap: the gap between the world in which we would like to live, and the world we create through our actions.^{vi}

Which raises an important question: How will we bridge the social aspiration gap? Put another way, how will we work together to generate more health, more equity, and more sustainability? And how can we do so in a way that brings the problem/potential equation into a better state of balance?

Let's start with something we all care deeply about: health. Every human on the planet has an aspiration for health. And every community has an aspiration for health. So, let's explore the gap between the health we aspire to, and the health we create through our actions.



3. HEALTH FOR ALL, HEALTH BY ALL: GENERATIVE CHANGE IN ACTION

What generates health?

How can we better understand the factors that generate health so that we can create more of it? This question, posed by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, gives us a practical place to start bridging the health aspiration gap.

Health, he explains, is not the opposite of disease; it's a continuum of experience that ranges from 'ease' to 'dis-ease.' But, he notes, most of our attention and our resources have been captured by the dis-ease pole of the continuum. With an eye to rebalancing that trend, Antonovsky coined the term "salutogenesis," drawing on the Latin roots *salus*, meaning health, and *genesis*, meaning origin.

Salutogenesis (noun)

The process by which health is created. When we understand the factors that generate health, we can create more of it.

Now, salutogenesis may not be a word on the tip of your tongue. But it's a useful word, one that helps us to reframe our thinking about health, not only in people, but in organizations and communities as well. And it can also help us to reframe our thinking about health and sustainability for the planet.

Salutogenesis, then, is the process by which health is created. When we understand the factors that generate health, we can create more of it. In Antonovsky's words, we give more attention to those factors that promote "movement toward the healthy end of the continuum."^{vii} And this is generative change-making in action.

Who generates health?

In the mid-80's, the World Health Organization adopted the guiding principle of *Health for All*. This principle expresses humanity's growing capacity for universal caring and concern. It's also a systemic recognition of the interconnectedness of people, the communities in which we live, and the diversity of determinants that influence health.

Year by year, we reiterate our global commitment to health for all. Yet the gap keeps growing. **So, here's a renewed commitment for the 21st century: Health *for* all, health *by* all.**

With the addition of these three simple words, our global commitment to “health *for* all” is activated by our local commitment to “health *by* all.” Because, really, who generates health? We do, each and every day, through our actions and behaviors, through our thoughts and emotions, through our relationships with others, and through the many local systems and services that shape our shared lives: economy, education, justice, governance, transportation, water and waste management. Including, of course, the health system.

Health, then, is the concern of everyone, not just health professionals. Because there's no single sector that can address the challenges and opportunities that face us, there's room for everyone to contribute. In fact, it's necessary!

Crowdsourcing health

In the world of fundraising, crowdsourcing is a rising star. Crowdsourcing not only generates financing for new endeavors, it gives each of us the opportunity to be philanthropists, financiers, movers-and-shakers. My ten dollars can make a difference.

Health is another resource that responds well to crowdsourcing. If our purpose is to generate higher levels of health in the community, everyone has a role to play, including:

- Health professionals
- Social workers and allied professions
- Educators
- Coaches
- Psychologists, therapists and other mental health practitioners
- Government staff and elected representatives
- Spiritual leaders and directors
- Private sector leaders

- Planners and policy-makers
- Community development practitioners
- Social innovators & social entrepreneurs
- Business owners
- Consultants
- Engaged citizens of all sorts, including kids, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors ...

Why does participation matter? It's not just because engaged community members can take stress off a burdened health system, augmenting services and supports with volunteer contributions. It's not merely that citizens can lobby decision-makers for health-promoting programs and policies. And not only because citizens are more committed to programs and policies that they help to plan, or that willingness to comply with health-promoting policies is enhanced when those affected by a decision participate in the decision-making process. Each of these is true. However.

Perhaps the better explanation, the more enduring explanation, is that participation – making a contribution – actually generates higher levels of health.^{viii} Len Duhl, a co-founder of the global Healthy Cities / Healthy Communities movement, summarizes a lifetime of learning about health causality: “we have learned that active participation, in itself, leads to health.”^{ix} In other words, participation is salutogenic.^x

Crowdsourcing, then, is an efficient way to generate higher levels of health. And generative asset building is one of the most promising ways to crowdsourcing health.

4. GENERATIVE ASSET BUILDING

Stepping up to a preferred future

Asset building is a hands-on way to work together toward a preferred future. With everyday actions, we can crowdsource more of the assets that promote thriving, in kids and adults, in organizations, in communities.

What are assets? Put very simply, assets are building blocks for thriving. As Richard Lerner explains, “assets include the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments and patterns of interactions known to both promote health and over which a community has considerable control.”^{xi}

Asset building is a *tried-and-true* way to promote resilience and thriving in people, in organizations, in communities. For example, in recent decades asset building has played an important role in positive child and youth development, producing an impressive body of research, evidence and

promising practices.^{xii} And the evidence shows that it's made a big difference in the lives of kids and their communities.

Asset building is an *affordable* way to generate higher levels of thriving ... health, well-being and healthy development in people and in communities. It's a low investment strategy with impressive returns. In an era of scarce resources, we can make better use of our most plentiful asset: the power of people who want to make a difference.

Asset building is a *democratic* way to generate a preferred future. Everyone has something to contribute. Everyone is an asset builder. Leveraging the contributions of diverse community members, then, we invite a surge of local engagement and contribution. And making a contribution is not only good for the community, it's good for us.

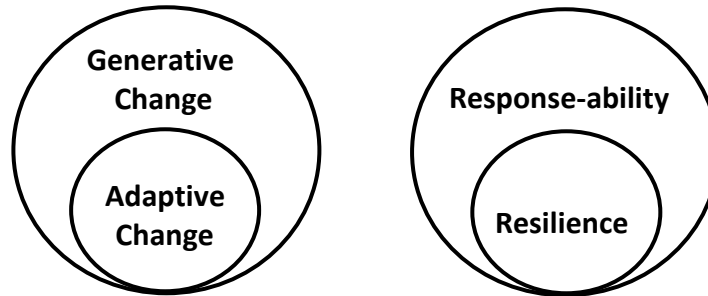
Assets that foster resilience *and* response-ability

These days, there's lots of talk about *resilience*, and calls to action to create 'resilient communities.' This is important. But, when we consider our capacity to navigate complexity and generate healthy change, resilience is not enough. *Response-ability* is another essential capacity claiming our attention in such complex and challenging times.

Resilience is often described this way: the ability of an individual or a system to cope and adapt in the face of adversity, trauma and stress. Response-ability is a little different; it's the capacity to respond, positively and proactively, not only to problems but to promising potentials ... now, and into the future.

Response-ability and resilience aren't at odds with one another; both are needed. Taken together, they offer a more integrative approach to change-making. Another way to think of response-ability is as 'resilience-plus.' It's a value-added equation, one that includes the adaptive capacities inherent in resilience, even while stepping up to include the higher complexity of generative change.

Here's an example. With resilience, complex systems (which include people, organizations, and communities) are better able to adapt to life conditions, even in the face of adversity. With response-ability, these same complex systems respond to life conditions with adaptive resilience *and* creative generativity; the goal is not merely to find equilibrium in times of trouble, but to focus on the potential of the system – to become healthier, for instance. So, where resilience is adaptive, response-ability is generative. And with response-ability our change-making is less reactive, and more intentionally creative.



Healthy people, healthy organizations and healthy communities are resilient *and* response-able. Generative asset building fosters both resilience and response-ability.

Whole-system asset building

We move closer to the goal of healthy people, healthy communities and a healthy world when we pay as much attention to generating health as we do to preventing disease or social problems. While they will vary from person to person, and from community to community, the assets that can generate higher levels of health include:

- *Individual:* Assets that generate higher levels of health in people include encouraging healthy choices, habits, and lifestyle, such as diet, exercise, stress management; supports for psychological, emotional and spiritual health and development; access to sport, fitness and other physical activities; meaningful employment, modifications for physical accessibility; learning opportunities and supports for parents, etc. By building assets, we increase health, resilience and response-ability in people.

- *Community:* At the community level, health-generating assets might include fostering neighborliness; programs to support healthy child and youth development; community gardens; comprehensive community initiatives to address critical issues such as poverty, food security and affordable housing; emergency preparedness; healthy public and private policy; health promotion and prevention initiatives, diverse cultural organizations and activities, and a broad range of opportunities for ordinary citizens to shape their community through engagement and contribution. By building assets, we increase health, resilience and response-ability in communities.
- *Natural Environment:* Assets to generate a healthy environment might include government and community actions to address climate change; community recycling programs and composting services; carbon-reduction policies and incentives; sustainable planning; sustainable economic development. By building health-generating assets, we support health and resilience in the natural environment, and ecological response-ability in people and communities.

**Psychological and
Spiritual Assets**

Healthy mind,
Healthy spirit

**Physical and
Behavioral Assets**

Healthy body,
Healthy actions

Cultural Assets
Healthy cultural values,
beliefs, attitudes,
assumptions;
social capital; political will

**Social and
Ecological Assets**
Healthy environment, economy,
social systems, institutions,
policies, services

Four Asset Building Domains

These asset-building domains are interconnected; assets in individuals affect assets in communities and the natural environment. And vice versa. By building health-generating assets in one area, we're actually strengthening health and well-being in each of the others. Reconnecting seemingly separate parts into a more inclusive and integrative whole, our change efforts generate more resilience and more response-ability.

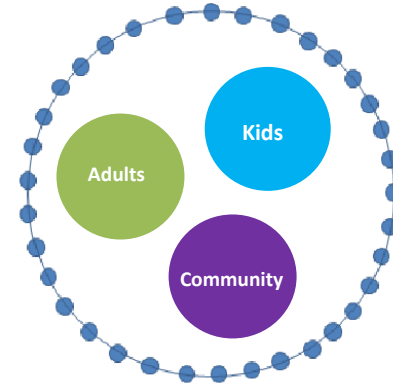
Integration might be the principle underlying health at all levels of our experience, from the microcosm of our inner world to our interpersonal relationships and life in our communities.

Daniel J. Siegel

Healthy development: Connecting the dots

Working together to generate a preferred future, here's a practical place to stand:

- A healthier future is possible, for our kids and ourselves, for our organizations and our communities;
- Healthy development, in kids and adults, is the work of communities;
- Healthy development in kids depends on healthy development in adults;
- Thriving kids need thriving adults *and* thriving communities.

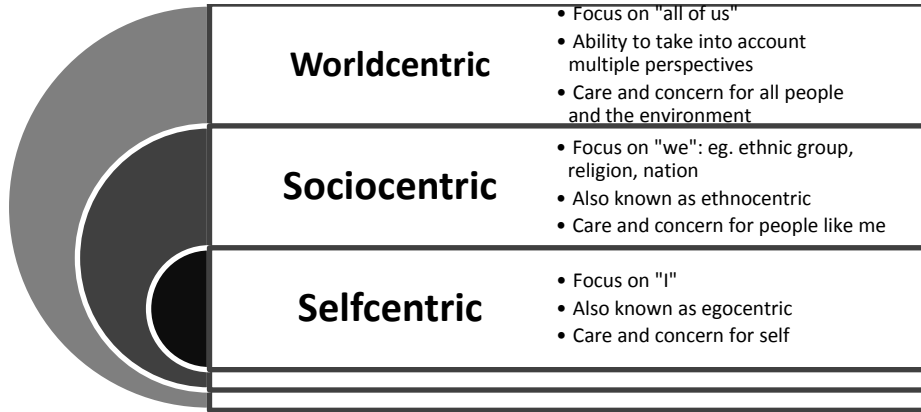


It's time to connect the dots between child and youth, adult and community development. And it's time to take action to generate the life conditions that foster thriving in kids, in adults and in communities.

How can the world change if people don't?

Change-makers often report that it's difficult for people to change their habits and behaviors. This is true even when such a change would not only be good for the individual, but would also benefit their family, their organization, their community. Now, a growing body of research in human development gives change-makers some helpful tools, even while expanding our perspectives on change.

Everyone knows that children progress through stages of development; while each child is unique, his or her growing capacities emerge in predictable patterns. But ample research shows that adults also have the potential to continue developing throughout their lives, in similarly predictable patterns. Each growth spurt reveals a new mindset – an increasingly complex way of knowing, feeling, valuing and making sense of life and the world around us. Each emerging mindstage reveals new perspectives, new insights, new solutions and new resources.



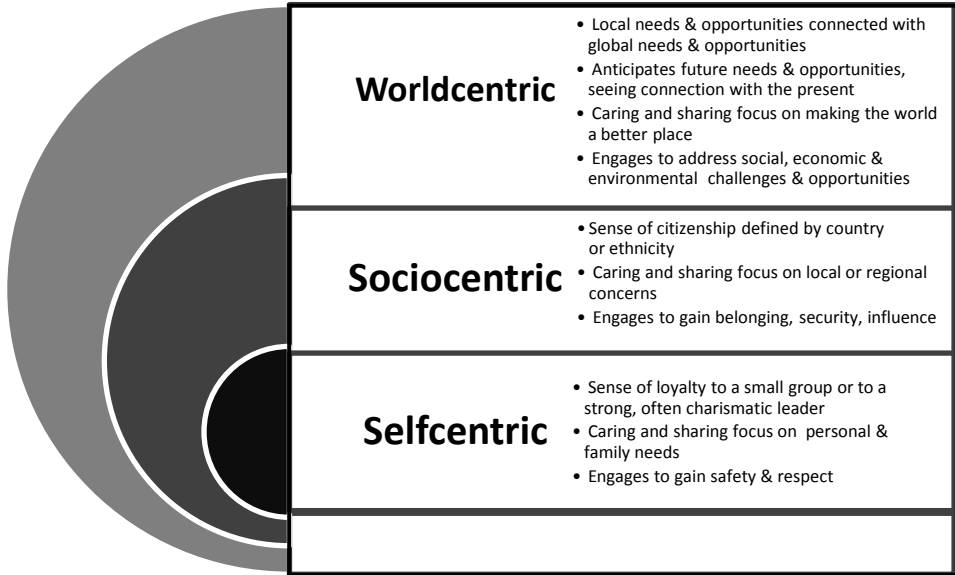
Robert Kegan, a respected developmental psychologist at Harvard University, calls this the “hidden curriculum of adult life.”^{xiii} In fact, there is much evidence that adults not only have the potential to develop, but that our very health and well-being depend on it. In adults, as in children, the failure to develop is the failure to thrive.

Developing citizenship

As global citizens rise to the challenge of health, equity and environmental sustainability, local citizenship is essential. Of course, I'm not referring to legal citizenship, which some have and some haven't. I'm talking about the sort of citizenship that says: I live here. I care about this place. I have responsibilities here, and I contribute here. I make a difference here.

For some citizens, *here* is their own block, their own neighborhood, their village or town. For many others, their personal sense of here expands to include their region, province, state or country. And for others – a growing number of others – here refers to the little blue planet called Earth, while the focus of their care and concern encompasses all of humanity and all of nature.

Everyone's a citizen somewhere. But our expressions of citizenship differ from person to person, a reflection of our diverse experiences and perspectives. Citizenship is another area in which development matters. As perspective expands, our sense of citizenship broadens and deepens, accompanied by an expanding capacity for care, concern and compassionate action.



Adult development: A promising new frontier for change leaders

So, an important catalyst of change is actually a dynamic inherent in our own development. From this perspective, generativity is not merely a by-product of our actions, but of our developing minds. And the maturity of our actions is closely correlated with the maturity of our minds ... our values, beliefs, assumptions, our capacity for care, concern, and empathy.

So, here's a proposition to consider: human development is the new frontier of change-making ... in every family, in every organization and in every community. And the value-added benefit of asset building is healthy development ... in kids and adults, in organizations and communities.

Assets that generate a preferred future

Generative change, you'll recall, means to purposefully and mindfully generate a preferred future, a thriving future ... for ourselves, our organization, our community, our world.

You'll also recall that generative change is the best-fit change technology when:

- Our aim is to foster health, well-being & healthy development, now and for future generations
- We're paying attention to problems *and* potentials ... in people, in organizations, in communities
- Resilience is necessary, but not sufficient for our purpose: higher levels of thriving for people, and for the planet
- Our change efforts require adaptive resilience *and* intentional generativity
- Our change goal is equilibrium, *plus* nudging the system toward a preferred future

Generative asset building pays attention to two types of assets:

Here and now assets: Assets that promote thriving, in kids, in adults, in communities ... addressing our problems *and* our potentials. Thriving, of course, includes healthy development ... not just in kids, but in adults as well.

Legacy assets: A healthy society leaves a legacy: a healthier, more equitable and more sustainable world, not just now, but for generations to come. When we build legacy assets, we're extending our capacity for care, concern, and empathy into the future, knowing that life in one hundred years will be as precious, and hopefully not as precarious, as it is today.



5. COLLABORATIVE MINDSIGHT

Cultivating mindsight

Collaborative mindsight is another practical addition to the change leader's toolkit. It's a meeting of minds that pays attention to the paradox inherent in most change challenges: problems disclose promising potentials.

Collaborative mindsight can be put into practice whenever two or more people come together to talk about change. It makes use of a resource that we have in abundance: the transformative power of our own minds. And it's really very simple.

Mindsight is a term coined by Dan Siegel to describe a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds ... and the inner lives of others.^{xiv} In other words, mindsight is the capacity to see into self and other, with insight and with empathy. Siegel suggests that mindsight is our "seventh sense."

When this seventh sense is activated in a group setting, we find we are better able to see and value the perspective of another person, even though we may disagree. They too are able to see and value our perspective. Once again, insight and empathy.

Here's a scenario to consider: Two people are sitting and chatting about a change challenge they're working on. One person sees it as a very big problem. The other sees potential, and an opportunity for positive change. Can both be right?

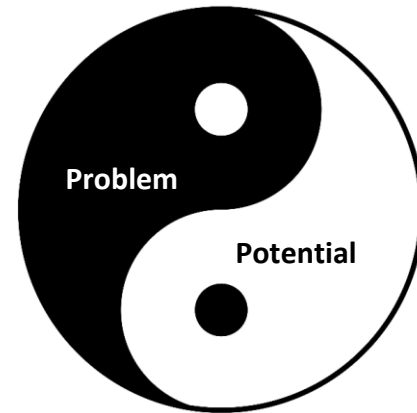
Indeed, they can both be right. This is what we call paradox: two truths are possible. Problem *and* potential.

Perspective and the power of paradox

Paradox is at the heart of collaborative mindsight ... from this perspective, every problem contains its opposite: a promising potential. And vice versa.

Faced with such a paradox, however, we can sometimes feel stuck. How can we get to potential unless we solve the problem? But, alternately, how can we address the problem unless we also act on the potential? It's a conundrum. But we face this sort of conundrum every day: the dynamic push and pull of paradox.

Take parenthood, for example. We nurture potential in our kids, even as we address undesirable behavior. The behavior is a problem, yes. But the child is beaming with potential, and that must be cultivated as well. Both, and.



Parenthood helps adults to grow up a little, to expand our capacity for care and concern, for compassionate action. As we grow we're better able to take multiple perspectives, we're becoming more comfortable with paradox. Responding to our child with insight and empathy, we see the world through her eyes, we intuit his inner experiences. And, with mindsight, we become increasingly aware of our own perspectives and inner experience.

Our kids are the immediate beneficiaries of our emergent capacity for mindsight. And so are the generations to come.

Activating mindsight in organizational and community settings

What if we applied the same capacities for insight and empathy within our more public lives, our professional lives, our citizen lives? What if we evidenced a similar capacity for paradox, for multiple perspective taking, for deeper levels of care, concern, compassion?



Collaborative mindsight: Four principles to guide action

- Paradox: two truths are possible
- Multiple Perspectives: I can see my perspective and I can see yours
- Inclusion & Integration: including people, integrating perspectives
- Mindful Discernment: focused attention + creativity + nonattachment

Collaborative mindsight: Seven turns along the path

When we talk about the practice of collaborative mindsight, a labyrinth comes to mind. Walking the path, each step takes us closer to center.

Step 1: Tuning In.

Step 2: Making Sense

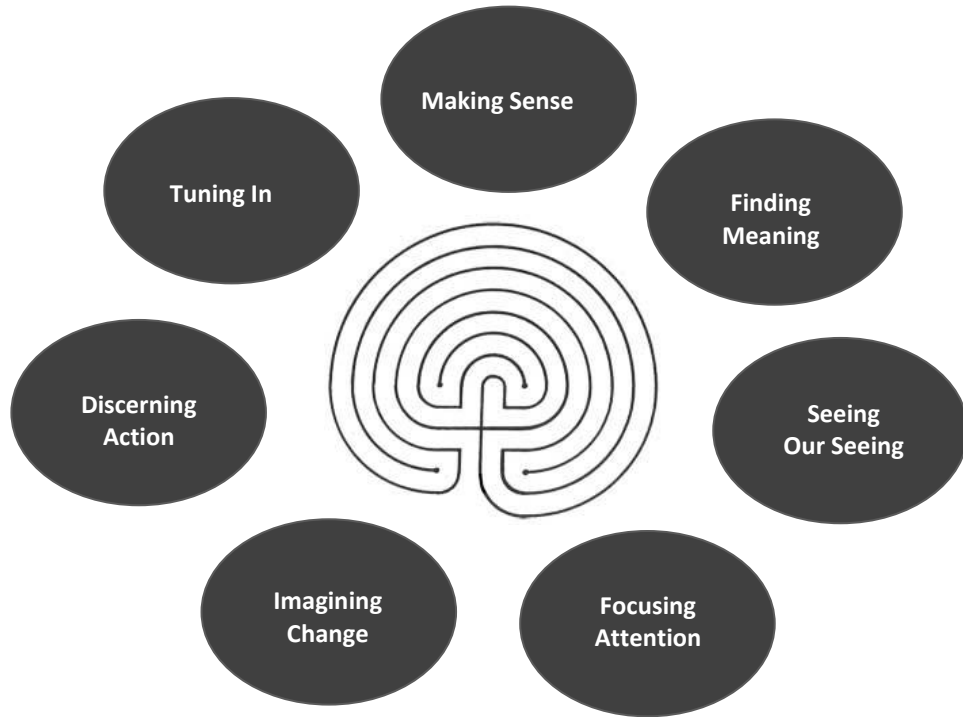
Step 3: Finding Meaning

Step 4: Seeing Our Seeing

Step 5: Focusing Attention

Step 6: Imagining Change

Step 7: Discerning Action



Step 1: Tuning In

- Tune in to yourself.
- Tune in to others.
- Tune in to the change challenge.

Step 2: Making Sense

- How do I make sense of this situation?
 - What is true about the situation?
 - What is true for me?
 - What is true for others?
- What sensations are in my body as I explore these truths?
- How does my life experience shape my perspective?

Step 3: Finding Meaning

- What is the problem in this situation?
- What is the potential in this situation?
- What factors contribute to the situation?
- How are these factors connected?

Step 4: Seeing Our Seeing

- What can I see?
- What can others see?
- What can't we see?

Step 5: Focusing Attention

- What's been getting lots of our attention?
- What's been getting *less* of our attention?
- How has our work been 'siloed'? How can we create more linkages?
- How does this help to clarify our purpose?

Step 6: Imagining Change

- What if we ... ?
- What if nothing changed?

Step 7: Discerning Action

- What will generate the highest levels of health, well-being and healthy development ... now, and for future generations?
- How will our actions help bridge the social aspiration gap, reflecting our ongoing commitment to health, equity & sustainability?
- How will our actions help to generate a preferred future?

Collaborative mindsight helps us engage in change-making at the intersection of problem and potential ... in teams, in organizations, and in communities. It can be practiced in any situation, in any setting. It can guide the work of a group, or simply serve as a mindful check-in for individual participants.



It's important to note here that collaborative mindsight is not another new facilitation technique. Rather, it's a set of principles, practices and perspectives that can support diverse facilitation approaches.

Open Space World Appreciative Theory U
Technology Cafe Inquiry (Presencing)

**Collaborative Mindsight:
Principles, practices &
perspectives on change**

6. MASTERING DIALECTICAL CHANGE

Dialectical change: Why it matters

Humanity is experiencing a bit of a reality check. Science is confirming what we've long suspected: Our climate is changing. Health disparities are on the rise. And social and economic inequality is growing, not shrinking. These are complex challenges.

In response, we can opt to take the kind of action that generates higher levels of health, equity and sustainability – in people, in communities, and in the natural and built environment. But skillful means are required.

The way we make change has everything to do with the change we make. What can we do? And how can we do it differently, more mindfully?

The principles and practices of dialectical change offer a good starting point. We can choose to turn our wicked problems into dialectical dilemmas ... complex, to be sure, but not unworkable.

Adopting a dialectical worldview, we can add dialectical change approaches to our change leaders' toolkit.



Fresh eyes on complexity

Complexity is here to stay. If you're like the change leaders we work with, you'll agree that our change challenges are growing increasingly complex. And you'll recognize the following features of complexity:

- New territory - there's little agreement on the problem, let alone the solution
- Tangle of factors (multiple, interconnected)
- Habitual action no longer works: innovation is required
- Multiple actors / stakeholders
- Multiple perspectives
- Doesn't respond well to linear thinking, strategic planning
- It's okay not to know!!

For most of us, complexity is no longer surprising. But it's the last item on this list that causes the most consternation: It's okay not to know. This, it turns out, is difficult, especially for well-educated professionals who are *supposed* to know.

We may never know all we need to about the complex issues we're facing; by their very nature they keep changing. But there is an important topic about which we can become more knowledgeable: the process of change.

Take climate change, for example. Pointing to the need to get serious about this very difficult issue, Karen O'Brien offers some important insight: "Focusing on *change*, rather than on climate," she says, "allows one to see obstacles to, and opportunities for, responding successfully to climate change."^{xv} This makes sense. So, let's focus a little.

The dialectical nature of change

If our intention is to expand our understanding of change, we must become more conversant with its dialectical nature.

The dialectical process is a future-friendly concept with an ancient pedigree. It has deep roots, for example, in classical Greek philosophy. And it has equally deep roots in Eastern religious and philosophical traditions. A time-honored observation about the nature of reality, it's even more relevant today.

What were the ancients noticing? It's the same thing that scientists are noticing today. Everything changes. And change follows a pattern, a dialectical pattern. It's a three-fold dynamic by which two elements come together to form a new entity, a new reality.

This pattern is present everywhere in nature. And it's ever-present in humans, influencing our health and development from our first to our final breath.

Good things come in threes

When two things come together in greater unity, the result is adaptive balance. When three things come together in greater unity, the result is transformation.

Dialectical change is a three-fold process. Two polarities create dynamic tension; eventually, something has to give. Sometimes the system simply breaks down. Or the system adapts, seeking renewed equilibrium. But when a third dynamic enters the mix, substantive change ensues. Intractable problems give birth to possibility. Polar opposites produce brand new realities. Seemingly disconnected parts unite to form a healthier whole. It's the agentic and integrative capacity of the third entity that makes the difference.

A popular example of the dialectical process comes from observing the way that seeds germinate. We start with one thing: the seed. We add another very different element: soil. But seed and soil, left to their own devices, are unlikely to sprout. A generative third force is needed: water. From this dynamic interplay of seed, soil and water comes new life.

Cynthia Bourgeault offers another example, drawn from her love of sailing:

A sailboat, as nearly everyone knows, is driven through the water by the interplay of the wind on the water (first force) and the resistance of the sea against its keel (second force). The result is that the boat is 'shot' forward through the water, much like a spat-out watermelon seed. But, as any sailor knows, this schoolbook analogy is not complete. A sailboat, left to its own devices, will not shoot forward through the water; it will round up into the wind and come to a stop. For forward movement to occur, a third force must enter the equation, the heading or destination by which the helmsperson determines the proper set of the sail and positioning of the keel. Only if these three are engaged can the desired result emerge, which is the course made good, the actual distance travelled.^{xvi}

In both these examples, we can identify three elements that form the scaffolding of the dialectical process: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The thesis and antithesis give us the two polarities or contradictions necessary to create dynamic tension. It's the synthesis of these opposing forces that resolves the tension, and creates the new reality. To achieve that synthesis, a dynamic third force is needed, a force that is purposeful, agentic, integrative. In other words, generative.

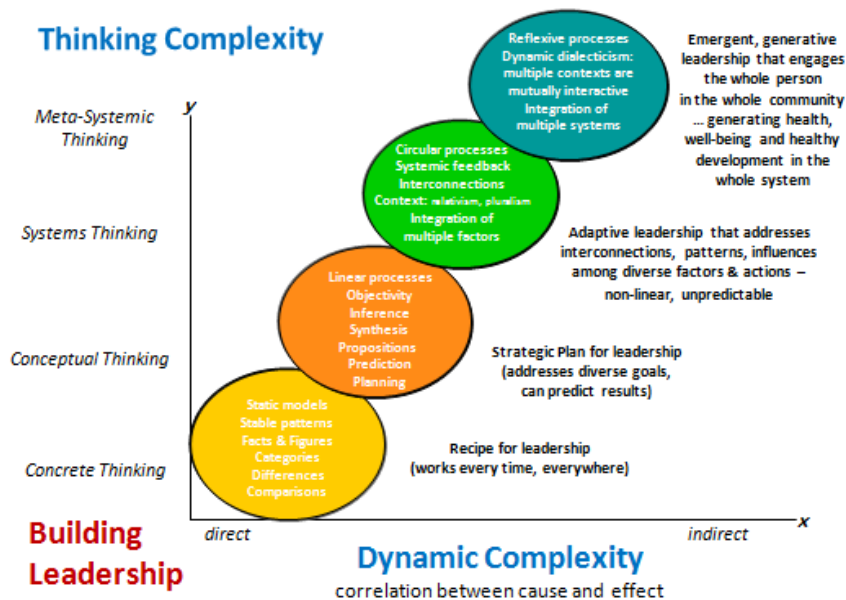
A dialectical worldview

We can think about dialectics in two ways:

- a) a worldview ... a fundamental perspective on reality; *and*
- b) the process by which reality changes.

Most of us grew up in a world where dualism reigned; in the West, it's been the dominant worldview for several hundred years. But, breakthroughs in scientific thinking during the past 200 years confirm the dialectical nature of change.^{xvii} In fact, among meta-systemic thinkers, it's the only worldview that makes sense.

Thinking Complexity



**Building
Leadership
Capacities**

Elements of a dialectical worldview ...



Dialectical Principles

- The principle of interrelatedness and wholeness
- The principle of polarity
- The principle of continuous change:
thesis, antithesis, synthesis
- The principle of progress:
development is directional

The process by which reality changes

First, to understand natural change processes, we need to become more familiar with that dynamic we're calling the 'third force.'
We can think of this third force as the agency that drives change.

Agency (noun)

The resource or the means by which change occurs.

Next, especially in conditions of high complexity, agency is most effective when it's integrative.

Integrate (verb)

To combine (two or more things) to form or create something; To form, coordinate or blend into a functioning or unified whole.

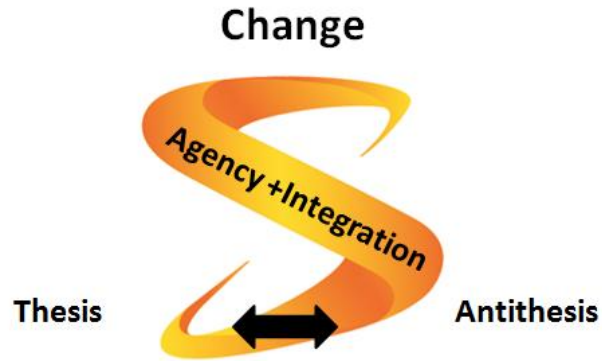
So, consider this generative change equation:

$$\text{Agency} + \text{Integration} = \text{Skillful Means}$$

An example of an integrative approach to change-making can be found in our earlier discussion of Generative Asset Building. We talked, for example, about connecting the dots between child & youth, adult and community development. And we talked about paying as much attention to health as we do to disease or social problems.

We also identified four interconnected domains of asset building: psychological and spiritual assets, physical and behavioral assets, social and ecological assets, and cultural assets. Together, they form a more comprehensive, inclusive and balanced whole.

Another great example of an integrative approach comes from the emergent field of Interpersonal Neurobiology. With leadership from Dan Siegel, it's a transdisciplinary approach to understanding the mind and brain, applying those insights in diverse sectors & fields of research.



Dialectical Process

Dialectical change principles at work

Among mental health professionals, Marsha Linehan is a bit of a legend. As the originator of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Linehan has offered new tools and renewed hope to therapists and clients alike. Previously complex and intractable mental health challenges, such as chronic suicidality and borderline personality disorder, have responded well to the DBT approach. And enthusiastic professionals from diverse backgrounds and disciplines continue to sign up for DBT training workshops.

What's unique about DBT? How is it different than other forms of cognitive behavior therapy? And why is it proving effective with mental health challenges that are notably non-responsive to other therapeutic modalities?

On the one hand, with the addition of components such as radical acceptance, distress tolerance, self-regulation, mindfulness, and multiple perspective taking, DBT offers a uniquely holistic approach to therapy. In addition, Linehan understood something fundamental about the nature of healing: it's dialectical.

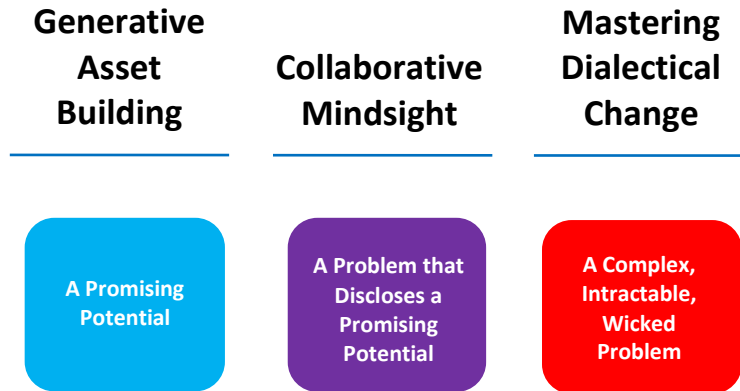
For example, closely observing the experience of her clients, and the dynamic interaction between client and therapist, Linehan:

- recognized the dialectical tension at play within the client, the struggle between illness and the desire for wellness;
- saw the potential inherent in the problem ... even typically intractable problems such as suicidality and borderline personality disorder;
- understood that healing was enhanced when her clients were able to think dialectically, to adopt a dialectical worldview;
- intuited the implicit 'third force' role played by the therapist; and
- noted that clients respond differently when the therapist can skillfully utilize the dialectical tension that characterizes a typical therapy session.

To an already extensive knowledge about the mental health challenges she sought to address, Linehan added an important ingredient: a theory of change. And it's making a difference.

When dialectical change savvy is needed

Dialectical change practices are most helpful when we're addressing a complex, intractable, 'wicked' problem. When the change challenge is characterized by high complexity, conflict and/or loss, it's the tool of choice.



7. STEPPING UP TO A PREFERRED FUTURE

Compelling reasons for doing things differently

Do you ever feel like a frog? You know, the proverbial frog in a pot of water slowly heating to the boiling point. Because it's gradual, the frog doesn't notice the rising temperature. He remains where he is, unaware that his world is changing. I frequently catch a glimpse of my own frog-ness, serenely sitting in the soup of life, carrying on as I've always carried on, unaware my world is changing. At times I do notice that, despite my best intentions and my best efforts, things aren't turning out the way I'd hoped. And yet I carry on.

We all know Einstein's quote about the definition of insanity: keep doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. And yet, in so many groups of leaders and change-makers, in so many organizations, in so many communities, this is the story we tell – as a joke on ourselves. And still we carry on.

Do *you* ever keep doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results?

Finding functional fit

What if we tried doing things a little differently, choosing the change approach that best aligns with the complexity of the change challenge?

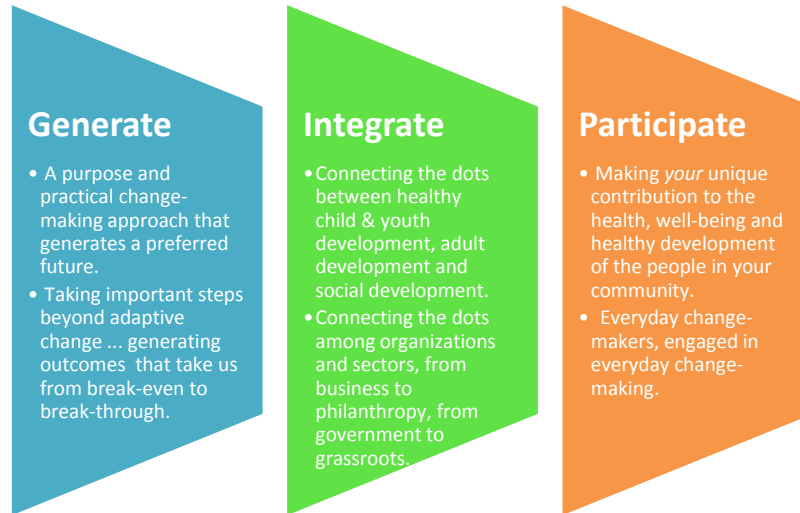
Are we simply looking to maintain healthy aspects of the current system, fixing problems as they arise? If so, **technical change** may be all that's required.

If our intention is to seek stability in a changing world, even bounce back from adversity and shocks, then **adaptive change** may offer the best tools.

If our goal is to maximize potential – with a focus on what the individual or the system can become, then **generative change** is the best fit.

What's the best fit approach for the change challenge *you're* working on?

When generative change is the right fit, here's a simple change model that helps to align purpose and actions.



**Our Change-making Model:
Generate. Integrate. Participate.**

Generate. Integrate. Participate.

To sum up, generative change is:

- Purposefully emergent, fostering health, well-being and healthy development in self and society, now and for future generations.
- An integrative change approach that connects the dots among each of the factors that generate health and well-being, including healthy development ... in children, in adults, and in communities.
- A participatory approach; working independently *and* together, as change leaders *and* as everyday citizens, we co-design a future in which we can thrive, now and into the future.

Practical tools for generative change include:

| Generative Asset Building | Collaborative Mindsight | Mastering Dialectical Change |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focusing on assets that generate higher levels of health, well-being & healthy development in children & youth, in adults and in communities.• Crowdsourcing: Everyone has a role to play. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A meeting of minds that pays attention to the paradox inherent in most change challenges: problems disclose promising potentials.• Activating mindsight: Applying insights and innovations in brain science to engage in change-making at the intersection of problem and potential ... in teams, in organizations, and in communities. | <p>When it's hard to get traction on "wicked" problems ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New perspectives on complex change challenges, plus practices to generate a preferred future for people and communities.• Dialectical approaches to change leadership with firm foundations in research and evidence-based practice. |

Generative change: Calling the crowd

A preferred future is possible. Not simply an impending future that we worry we must adapt to, but the future we can choose and create through our actions. And our actions are more successful and more sustainable when we add generative tools to our change-maker's toolkit.

If we're going to generate a preferred future, however, it's going to take a crowd. And the crowd is us: professionals and volunteers, parents and policy makers, business leaders and neighbors, politicians and engaged citizens.

Generative change-making is a practical way to invest in health, equity and sustainability. It promotes everyday change-making, practiced by everyday change-makers ... making a difference in the world by taking action right here at home.



About Communities that Can! Institute

Communities that Can! Institute supports the collaborative efforts of professionals and citizens to create a world in which we can not only survive, but thrive – now, and into the future. You can learn more about our work at www.communitiesthatcan.org.

Our offerings include:

- Webinars, workshops and training intensives
- Keynotes and conference presentations
- Coaching with individuals, organizations and change labs
- Capacity building for leaders and teams

About the author

Tam Lundy is a consultant, educator and mentor in the field of human and social development with extensive professional experience in diverse sectors and settings, including health, human services, education and government.

Tam has led large-scale initiatives; advised and supported professionals, policy makers and grassroots change leaders; developed and delivered countless workshops and courses; and written extensively on topics ranging from community development, capacity building and engagement to human development and the challenge of change. She has also taught university graduate courses in health promotion and education, and leadership for healthy change.

Tam is the Director of Learning at Communities that Can! Institute.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Dan Siegel describes neuroplasticity as the overall process by which brain connections are changed by experience and attention.

ⁱⁱ As Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2009) indicate, adaptive change-making shifts our attention from the problem to the person having the problem. Adaptive challenges, they say, “can only be met by transforming your mindset, by advancing to a more sophisticated stage of mental development.” (29)

ⁱⁱⁱ Heifetz, R. (2009).

^{iv} Hanson, R. (2013).

^v Royal Society for the Encouragement of Art, Manufactures and Commerce:
www.thersa.org

^{vi} *Beyond the Big Society: Psychological Foundations of Active Citizenship*. Available on-line:
<http://www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/learning,-cognition-and-creativity/social-brain/reports/beyond-the-big-society>

vii Antonovsky, A. (1987).

viii Advances in neuroscience are confirming what health promoters and community development practitioners have observed for decades: participation, in itself, is health promoting. See, for example, the research cited in Matthew Lieberman's book, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*.

ix Len Duhl is Professor Emeritus in the School of Public Health at the University of California's Berkeley campus. He and Trevor Hancock are honored for their work to promote the Healthy Cities / Healthy Communities approach in countries around the world.

x On the other hand, there's growing evidence that social isolation compromises health. See, for example, the Vancouver Foundation's Vital Signs report for 2010.
www.vancouverfoundationvitalsigns.ca

xi You'll find a comprehensive introduction to community-based asset building in Lerner and Benson's *Developmental Assets and Asset-building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy and Practice*.

^{xii} The pioneering work of Search Institute gives us a great example of asset building in action. From their perspective, developmental assets are the building blocks of healthy development; the more assets a child has the better the chances they will thrive, even under challenging circumstances.

^{xiii} Kegan, R. (1994).

^{xiv} Siegel, D. (2011).

^{xv} Karen O'Brien is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo in Norway

^{xvi} Bourgeault, C. (2013)

^{xvii} H.K. Wells, for example, examining the historical development of modes of scientific thought, noted a shift "from entity to process, from static to dynamic, from dichotomous to dialectical." In Kegan, R. (1982). According to Wells, since the early 1800's "nearly every social and natural science has made this transformation." (Ibid.)