

CHANGE OLOGY

**How to enable groups,
communities and societies
to do things they've
never done before**

Les Robinson



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Introduction

How to change the world

Mickey Weiss was a bare-knuckled, hardheaded vegetable merchant who ran a mushroom company at the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market for four decades until he retired at the age of 72.

One day in 1987, after passing a homeless encampment on his way to work, he arrived to see a pallet of perfectly edible but unsold strawberries being tipped into a dumpster. Mickey cried out “Why are we throwing away berries when eight blocks away people are frying stale bread over open fires for their first meal of the day?”

When he retired, Weiss did something extraordinary. At his own expense, he set up shop on 2,500 square feet of dock space at the Los Angeles markets. Then he went to his old competitors and asked them to donate their ‘edible-but-not-sellable’ produce. Next, he contacted a host of charities and gave them landing rights to back up at his dock at, say, 10.30 to 11.00 a.m., take away whatever they wanted, and distribute it to the poor and homeless.

Weiss’s scheme became well known. It won awards and plaudits across the nation. Yet despite the wide publicity, it remained a lonely bright spot. In four years only one other city had managed to copy the idea.

At that time, Peter Clarke and Susan Evans were Dean and Assistant Dean at the Annenberg School for Communication in Los Angeles. They were moved by Weiss’s story and, as health communication professionals, decided to take on the task of disseminating his ‘orphan innovation’ to other cities.

I met Peter Clarke, a lean, vigorous, 60-something in a dimly-lit faux Mexican restaurant off Wilshire Boulevard. In between seemingly endless bowls of guacamole, he described what must be one of the largest, most

successful and most uncelebrated change projects ever undertaken by private individuals.

Peter explained that the United States had around 250 food banks that delivered food to 36,000 community pantries, shelters and homeless missions who used it to feed hungry adults and children. In 1991 virtually zero per cent of this food was fresh fruit and vegetables. It was mostly canned and packaged food and beverages, much of it high in salt, fats and added sugar and low in nutrition – two of the largest inventory items were fizzy drinks and salted crackers. Although intended to nourish, this food was itself a public health problem, contributing to epidemic levels of diabetes (affecting 18-24 per cent of low-income people), high blood pressure, and other chronic and potentially deadly conditions.

Meanwhile, wholesale produce markets, growers, retail outlets and other sectors of the US food industry were dumping thousands of tonnes of unwanted but perfectly edible fruit and vegetables every day at their own expense simply because it was unsold and had to be moved off their docks to make way for more.

The angle that impressed Peter and Susan most was putting vast amounts of disease-preventing food like carrots, courgettes, cabbage and sweetcorn into the hands of those who needed it most. “It was the largest public health intervention we could imagine,” he said. So they decided to dedicate six months, part-time, to spreading the idea. That was in 1991 and they’re still at it.

Peter and Susan began by imagining they faced a problem that could be solved by education. So they wrote a manual based on Weiss’s programme and presented it to five food banks. And they held a conference in Los Angeles where participants could see Mickey’s programme in action. According to Peter, the food banks were fired up with enthusiasm but six months later nothing had happened.

So they went directly to the food bank industry association, America’s Second Harvest, and presented their proposal to its annual convention. They had large, enthusiastic audiences for their talks. But again, nothing happened. Their efforts had amounted to, in Peter’s words, “a well-intentioned, well-executed, colossal failure”.

Peter and Susan’s first big realisation was that they were trying to sell the wrong programme. “It took us a while to learn that Mickey’s programme

wasn't being replicated because it couldn't be. We'd been trying to get a wholesaler to front a dock like Mickey's but it never worked in the cities where we tried it. It took us three years until we had an ah-ha moment and realised we were trying to sell the wrong thing!" The model couldn't involve a dedicated dock. Instead, the food banks would have to pick up from individual wholesalers.

Their next ah-ha moment came when they started to listen more attentively to the people they'd been trying to persuade. "We heard an off-hand observation from a food bank director who said 'there's no one on my board who thinks we should invest resources on perishable collections.' This was a big realisation for us, that the prospect of adoption would be increased by speaking to all the stakeholders. Just talking to the executive directors wasn't enough. Furthermore, we had to approach each food bank individually, acknowledging its particular food ecology and unique community!"

So they decided to make an offer to food banks: "if you are even mildly interested in fresh food we'll come to you, whether you're in Mobile or Washington or Salt Lake City and spend two days explaining how fresh produce recovery can work in your situation. There's no obligation. The only commitment we ask is a series of meetings, with your executive director, with your key employees, with your board, with a sample of your client agencies, with philanthropic funders, and with produce wholesalers."

Being a change maker began to demand an extraordinary level of commitment from Peter and Susan. "We would finish our classes at 10 p.m. at night, catch a plane first thing the next morning, and spend two days of intensive meetings, collapse on Friday night and fly home on Saturday morning."

Gradually, through trial and error, Peter and Susan pieced together the elements of a successful project. For a start, they knew that credibility was vital. So they brought Mickey Weiss along with them on their visits to prospective food banks. "He radiated credibility when he walked into the room," said Peter. When Mickey died in 1996 they invited managers from adopting food banks to fill his role.

Then Peter and Susan recognised that the executive directors were helpless unless their boards bought into a new vision for their food banks, one that focused more on public health. "We'd tell them: 'We need you to understand you're no longer in the hunger business, you're in the disease-

prevention business.’ We’d present a mini-lecture on the relationship between diet and illnesses like diabetes. Few of them had understood this before. We were pivoting their mission identity,” said Peter.

Next, they were surprised to discover that hardly any food bank staff knew how to pitch for a food donation – the cans and packaged foods had simply arrived year after year. So Peter and Susan had to train them. Their method was to do the pitch to produce wholesalers themselves so food bank staff could see how it was done. “We’d ask the wholesaler to tell us about his business and have a tour of his cool rooms, trucks and dock. And we’d say ‘you probably have a lot of food sometimes that you need to get rid of’. They’d agree they had heaps of food going to landfill. Then we’d say ‘How about the folks here come and pick it up? You name the time.’ And then we’d say to the food bank director ‘Can you have a truck on that day?’ and he or she would say ‘Yes.’” Peter and Susan had become a kind of dating agency, introducing the food bank people to the produce wholesalers, two groups who previously had no idea each other existed.

Another critical discovery was the need for an enthusiast at each food bank who fell in love with the idea. And then there was a final piece in the jigsaw – money. “We’d been cultivating the Baltimore Food Bank,” said Peter. “The executive director was positive but kept saying ‘I don’t know how I’m going to budget to get this started.’ We realised he needed some money. We were ignorant about how much so we wrote him personal cheques for US\$500 (£300) each, pretending that funds had come from an anonymous donor, called him a week later, and he said ‘got your message, we’re going to start.’”

Fortunately, they soon found a charitable funder, Helene Soref, who was passionate about nutrition. When a food bank’s plans for a pilot programme were finalised, Soref’s foundation would cut a cheque, on Peter and Susan’s recommendation, for, say, US\$18,000 (£10,800) on two weeks notice. This would help a food bank lease a refrigerated truck or pay a driver. Later, Peter and Susan created and ran a grants programme funded by Kraft Foods, and channelled nearly 700 grants to food banks over 12 years, totalling more than US\$30 million (£18 million).

By 2007, 16 years after first hearing Mickey Weiss’s story, Peter and Susan had kick-started 162 fresh food programmes across the country, 87 per cent of all programmes operating at that time. And they’re still doing it.

American food banks now handle more than 500 million pounds of fresh produce every year.

Peter summed up their journey, “Every place was different, so diffusion didn’t happen easily. We had to be accommodating about each site’s peculiarities and not try one-size-fits-all. We had to become an authority, not just on fresh food, but on fresh food in Dallas, Spokane and Cleveland! Our biggest lesson was, at the end, to step back and let local food banks take the credit. Their ownership had to be affirmed just as if they’d invented it themselves so they’d take full responsibility for their success and not become dependent on us. To be really successful, we had to disappear.”¹

Peter and Susan’s story illustrates many things about a successful change effort. First, it shows how, with perseverance and imagination, it really is possible for individuals – even unfunded ones – to change the world in amazing ways.

Second, it demonstrates some of the essential features of a successful change effort: Mickey Weiss provided an inspiring story worth buzzing about. Without that buzz Peter and Susan would never have heard about the idea, and even if they had wanted to make it happen, food bank executive directors and boards would never have listened to them. Building on Mickey’s story, Peter and Susan generated a hopeful new vision for food banks: no longer would they be simply feeding the needy, now they would contribute to their health as well. Yet buzz and vision alone did not create the change. New relationships needed to be shepherded into existence. And individuals including local champions, board members and food bank staff needed specific kinds of assistance to learn how acting for change might really be within their power. Meanwhile the programme itself changed dramatically as Peter and Susan learnt hard lessons along the way. These are the vital themes we’ll be coming back to in this book.

Third, it shows how solutions to large-scale social, health and environmental problems always involve people doing things they have never done before. Food bank directors agreed to establish refrigerated stores on their premises and fund new pickups, food bank boards voted to change time-honoured methods of operation, food bank staff found themselves courageously pitching their case to fresh food wholesalers, and the wholesalers found themselves making room on their docks for charitable pickups.

Peter and Susan’s effort is a microcosm of how the world changes. The

solutions to complex social problems always involve diverse individuals doing things they have never done before and sustaining those changes in their lives and organisations, whether it be politicians voting new programmes, CEOs leading their corporations in new directions, or ordinary folk changing the habits of a lifetime.

When individuals make these kinds of changes their lives usually get better and they might become the stimulus for others to change. When many people make these changes, we may see revolutionary waves that overturn the established order. The action might be eating healthier, joining an action group, letting our children bicycle to school, signing a petition, or investing in green technology. Or it might be speaking up against a bully or a dictator. Whatever it is, broad social changes are the accumulation of millions of such individual changes. And each one of these changes is a person doing something they have never done before.

It's true that technological change and institutional reform, accident and cataclysm all profoundly affect the world. But the result always depends on how humans interpret those events and willingly change and adapt. Boffins may invent new products, and politicians may pass new laws, but whether those products or laws amount to anything depends on whether people invest their time, energy and commitment to adopt them and sustain that change permanently.

Nowadays myriad efforts are under way to influence human behaviour for the better. In every country, at every level of society, small teams in government, business, community organisations, and even private individuals, are working to tackle complex and longstanding social challenges in every field imaginable – energy and water conservation, road safety, obesity, drug and alcohol addiction, hunger and nutrition, emergency preparedness, habitat protection, crime prevention, to name a few.

This book is for all those who wish to be makers of this kind of change.

It aims to answer the question: How can we work successfully to influence the decisions other humans make, and by doing so help solve some of the outstanding social, environmental and health problems of our time?

Humans, as we'll see, are geniuses at resisting change when they think others are trying to impose it on them (and just as well too, or we'd all be living in extraordinarily primitive and oppressive societies). Yet progress happens too: people stop denying and resisting and willingly embrace

change when the conditions are right.

There are rarely silver bullets in this kind of work. Instead, change is more like a pattern. A mix of ingredients comes together and we find, often to our great surprise, that people start adopting new practices in their lives, businesses and communities. And what starts as a trickle sometimes turns into a wave.

This book proposes that successful and sustained change efforts happen when six different ingredients come together:

1. Positive buzz
2. An offer of hope
3. An enabling environment
4. A sticky solution
5. Expanded comfort zones
6. The right inviter.

Am I saying that if you utilise these ingredients your project will succeed in its goals? Well, pretty much, yes. Failure to include them will almost certainly tip your effort into a ‘so what?’ zone where you may struggle to find any observable impact at all. Yet by applying them with zest and imagination, there’s a good chance you’ll be surprised at the results.

In six sections of this book I examine each ingredient in detail, aiming to capture the collective learning of many practitioners and theorists, giving inspiring examples, and examining the experimental research to explain why some approaches work and others don’t.

Following most sections, I’ve also added a practical tool or method that I’ve found useful in designing change efforts. I hope you find them useful too.