On making social change

"In this time of shifting and consolidating power, with millions of others we co-create history one step at a time."

– Fran Peavey, *Heart Politics Revisited*

This paper captures my thoughts as a practitioner on the design of social change programs and on evaluation as a change tool. It includes a 7 stage model of social change. I hope readers find it useful and interesting.
- Les Robinson (les@socialchange.net.au) Aug 2001 [2007]

I've been part of citizen activist groups for over 13 years, and lately I've worked as a consultant, designing social marketing campaigns at Social Change Media in Sydney.

I've known, worked with, or trained a lot of activists and environmental educators over the years - wonderful people, with great courage and spirit, working hard to help us build a decent society.

My thinking about this work has evolved. I began by thinking that getting power was everything. With power you could beat the bad guys and overturn wrong decisions. I gradually realised that aggressive lobbying campaigns were really a case of "achieving change by other than democratic means". They were always vital battles, but every campaign we won by using the same tools as corporate manipulators, helped undermine the democratic system. And without democracy there is nothing to protect us from "market forces".

Then I saw that environmental destruction was really the sum of our lifestyles. So "social change" was really about modifying the daily practices of millions of individuals and thousands of corporations. This led to thinking about 'soft' social marketing campaigns and "behaviour-change" programs.

And now I'm starting to realise that there are so many practical obstacles to people adopting less damaging lifestyles, that perhaps it is 'the system' after all. I think that the majority of people do aspire to lead healthy, more natural lifestyles that don't damage the planet. Our systems of production and consumption are part of the problem. But our broken system of political decision-making is the real

1

obstacle. George Soros said that the instability of world financial markets could "destroy society" but he believes that the great disasters of the 21st century will probably be caused by the failures of democracy. I think he is right. Reforming and ethically strengthening our democracy so that we, as a society, can resolutely protect the common good – this will probably be the real battleground of this century. I hope so.

But whatever the solutions are, the habits of the past are probably not going to be much of a guide to the future – progressive social change and fundamental changes of attitude and behaviour are vital. Change needs agents. And change agents need effective strategies and tools.

As a 'change agent' I've spent time thinking about how we can do this work better.

A starting point – three years ago – was when I stopped assuming that 'information' was the answer and asked myself what it would take to change my own ingrained habits.

I developed a 'model' which I talked over with a lot of people, in a lot of seminars and workshops, over the past 3 years. Now I am up to 'version 2'.

Essentially it's a checklist of things to consider when you're planning a 'social change' campaign or program. In fact there are probably plenty of other models, and plenty of ways to interpret them...and, of course, every project is different.

But here goes...

I think that a social change project needs at least seven elements and these are shown on the model on page 6. In any situation, some elements will already be in place (especially – in our media-drenched age – 'understanding'). You always need to talk to your community and get a sense of where the obstacles and gaps are. The model provides a picture of a 'change system' so you can figure out the best intervention point to invest your energy to achieve the maximum effect.

But before I list the seven elements, I want to make some introductory points –

1) **I think social change is inherently about people's hopes and dreams** – **their aspirations.** We make a wasteful error in constructing programs around the narrow agendas of government or abstract policy – drug education, stormwater quality, litter, recycling, anti-smoking, Greenhouse gas abatement, water conservation etc - and not around the real hopes of real people living real lives.

   People's aspirations are constructed quite differently to those of organisations. They are much more holistic and personal. I've tried to illustrated this with a graphic:

What we offer

Dont litter

Recycle plastics properly

Compost your food scraps

Store chemicals safely

Wash bottles before recycling

Only rain down the drain

Use your car less

Bin your butt

etc...

What people value

I want a healthy family

I want my share of the good life

I want more time for me

I want to connect with community

I want to live in a safe, good, neighbourhood

I want a comfortable, attractive lifestyle

I want a beautiful home and garden

We have to get a lot smarter and more adventurous in converting our narrow organisational policy fragments into campaign themes that speak to real people's hopes.

Two recent projects that attempt this are *Living Waters-Living Communities* (OzGreen/Warringah Council), and *Eco Living* (Social Change Media/Northern Sydney Waste Board). Their themes and content attempt integrate diverse actions into a more coherent 'lifestyle' approach. The NSW EPA's *It's a living thing* meta-program works on a similar principle.

2) I think we have to move way beyond information. The managerial mood of the day suggests that information is powerful. Certainly it is the powerful currency inside all organisations, and citizens denied information are made powerless. However this is an information-saturated age. No matter what the issue, the 'early adopters' probably already know everything they'll ever need to know about the problem, the solution, the costs of inaction and the benefits of change.

Information is cold, rational and often pessimistic ('Pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the spirit'). However change is about inspiration, imagination, desire, emotion, poetry. We need to be open to these qualities and find room for them in our campaigns.

3) Individual change is probably an illusion. Like all good business-school graduates we persist in treating people as if they were "rational, utility-maximising individuals". This assumption is wrong on each count.

In my own life – and in the changes I've witnessed - progressive social change has always been a collective, never an individual, process. We need peers to inspire

3

us, lead us, support us, motivate us to be our best, convince us, and give us reasons to stop acting like "utility-maximising individuals" and start acting like members of a community.

(I seriously doubt, for instance, that there is any such thing as individual "empowerment" – power is something we can only achieve as groups. All individuals, in our intensely corporatised world, tend to be powerless and pessimistic, unless they are part of a group.)

The work of a change agent therefore involves bringing people together and facilitating the collective work of groups. To do this we need people-skills like facilitation and conflict-resolution, plus an understanding of 'leadership' and a sensitivity to group dynamics.

The use of celebrity endorsers and local leaders helps create this sense of 'the collective'. But perhaps the best way is through the formation of peer education groups where members of a community are recruited, trained and resourced to deliver the program to their peers. *Earth Works* is the classic example of this type of program.

The best use of peer education is probably not to convert mainstream audiences, but rather to mobilise 'innovators' to influence the 'early adopters'. (Once a new behaviour starts to go mainstream, peer education loses it's cost-effectiveness, and it's time to move the group onto the next issue – this is where Earth Works is at now).

I think that peer education programs are probably the way forward for community environmental education.

4) **When it comes to personal change, we are not all equal.** Some are more ready to change than others.

A really useful tool to think about this is the 'innovation adoption curve' (see next page).

When we think about our 'audiences', it's useful to segment them like this. It helps with important decisions about the design of our campaigns. For instance, you might be targeting visionary 'early adopters', or attempting to bridge the credibility gap to a pragmatic 'early majority', or running a 'compliance' campaign which is struggling to convert resistant late majorities and sceptics. These would be very different programs – in style, language, 'offering', and delivery – because the audiences have different needs.

The descriptions under the graphic on the next page hopefully convey some of the different flavours you'd use when addressing these different groups.

The Diffusion of Innovations
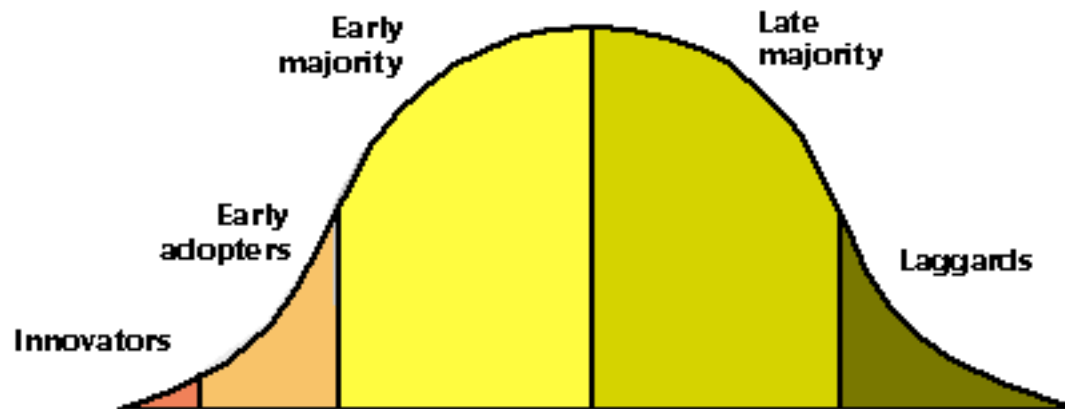
Innovators – environmental champions, committed, *ideological*, lead the way, imaginative, energetic, evangelical, the test-bed for innovations and a vital presence in a successful change program.

Early adopters – open to change, *visionary*, imaginative, looking for a strategic leap forward in their lives or businesses, quick to make connections between innovations and their personal visions, want quick results, less cost-sensitive than other groups – willing to invest and take risks. They prefer personalised solutions and personal support and like their egos stroked. Like to hear "state-of-the-art".

Early majority – *pragmatists*, comfortable with environmental ideas, but need to see solid proof of benefits. They are influenced by other pragmatists. They want proven better ways of doing what they already do. Want easy solutions with minimum discontinuity. They seek reliable support systems and a sense of sustained partnership. They are in for the long haul, not risk takers. Like to hear "industry standard".

Late majority – *conservative* pragmatists, follow the mainstream and established standards, hate risk but don't want to be left behind, not comfortable with environmental ideas.

Sceptics – "brown bombers" act to block environmental improvements. Their arguments need to be taken seriously – often they identify real problems which need to be solved before majority groups can accept an innovation.

– Rather freely adapted from Everett Rogers, *The Diffusion of Innovations*, The Free Press, New York, 5th edition 2002

So, finally, here is the seven-step model and checklist.

The Seven Doors model of program design for voluntary change (v9)
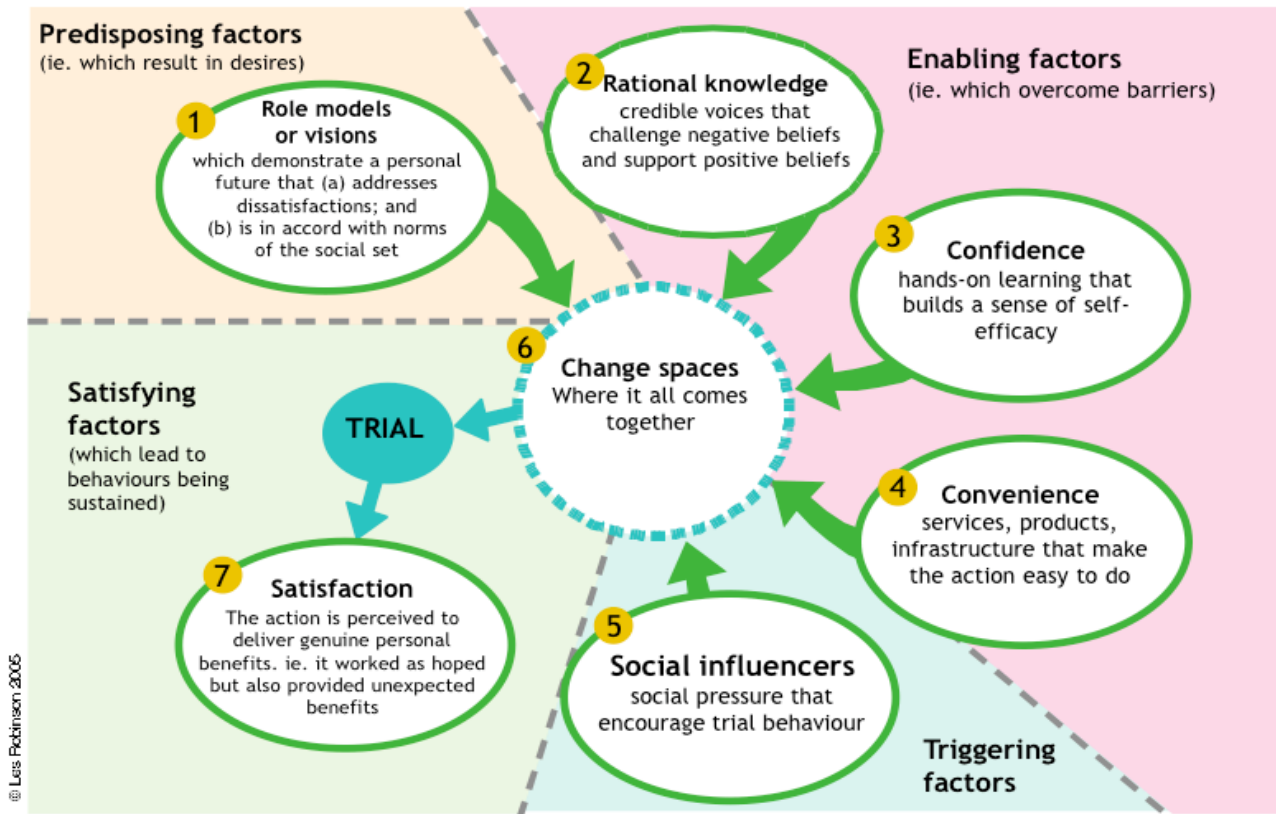
1) Role models and visions

☐ Have you carried out focus groups to explore the links between your program and deeply-help community aspirations? (the focus groups can be quiet informal)

☐ Have you used role models or visions to link your program's "offering" with people's aspirations?

☐ If you are using fear or negative imagery, have you been gentle with people's 'comfy zones'? (ie. kept the solution quiet simple and within people's everyday capacities?)

2) Rational knowledge

☐ Have you been respectful of your audience's knowledge-base? (ie. is ignorance *really* part of the problem?)

❑ Have you clearly set out credible costs and benefits in concrete, everyday word-pictures, which people can easily relate to?

❑ Do you have a few simple, succinct "facts and stats" that convey the costs and benefits with immediacy?

❑ Are the alternatives credible? (ie. are the desired actions practical and within people's everyday capacities?)

❑ Have you used credible spokespeople?

3) Skills (confidence)

❑ Have the necessary actions and skills been conveyed with clear illustrations or photos?

❑ Have you created demonstration opportunities where people can look, touch, experiment and play with the new products?

4) Convenient systems

❑ Are the desired actions/behaviours easy and convenient to do?

❑ Is the absence, ineffectiveness or expense of current systems or products a major obstacle to change?

❑ Have you asked the audience for their views on existing systems and how to improve them?

❑ Have any proposed new systems and products been market tested?

5) A sense of community (trusted others)

❑ Is there visible leadership?

❑ Are there credible endorsers?

❑ Are there opportunities to meet credible advocates face-to-face?

❑ Is there passion for this change, and is your campaign conveying it?

☐ Have you created 'change spaces' where people can meet peer advocates? (peer education, community get-togethers, support/action groups?)

6) Change spaces, change moments

☐ Have you created out-of-ordinary-life times and places where people can interact with passionate advocates, witness well-crafted presentations, have time to focus on the costs, benefits and opportunities, have their comfy zones safely challenged, and envisage their personal change paths?

7) Satisfaction / reinforcement

☐ Are people being given feedback on the success of their efforts?

☐ Do participants have a chance to be rewarded and celebrated?

General

☐ Do you have a good handle on the obstacles to change (based on focus group discussions)?

☐ Have you explored how the desired change is perceived in the community? (For instance, how do people *really* feel about comfort- or convenience-making things like electricity and cars?)

☐ Have you explored what makes 'early adopters' different from the population at large?

On evaluation

Evaluation is an important part of any change program. It allows us to learn from experience, engage in critical reflection, and steer the course of on-going projects. But I think there are problems and missed opportunities with the conventional ways we do evaluation. I'd like to comment on these.

We are all in managerial systems, so we need to feed data to our managers. That's part of corporate life.

We also need to do evaluations to find out what works and to guide the evolution of our programs and our own knowledge and skills.

But evaluation should also be used as a feedback tool, so our constituencies can celebration their success. And evaluations should also look forward, helping us design the next stages of our change work.

I'd like to make 4 points about evaluation:

1) Evaluations should seek out values, not avoid them

Evaluation is often seen as a value-free technical process divorced from the design and delivery of programs.

Evaluations are commonly assumed to be:

  • about collecting objective data, sidestepping questions about WHOSE data and the potential of the data as an influential change tool in its own right.

  • about the past ie. proving 'success' by measuring PAST efforts, not helping creatively design future efforts.

  • value-free and ownership neutral – best designed by social scientists or objective professionals, rather than by the target constituencies themselves.

  • post facto ie. after the event, not a change process in its own right. Also the design of the evaluation is often divorced from the initial design of the change program.

  • one-off ie. evaluation occurs once, after a program. It is not used as a management tool to allow a program to change mid-way, in response to feedback.

  • a corporate asset ie. not 'owned' by the public and not needing to be communicated to the public.

  • scientific ie. not something which can be flexibly or creatively interpreted by the program designers. Thematic or anecdotal evidence is given low credibility

in most evaluations. Interpretations must remain neutral. Creative and imaginative 'gut feeling' interpretations are discouraged.

In my experience formal evaluations are extremely limited documents, dull, radically conservative, offering little assistance towards creative program design.

Useful evaluations, I've found, are those that:

• let you, the program designer, 'remain intelligent in the process' (ie. feed your imagination, not limit it);

• provide unexpected insights into the attitudes and aspirations of the 'target' audiences;

• capture the authentic words and passions of the audience;

• focus on the potential for future change in the audience, rather than measuring the amount of change which has taken place so far.

2) Typically, we evaluate three things:

A) program performance ie. productivity; eg. no. of brochures or media stories produced.
B) communication impact eg. recall of messages, retention of information.
C) program outcome ie. changed behaviours.

Keep in mind that 'outcomes', though often difficult to measure, are the only real indicators of success. It's valuable to collect data on A) and B), however they do not *prove* your program was effective.

But this 'success' kind of evaluation, though necessary to please ourselves and our managers, contains missed opportunities because it does not, itself, contribute to further change, and because it provides little assistance in designing the next phase of the program.

3) An effective evaluation

...Should be seen as an inherent part of the process of change:

• It can report back to your 'target' constituencies on the success of their efforts – acting as a reward and reinforcement. To do this however, it's helpful is the 'data' is morally persuasive, that is, it should connect to deeply held values (eg. healthy families, proud neighbourhoods, rather than 'tonnes of material diverted from landfill', or how many of people can define a 'catchment'). We can learn a lot from the 'progress indicators' movement in understanding how to design the right questions to ask (see 4) below).

• It can be part of the direct educational process, eg. surveys collected by

volunteer educators who then proceed to answer people's questions about eco-living (a kind of benign 'push-polling');

• The results should be promptly communicated back to the constituencies. Success should be celebrated - it is part of the process of making and sustaining change.

...Should help you design the next step:

'Learning how to do it better' is a far more important and worthy reason for an evaluation than ticking the 'success' box. Generally, statistical results can't help you create the next stage of a program. Focus groups are the best way to do this – but only if the program designers can observe the process (and even interact with participants).

You need to be there because change is inherently about people's values, doubts and dreams – things which can best be detected with empathy, intuition and sensitive observation. They are hard to convey in a report whose stilted language usually obliterates the subtle nuances which convey the most valuable kinds of understanding.

4) Injecting values: how we can learn from 'progress indicators'

'Progress Indicators' is a approach that invites members of the public to design - through facilitated debate and deliberation - indicators which can measure the progress of communities or governments. The indicators can then be reported at intervals to give more subtle measurements of success than the usual technocratic measurements (eg. average no. of hours citizens invest in volunteer activities is a far more indicative measure of community success than GPD). These indicators aim to be morally persuasive by representing community values in terms the community can immediately relate to (eg. family safety, good neighbourhoods, healthy environments, fair go, lifestyle).

We can learn from this approach by involving our communities in the collaborative design of programs, setting future visions which become the indicators for measuring and reporting on change.

[I re-read this article in 2007. My thinking has changed just a little - I now put more emphasis on 'buzz with trusted others' as a trigger for change with majority audiences - but I'm still quite happy with this article.]