

How to design a change program: **Enabling Change theory** (v1.0)

On using theory in project design

Someone once said: "All theories are wrong but some are useful." That's worth keeping in mind when we think about the role of theories in a change project.

Theory is popular. In health promotion, for instance, it's generally accepted that behavioural projects should always be based on a theory. So you'll typically read "This program was based on the Transtheoretical Model" or "This program was based on Social Learning Theory" or similar statements.

Although this approach is probably better than basing a project on no theory, it's a little deluded for two reasons.

Firstly, each of these theories only describes a fragment of the human experience of change. Even the many incarnations of "costs and benefits" or "barriers and drivers" theories, which seem so self-evidently universal, are not so. For instance, what if people change simply because other people in their network change, or because they always wanted to be like that, or because a powerful role model asks them to change, or other reasons that haven't got much to do with a rational balancing of costs and benefits? Rational exchange theories don't extend to cover those situations.

I doubt there is any field of science that is more fantastically intellectually fragmented than behavioural science, with hundreds of theories, each occupying mutually exclusive bubbles. Because one theory takes it's author many years or (more often) their whole career to assemble the evidence for it, few have ever attempted to create a integrated, all-purpose theory of behaviour change.¹

¹ A notable exception is the Theorists' Workshop model, when a group of the world's leading behavioural theorists were brought together in 1991 to see if they could integrate their theories. See: <http://epirev.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/25/1/65?rss=1>

Secondly, all such theories are generic and universal. They cannot take account of the unique abilities, perceptions, needs and contexts of particular groups of people.

Therefore, in the Enabling Change approach, we avoid applying generic theories to our projects. Instead we spend time with our potential actors and strategise unique, customised theories-of-change that arise from what we learn about them (which is not as difficult as it sounds). Such theories of change are simple statements about why we believe a project will succeed in influencing that specific group's behaviour. They are unique, specific, local, contextual and rarely generalise to other situations. Your project then becomes a test of that theory.

Having said that, there is nevertheless a role for generic, abstract theories. When we design change projects our worst enemy is often our own unconscious assumptions about what motivates change in other people. We all bring such assumptions to our work. All of them are simplistic and some of them are wrong-headed (like "in your face theory"² for instance). A good generic theory can compete with these unconscious assumptions, equipping us to be less at the mercy of our prejudices.

The Enabling Change theory – a 'good enough' theory

This is not a theory about changing people's behaviour. It's a theory about enabling people to change their own behaviour. I've gradually evolved this theory the last ten years. It integrates a number of formal theories I've found particularly useful in understanding what it takes for new practices or products to be adopted by groups of people.

Many of these theories imagine humans in their social environment and some imagine humans in their technological and physical environments too, which is what makes them very useful.

They include:

Diffusion of Innovations

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations

² The theory that says "If people aren't changing, it's because the message isn't in their face hard enough." See

<http://changemoments.blogspot.com/2009/08/arrgh-no.html>

Self-efficacy

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy>

Social Learning Theory

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_learning_theory

Social Influence Theory

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_influence

Self-discrepancy Theory

www.psychwiki.com/wiki/Self-Discrepancy_Theory

Self-determination Theory

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-determination_theory

Risk Perception theories

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risk_perception

Motivational interviewing

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motivational_interviewing

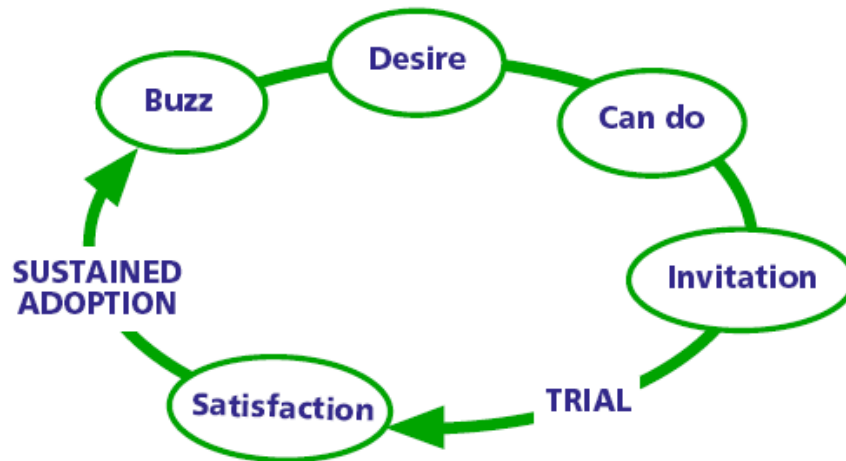
Integrating these diverse conceptual frameworks wasn't a clean process. A crowbar and superglue were needed to amalgamate some of the ideas. The result is a "good enough" theory. It's not perfect (no theory can be) and it's too simple to really encompass human nature. But it's a useful lens on the business of change. It provides a valuable guide for what questions to ask in focus groups; it's a check list of factors to keep in mind when designing projects; and it's a guide for evaluation. Most importantly, it's a superior replacement for half-baked unconscious assumptions.

In the Enabling Change workshop, this theory is integrated into the project design template. See The Enabling Change process:
http://www.enablingchange.com.au/the_enabling_change_process.pdf

The theory consists of 5 conditions or factors. The principle is: for sustained adoption of a behaviour or product, all five of the conditions need to be present in the actors' situations.

The first thing you'll notice is that the theory is not about changing knowledge, beliefs or attitudes. It's very much about enabling relationships between people, modifying technological and social contexts, and about the role of the self or identity.

The five conditions are:



This sketch shows how the five elements form a virtuous circle. When a new activity or behaviour generates satisfaction, people talk about it, creating more buzz, increasing desire, and so on.

1) Buzz: Nothing happens without conversation. Conversation, or at least interaction, is the carrier of social change. It connects people, decides social norms, and it's how societies and groups make choices.

Successful change projects therefore give people reasons and opportunities to interact and discuss a new product or behaviour.

2) Desire: For a product or behaviour to be adopted it must be wanted or desired. It's important to understand the mechanics of want or desire, which begin with a discrepancy between people's ideal selves (aka identities) and what they observe about their lives. The discrepancy causes frustration, guilt or dissatisfaction. Now people are primed for change.

Successful change projects activate that desire, not by emphasising people's unhappiness, but by offering a hopeful vision of how people can live closer to their desired selves. Role models are very useful for this purpose.

3) Can do: Desire and hope alone rarely produce behaviour change. People must feel they have the self-efficacy to carry off the new behaviour with success and without humiliation or loss.

Increasing people's self-efficacy, that is, their belief in their own capacities, is perhaps the most important and neglected element of a change project. Tactics that build self-efficacy (and lower the risk of change) include:

- Increasing familiarity (via modelling and hands-on learning)
- Giving people free choice over whether and how they participate
- Social proof (hearing/seeing similar others do it successfully)
- Being part of a purposeful group
- Clear goals and regular feedback
- Generous personal interactions, incentives, gifts
- Commitments/pledges
- Enjoyment

At “Can do” we also analyse and plan ways to modify the physical and social settings in which people act and make decisions.

4) Invitation: Change is a little like a dinner party. Even if you want to come, you still need an invitation. Invitations are interactions with those special people who we have trouble saying no to.

Mobilising such passionate-similar-connected-respected inviters is vital for a successful change project.

5) Satisfaction: Buzz, desire/hope, can do and invitation, at best, can only get someone to try a novel product or behaviour once. For that initial trial to be sustained it must generate satisfactions in terms that matter to the users. Increased personal control, more time, or better relationships are examples of satisfactions that can drive sustained behaviour change.

Successful projects therefore don't accept the product or behaviour as given. Instead they spend time carefully selecting and modifying products or behaviours to maximize the benefits they deliver and their fit with people's lives, often in collaboration with the users.

And, of course, when people experience satisfaction, they talk about it, creating more buzz, increasing desire, and so creating a virtuous circle, which explains why some products take off and spread throughout social systems.