# Informal Coalitions

## Chris Rodgers

The gap between desired change and achieved change can be down to a failure to recognise the hidden, messy, and informal dynamics of complex organisational life. Deliberate, informed engagement with these inevitable, informal coalitions is a leader's only meaningful choice.

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### The Challenge of Change

The ability of leaders to deal effectively with organisational change is critical to success in all sectors of the economy. And yet, research shows that around two-thirds of all formal change efforts fail to deliver the desired results[1]. This suggests that something vitally important is missing from conventional approaches to change leadership. This note argues that the gap between the rhetoric of change and the outcomes achieved 'on the ground' is due to the failure of these approaches to take account of the hidden, messy and informal dynamics of everyday organisational life.

Almost invariably, emphasis is placed on the formal elements of organisation – its processes, systems and structures – and on getting these 'right' through detailed analysis, structured change methodologies and project management techniques. Other, ever-present features of organisational life, such as the influential role played by informal interactions, the impact of power and politics, and the powerful grip of cultural assumptions on decision-making and performance, tend to be dealt with superficially or ignored altogether.

Structured analysis and project management disciplines have an important part to play in organisational change and performance … *but only where these are used in their proper place and when their limitations are understood*. Organisations are made up of people interacting with each other. And people have a habit of not conforming to the mechanistic assumptions that still channel much of the established thinking about organisational leadership, change and performance. Typically, the most significant decisions and actions in organisations result from much messier processes than allowed for in the well-ordered, design-and-build approaches and project plans that dominate many of the established approaches.

In practice, outcomes rarely arise from formal, dispassionate analysis of 'the facts'. Or from step-by-step decision-making by people whose agendas are fully aligned. More often than not, decisions and actions result from informal interactions, joint sense-making and political accommodations made by people who are trying to make a difference in a complex, uncertain and ambiguous environment. The perspective set out below aims to assist and enable managers to thrive in these challenging conditions. It does this by helping them to get to grips with the *underlying dynamics* of organisational leadership, change and performance.

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[1] Reported in Beer, M. and Nohria, N. (2000), *Breaking the Code of Change*. HBS Press.

**The Conventional View of Organisational Change**

Figure 1, suggests that conventional approaches to organisational change vary from "tight" (imposed, directed and programmed) methodologies to those that are more "flexible" (involving rather than imposed, facilitated rather than directed and with a degree of adhocracy as opposed to being overly programmed).

**Figure 1: Spectrum of conventional approaches to organisational change**
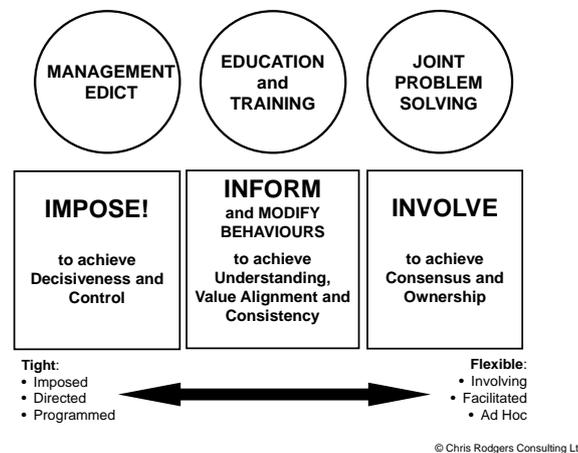


In the figure, the ***management edict*** mode seeks to achieve speed, decisiveness and control by imposing change on the organisation. This represents the classic, top-down view of organisational change and is often presented as the primary route to organisation-wide transformation. For many managers, this is what change leadership is all about.

At the 'flexible' end of the scale, ***joint problem solving*** approaches involve a wider constituency of people, to achieve broad agreement about how best to proceed and to create a sense of ownership for the desired changes. These adopt a more inclusive view of the dynamics of organisational change and reflect a collaborative and participative style of leadership. By looking to tap into a wide pool of talent and ideas, and to achieve buy-in to specific changes, advocates argue that these approaches can help to generate greater commitment to the change agenda and lead to more robust outcomes.

In between these two extremes, the ***education and training*** mode sets out to inform people of the required changes, to persuade them of the merit of these, and to modify their behaviours to suit the new requirements. It focuses on consistency, integration and 'structural' alignment. It also includes *structured* communication strategies and practices, as well as training and development interventions. Those managers advocating this approach to organisational change aim to immerse staff totally in a core message and to instil a set of shared values, attitudes and behaviours.

The above approaches rarely if ever operate in isolation. Ordinarily, formal change strategies will embrace a mixture of the three. However, despite the differences in emphasis and leadership strategies that these reflect, they all see change as:

- Occurring in discrete (even if often overlapping) episodes
- Being determined by, and progressing in line with, management's intentions.
- Taking place within the formal settings of the organisation.
- Respecting formal organisational structures, processes and systems, with top-down leadership being critical.
- Emphasising 'organisationally legitimate' themes, which reflect management's declared intentions and policy stances on particular issues.

- Treating opposition to these themes as "resistance," which needs to be overcome if organisational success is to be achieved.
- Being designed and orchestrated by managers who are external, objective observers and controllers of other people's actions.
- Working best if emotions, politics, 'mess' and informality are suppressed, since these are viewed as symptoms of organisational dysfunction.

Although these approaches embrace the full range of conventional views on how change happens in organisations, something vital is missing. This gap between rational theories of change and the everyday dynamics of 'real life' organisations is addressed below.

**Mind the Gap!**

Consider what happens in organisations when a specific change is announced – whether organisation-wide or more locally. Invariably, people get together and talk to each other about it. They share their perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of what's going on. And they decide – individually and collectively - what to make of what they've heard, and how they will react. This characteristic response to specific announcements and unfolding events in organisations is universal – everyone does it. Everyone has a basic human need to make sense of the world in which they live (Weick, 1995) and to act in ways that maintain their sense of competence in dealing with its challenges (Culbert, 1996). And it is through these informal conversations with others in their personal networks, as well as during incidental encounters, that people satisfy this need. This activity impacts significantly upon the nature, time to implement, and ultimate effectiveness of management's original proposition, whether overtly or covertly. That is, this conversational process *changes* the organisation in its own right.

Crucially, it is individuals themselves who decide whom to talk to, what to talk about, what the outcomes of these conversations mean, and what use to make of the sense that they've made. Managers can neither prevent nor control this activity. Shared sensemaking and coalition building will go on with or without their *active* involvement. The only choice that managers have is whether or not to attempt to influence the dynamics and outcomes of this process in a meaningful way. Equally importantly, as we shall see later, formal statements and decrees by management *also originate* through the informal, sense-making conversations that they have with others in their personal and professional networks – both internal to the organisation and outside it.

This presents us with an alternative view of how change happens in organisations, which is critical to a full understanding of change and organisational dynamics. Amongst other things, it is an approach that recognises the impact that informal conversations, power and politics have on organisational outcomes - whether or not these are seen as "legitimate" in the formal arenas of the organisation. I call this perspective "*informal coalitions.*" This approach deliberately sets out to engage with these dynamics, and to build active coalitions of support for desired changes.

**The Nature of Informal Coalitions**

The *informal coalitions* view of change stresses the complex, developing and emergent nature of the overall process. It therefore rejects the ability of managers to plan and control it in the ways that the conventional approaches imply. Instead, it sees change as emerging from the informal coalition of people around particular perspectives or 'themes', which lead them to act in one way rather than in others.

From an *informal coalitions* perspective, overall outcomes are *necessarily* unpredictable. The *seemingly* more certain world implied by the wholly rational approaches to change is an

illusion. Whilst specific decisions and actions can be 'commanded and controlled' by managers, within the levels of their delegated authority, the ultimate impact that these have on organisational outcomes cannot. These will be significantly affected by the ways in which people perceive, interpret and evaluate what is going on. What emerges will depend on which of these interpretations are shared, bought into and acted upon. If the themes around which people coalesce are aligned with management's formally adopted position, the actions that flow from them will support their implementation. However, if the themes that are organising informal conversations and actions run counter to the official line, the changes intended by management are likely to be frustrated or actively undermined.

Informal coalitional activity is present in all change. Ordinarily, though, it is only recognised as such in terms of so-called "resistance" to management-imposed initiatives. When viewed as a conscious approach to leading change, it is deliberately informal. It seeks to influence outcomes through everyday conversations and interactions – working with these natural dynamics to build support for the desired changes. Its disadvantage – from the perspective of a management world wedded to "keep it simple" mantras and quick-fix solutions - is that it appears 'messy', indecisive and lacking in structure.

The notion of a "coalition" is particularly important here, since it breaks away from the conventional wisdom that alignment behind a common set of values and beliefs is essential for effective organisational change. Implicit in the idea of a coalition is recognition that people do not have to agree on everything or share an identical set of values to make progress. They can – and do – still come together to deliver a common change agenda. Often, the 'alignment' of people behind particular themes will be tacit and/or assumed, rather than explicit and openly expressed. It is also important to recognise that those who decide the intention, nature and timing of formal strategies and policies (ordinarily members of senior management), themselves participate in informal coalitions before, during and after their formulation, adoption and implementation. And these coalitions will often owe more to political accommodations and social networking than to the 'unity of purpose' implied by the popular conception of a unified top team.

The *informal coalitions* approach is therefore unavoidably political. It is political in the sense that it recognises the *inevitability* of differences of interest, view and motivation that exist within *all* organisations. This is especially the case where decisions involve the acquisition, deployment and management of *limited and valued* resources, as is characteristic of organisational change. Scarce resources, coupled with differing interests, make conflict central to organisational dynamics. Politics is simply the playing-out of these differing interests, which makes power relationships critical to decision-making and change in organisations. Organisational outcomes then emerge from the ways in which these differences are addressed. The *informal coalitions* view recognises that a wide range of power sources and political processes are used, *throughout all organisations*, to influence the nature and direction of the change process.

From a conventional view of leadership and organisational dynamics, politics is a dirty word. Political activity – if acknowledged at all - is usually seen as negative and organisationally dysfunctional. And clearly, the informal and potentially covert nature of the *informal coalitions* approach to change leadership could be driven more by self-interest than organisational need. However, whilst recognising the potential for negative politicking to arise, political action and coalition building are natural characteristics of organisational behaviour. *Everyone* takes part in it, whether they recognise it as such or not. From this perspective, constructive engagement with the political nature of organisations is central to effective leadership. It is about helping people to make sense of the events that are going on around them and building coalitions of support for organisationally beneficial changes.

## Organisations as Networks of Self-Organising Conversations

Viewing change from an *informal coalitions* standpoint sees organisations as networks of ongoing, self-organising conversations. This perspective recognises and embraces the *a-*rational aspects of organisation – its hidden, messy and informal dynamics - which most conventional, so-called "commonsense" approaches to leadership, change and performance ignore.

**Figure 2: Organisations as networks of self-organising conversations**
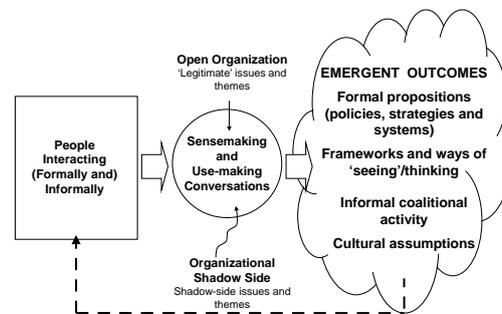


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*Informal coalitions* are embodied in the informal processes, social networks and political coalitions of the "shadow side" of organisations (see Egan, 1993, for example). These emerge through a process of *self-organising* conversations, through which managers' actions, other organisational symbols and emerging events are interpreted, inferences drawn and assumptions embedded. These conversations occur 'any time, any place, anywhere'. They don't just happen in the formal structures, processes and confines of the organisation. Nor are they tied to formal, structured communication programmes associated with specific change events. The themes which these conversations reflect, embellish of create may be unconsciously held and may even appear as fantasy to those who consider themselves to be 'in the know'. This makes them no less powerful, though, in shaping the dynamics of particular organisations. Many of these conversations are brief, random and incidental. They are frequently emotion-laden, and sometimes covert and private. Through these conversations, individuals and groups develop a sense of what the organisation (or a specific part of it) is about, what is going on, and how they should think and behave, in the light of the interpretations that they make. This is illustrated in Figure 2, above.

Informal conversations 'stitch together' the legitimate (formally acknowledged) and shadow-side aspects of organisations, and also generate their own shadow-side effects. The shadow-side aspects of organisational conversations are most evident in the ways that these generate and transmit organisational folklore, mythology, humour and rumour. The most 'subversive' of these rarely surface in the formal organisational settings but are rife when protected by the informality of casual chat, private peer-group meetings and one-to-ones, the anonymity of the grapevine and so on. These shadow themes also provide the sub-text of 'official' conversations (e.g. collusion during meetings to promote or subvert a particular line), even where the overt conversations appear to reflect legitimate themes and behaviours.

Patterns of meaning emerge from this sense-making process. Some of these become part of the formal missions, strategies, policies, and so on of the organisation, whilst others remain in the organisation's shadows. People continuously 'coalesce' around the hidden or emerging themes, either to further particular causes (collaboration) or to frustrate them (collusion). Managers are *unavoidably* participants in this everyday process, not external objective observers and controllers of other people's actions. Leadership, in the context of *informal coalitions*, arises from having sufficient *power* (in the eyes of relevant others) and a compelling enough *story* to cause people to see things differently and to 'sign up'.

## Implications of the Dynamics of Informal Coalitions

The *informal coalitions* perspective emphasises informal relationships and the shadow-side dynamics of organisations as key elements in the change process. It uses conversation and coalition building as the main route to change. And it rehabilitates power and politics as legitimate 'tools' of leadership. These raise a number of critical issues for leaders and change specialists to embrace. Amongst these are the propositions that:

- "Managing change" is not possible in the ways that conventional perspectives imply that it is.
- Mess is inevitable in organisations, and can be productive.
- Coalitions don't require people to buy into a set of "shared values" to be successful; they only need people to coalesce around a compelling theme that causes them to perceive, interpret and value things differently.
- Managers cannot "control" these conversations or the formation of coalitions in any meaningful sense; and they cannot, therefore, predetermine the outcome of any changes that they or others initiate.
- Shadow-side dynamics and power relationships are critical to effective organisational change and performance – they won't go away simply by ignoring them. *Constructive* politics – defined here as the ethical and organisationally enhancing management of differences – therefore becomes a central task of leadership, not something to be denied, wished away or seen as necessarily destructive and divisive.
- Culture is not a 'thing' that an organisation *has* but an *ongoing process* of shared sense-making. This process generates taken-for-granted patterns of assumptions that tend to channel future sense-making down well-trodden paths. At the same time, this process is fragmented and the source of multiple interpretations, not a single, homogeneous set of shared values.
- Leaders/managers are *both* 'in control' *and* 'not in control' at the same time (see Figure 3 and also Streatfield, 2001) – doing the conventional things better and getting them right helps with the former but won't overcome the latter.
- Ultimately, leadership is not about being 'right' but about being able to influence others to see, interpret, evaluate and do things differently, and building coalitions of support for desired changes.
- 'Talk' is the primary *action* tool that leaders possess to achieve this.
- Effective leadership will often be invisible and the antithesis of the outstanding, heroic form of leadership that is often equated with leadership *per se.*

**Figure 3: The leadership paradox**



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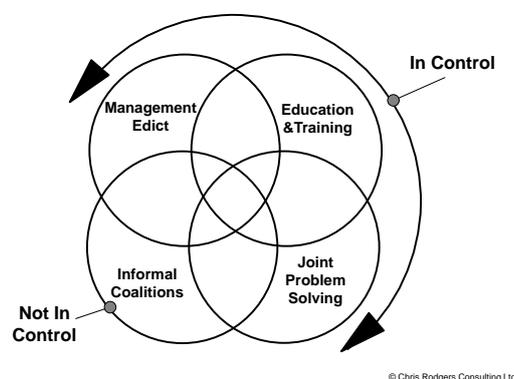
The above characteristics of *informal coalitional* activity do not sit comfortably with the rational view of change and organisational dynamics that dominates conventional management thinking. Making the required shift in perspective can therefore be challenging and uncomfortable. But it opens up the possibility of engaging more successfully with the natural

dynamics of change. It also offers a way of dealing with the leadership paradox of being both *in control* and *not in control* at the same time.

## A New Change-Leadership Agenda

Finally, for leaders at all levels, the dynamics of *informal coalitions* point to a new change-leadership agenda, which includes:

- **Reframing communication**. This means thinking differently about the purpose and process of leadership communication; valuing everyday talk and interaction as a leader's primary *action* tool; and seeing the purpose of leadership communication as sense-making and relationship building ahead of message passing (Figure 4). Change happens through the everyday conversations and interactions that people have. As these conversations change, so does the organisation (Bate, 1995).

**Figure 4: The Leadership Communication Grid**



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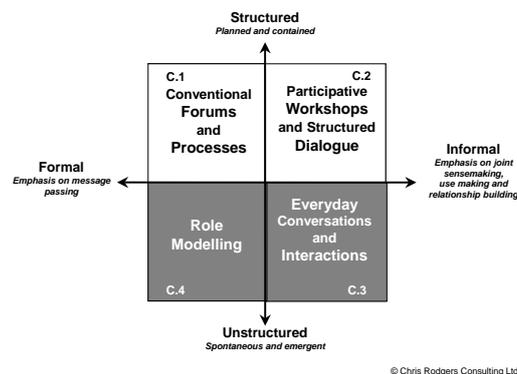
- **Acting politically.** This means engaging with the *inevitable* political dynamics of the organisation; and using power ethically to influence outcomes in organisationally enhancing ways.

- **Building coalitions** of active support for value-adding ideas and desired changes. Issue coalitions aim to shift the organisation's agenda and policies in organisationally beneficial ways. Action coalitions set out to implement desired changes 'on the ground'.

- **Embracing paradox.** This is about working with the inevitable tensions and contradictions that characterise everyday organisational life, and turning these to the organisation's advantage by adopting a 'both-and, at the same time' stance (Stacey, 2003).

- **Providing vision,** more than providing *a* Vision. This means using everyday conversations and interactions to help staff gain perspective, realise their purpose, self-manage their processes, exploit possibilities, unlock their potential and ignite their passion.

## Walking Case Studies

In introducing the notion of informal coalitions to managers, it has been interesting to see how readily they have connected with the idea and its implications for their leadership practice. Leaders at all levels – from Board members to first-line supervisors - never fail to 'get it'. Some people initially feel uncomfortable with the challenges that the dynamics of informal coalitions make to their established views on what constitutes 'good leadership', and to the rational assumptions to which these are tied. Nevertheless, they all accept that these dynamics will happen anyway – with or without their active involvement in them as leaders.

They know this to be the case not least because, when they are not wearing their formal leadership 'hats', they take part in informal coalitional activity themselves. In this sense, they are all 'walking case studies' of informal coalitions in action.

**And in the End …**

The only meaningful choice that leaders have is whether or not to engage with the dynamics of *informal coalitions* in a deliberate and informed way. The above agenda enables leaders to bring about organisational change more successfully by blending the sensible use of formal, rational frameworks and approaches with a proper understanding of the *a*-rational dynamics of their organisations.

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**(UPDATED 2012) BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Chris Rodgers is as an independent consultant, facilitator and coach, working primarily in the areas of leadership performance, change management and organisational dynamics. He was previously a senior manager in the UK power industry with National Power, during the period of its groundbreaking privatisation and commercial transformation. As a consultant, he has worked with a range of organisations in the private and public sectors, both in the UK and internationally. These include npower, Essent, RWE Technology, Shell, Screwfix, AES, DSRL, B&Q, Lloyds Banking Group, Barclaycard, UKAEA, Lane4, Currys, Coca Cola Enterprises, and the Cabinet Office. He is Honorary Senior Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Management at Cass Business School. He holds an MSc in managing change, runs the OD Innovation Network and is a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute. Chris's book, *Informal Coalitions: Mastering the Hidden Dynamics of Organisational Change*, was published globally by Palgrave Macmillan in 2007. Contact chris@chrisrodgers.com.

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**Why I Chose this Piece** - Deborah Booth

*How can we make leaders' day-to-day experience in organisations meaningful and offer them new possibilities when it comes to helping them make sense of organisations which are no longer delivering what's expected?*

Attending a meeting in July, held to introduce Chris Rodgers's ideas to organisational developers I realised how few practitioners (as opposed to academics and writers) have so far felt it worth their while to get to grips with what is wrong with systems approaches to OD, and why 'rational decision-making' doesn't work any more. Chris's brilliant and highly readable 2007 article shows why the gap between desired change and achieved change may be down to the hidden, messy informal social dynamics of our organisations. It describes how exploring the ways each of us makes sense of our particular social world can offer leaders (and developers) insight into new ways to engage with the complex social dynamics of their own organisational situation, through paying attention to the critical role of conversation and informal coalitions in creating support for change.

Others (including myself) have tried to communicate how new ideas from what we used to call 'the social sciences' reveal the non-rational nature of almost all organisational decision-making and the hidden relationships between political power and organisational change in our client organisations. Chris Rodgers is unique in doing so in a way which is easy to understand, and which clients like and find of practical value. His book Informal Coalitions expands the themes outlined in this article. More recent ideas can be found on his blog www.informalcoalitions.com.

## About the reviewer

Deb Booth was member of the *e-O&P* team between 2009 and 2011. Her exposé of the way the humanistic values espoused by developers have allowed them to be manipulated by unscrupulous clients was not a popular success (*e-O&P* May 2010). A deep concern for organisational ethics led to her current research into ways to prevent hubris in organisations as a member of the Daedalus Trust's Research Advisory Group.

## About the Publication

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