

Key ideas on change

Adaptive change isn't open to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures.

Technical challenges can be tackled within the existing system, by those authorised, using ordinary expertise and skill. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are those that require new attitudes, new thinking, new habits, experiments, and adjustments from numerous people.

Complex human systems fight change

A network of people in an organisation or society works like a system. The interaction of the people produces a result equivalent to the system itself working to oppose change. The system will work to protect the power that some people have. If you work for change the system will fight to neutralise the threat that this represents. It will find the most effective defence – attacking, diverting, marginalising or seducing you (see Heifetz & Linsky). It will try to inoculate itself against change.

The system will be one step ahead.

It is possible to make change happen, but only by working on it. No one step forward will be the key step, and every step has unhelpful consequences. The system will find ways to minimise the effect of any particular effort (policy, campaign, etc). Your effort is most at risk at the point when you think you've got the problem sorted. The system will already have worked out how to minimise the change that takes place.

Change cannot be 'implemented' top down.

System change happens because individual people begin to behave in a different way, and when individual people step out of line and refuse to do things the way things are done around here (we call them fairies). As more people do things differently, the balance starts to change. The more the balance changes the easier it is for others to 'join up'. Eventually the balance tips towards the new way of doing things, and it is then easier to behave in the new way rather than the old. Of course there will always be people who refuse to change (we call them goblins). There is little point in spending time trying to convert the goblins as change can happen without them – whatever official position they hold. Change requires allies to work together (fairies have to attract support).