

Organisational leader or part of a wider change movement?

How sustainable development change agents see themselves.

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EABIS Colloquium 2008



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Aim

This modest contribution is from the perspective of a practitioner who has attempted to explore in a structured way, impressions gained of how people who are organisational change agents for sustainable development see themselves and the task with which they are engaged. My aim with this presentation is to:

- share those impressions,
- sketch out their significance,
- prompt you to consider your own experience (whether that is as an organisational change agent, or as a consultant to such people, or as a researcher in this field),
- share some practical responses,
- and signpost some sources of further reading.

A good outcome would be if together we share responses to this presentation and are prompted by it to help each other to reflect on what might make us more effective.

1. Impressions and observations

Starting point

As the theme of this colloquium emphasises, certain individuals play a key role in organisational change for sustainable development. They may be in formal leadership positions, or they may be demonstrating "lateral leadership". In all cases they are, or are attempting to be, 'change agents' for sustainable development within their organisation or sector.

If we accept that such leadership is important, and that it comes from within the organisation as well as from the top of the organisation, then perhaps we need to understand the experience of these change agents a bit better.

I have worked with upwards of a hundred such change agents over the last decade of my practice as an independent consultant and trainer. I have the impression that, as a group, they vary in their degree of commitment to their organisation (some have changed jobs or even careers during this time). Their commitment to sustainable development - making the world a better place – on the other hand is strong and enduring.

I tested these impressions with a small survey¹. The main observations are presented here:

- Organisational change agents for sustainable development see themselves as acting in the service of a bigger goal.
- They believe that for society to move onto a sustainable development trajectory, a very great deal of change is needed.
- From time to time, the challenge of bringing about that change is overwhelming.

¹ See Walker 2008a and Walker 2008b for a fuller analysis and results.



- Whilst they agree that sharing their positive feelings in a work situation makes them more effective, they are divided about the way they should manage their negative feelings.
- So it 'leaks out' in conversations 'at the margins'.

In the service of a bigger goal

My own experience tells me that a very significant number of people who fill sustainable development and CSR roles in organisations see themselves as part of a wider movement. This is backed up by the survey. Looking at the responses from those people who identified themselves as organisational change agents:

Why are you involved in sustainable development?	
Most popular results, 'one top answer'	Most popular results, 'three other reasons'
<i>It's the only logical thing to do, given the impact of the way we've done things up to now. (27% chose this as their one top reason.)</i> <i>To 'save the planet.' (25%)</i>	<i>To help people in the future have better lives, by working for social justice / fairer use of resources / human rights / maintaining eco-system services. (58% chose this as one of their three other reasons.)</i> <i>To help people now have better lives, by working for social justice / fairer use of resources / human rights / maintaining eco-system services. (46%)</i> <i>I want to bridge the gap between my personal values / lifestyle, and values / activities at work. (44%)</i>
There were twelve statements to choose between.	

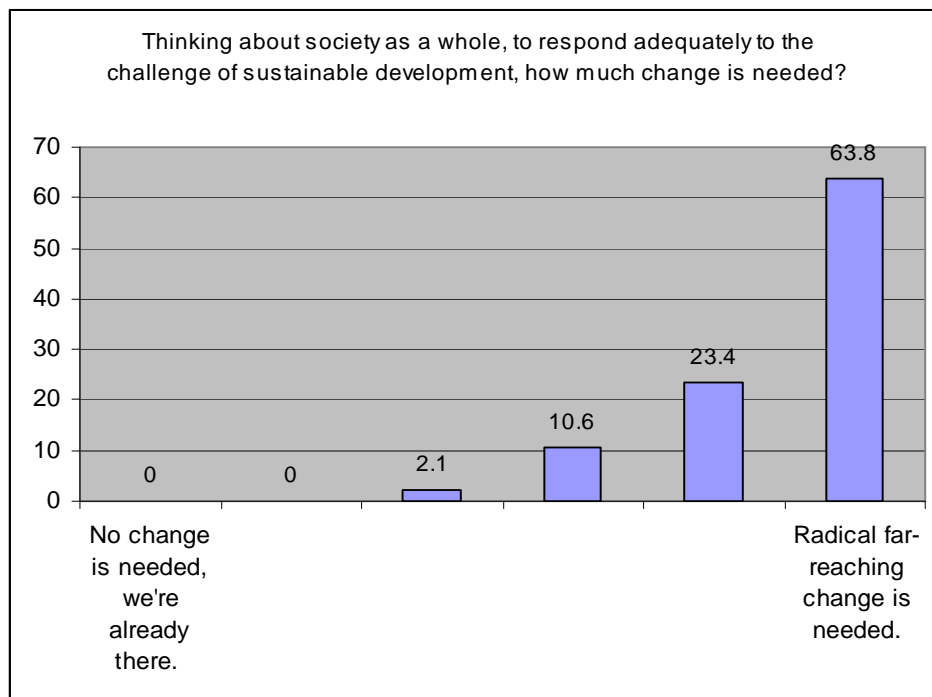
Answers which mirrored the traditional business case (e.g. "it's a growth market" or "it's the next step on my career path") attracted very little agreement.

I am particularly interested in the experience of these organisational change agents (both in formal leadership positions and elsewhere) who see themselves as part of a wider sustainable development change movement, in the service of something 'greater' than organisational success. It seems to me that they have the potential to play an important role in the transition to a sustainable society, if they can keep effective.

A very great deal of change is needed

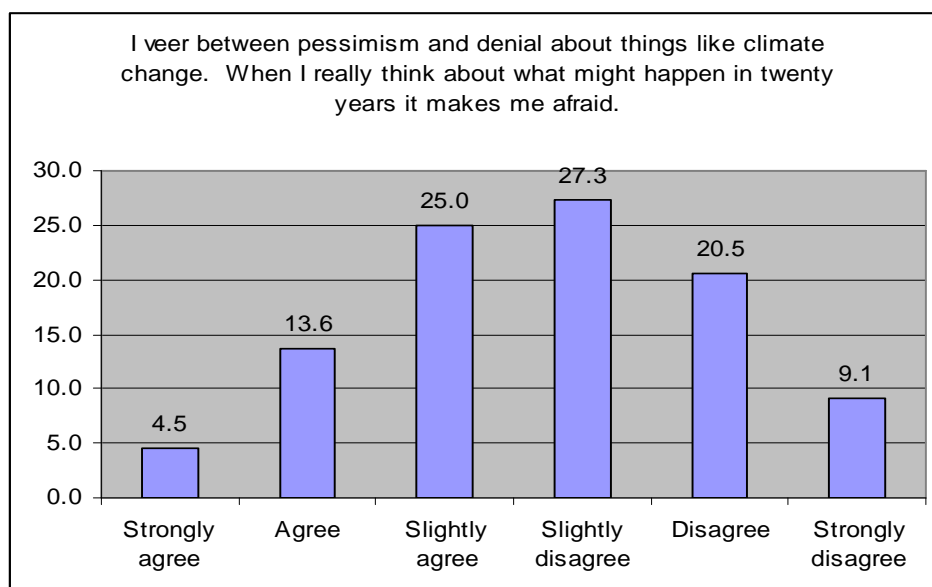
For these people, there is a big gap between the desired future and current trends – the amount of change needed in society, in order for our society to be solidly on the road to sustainable development, is seen to be very large indeed. The survey explored this, and I have also used a similar exercise during client work and in learning situations.



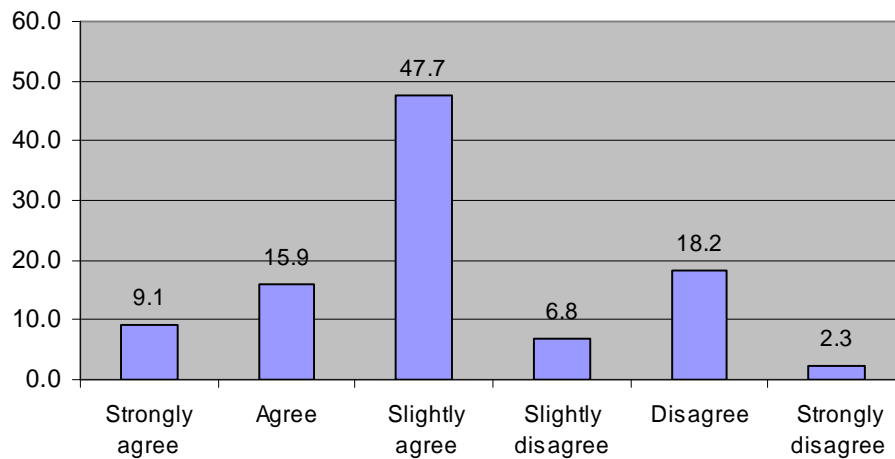


My impression, from personal experience of very trusting and safe conversations with clients and peers, is that the gap between what is needed, and what they believe is being achieved, can give rise to very strong negative emotions – fear, despair, anger, profound disempowerment. It is well known that as one learns more about the ecological and social system pressures (e.g. recent information on the rate of ice melt, food shortages), the sense of urgency increases and their perception of the scale of change needed looms larger.

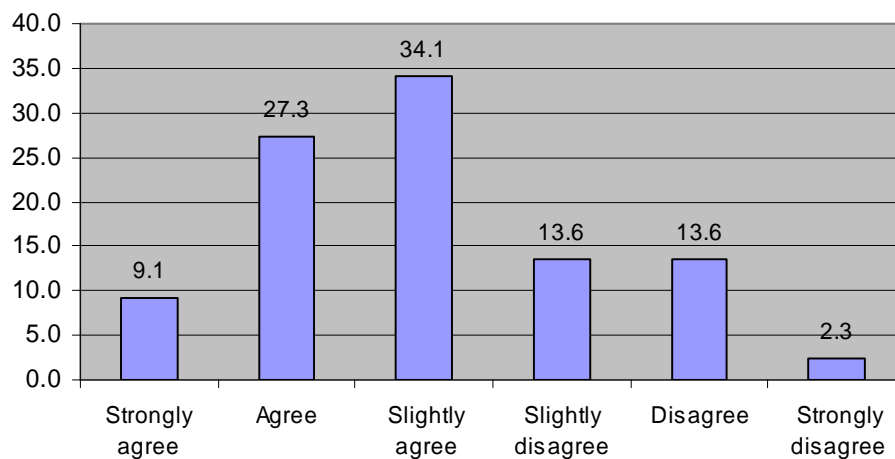
I explored this in the survey, asking for the extent of agreement with a series of optimistic and pessimistic statements, many of which were based on things people had said during conversations. The responses revealed a rich range of responses, with the same respondents agreeing with both negative and positive statements. The degree of agreement with the more optimistic statements in the survey was stronger, but this did not mean that negative emotional responses were not felt even by those who were essentially optimistic. For many respondents, there was agreement with such statements as:



I'm fearful about things like climate change, ecosystem collapse and / or societal collapse, sometimes to the point of being overwhelmed by my feelings.



I veer between optimism and fatalism about things like climate change. I think we can achieve sustainable development but we probably won't, more fool us.



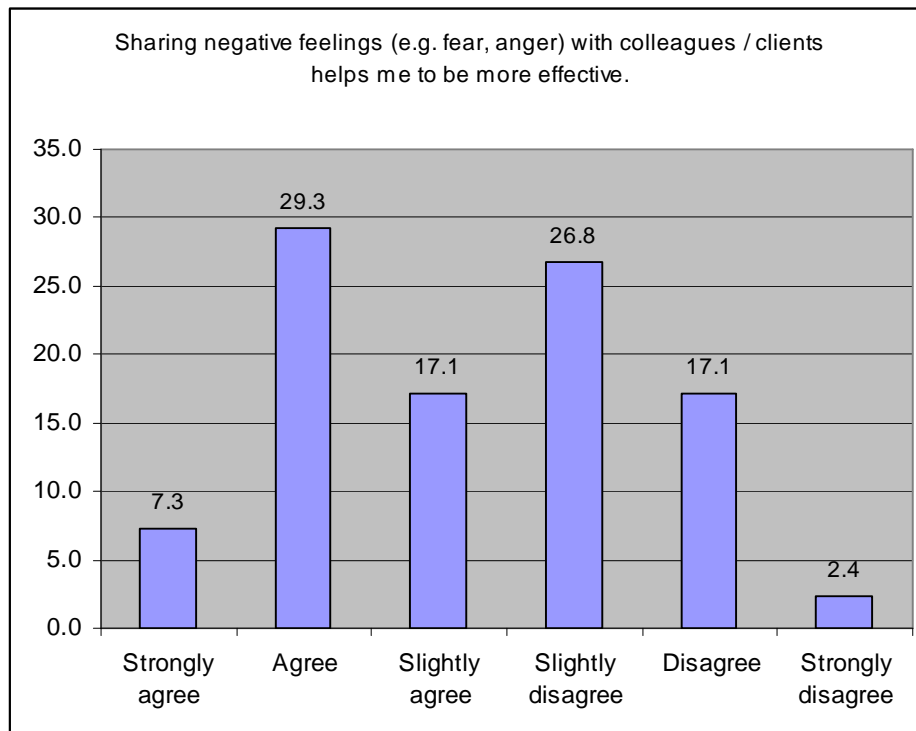
How should these feelings be managed?

Should we seek to talk through these negative feelings, being open about them with colleagues and peers? Or should we keep them to ourselves, and share them only in private or social situations?



Most say that they are already open about their feelings (positive and negative) as part of their work (31% 'always', 52.4% 'most of the time'). Slightly more (23.85 and 66.7%) say that they are open about their feelings in the safer situation of giving and receiving support (e.g. coaching, networking).

When asked about whether sharing feelings helps them to be more effective, the majority agreed that sharing positive feelings helps, and that sharing negative feelings in a confidential situation helps. When it comes to sharing negative feelings in a work situation, organisational change agents did not agree with each other.



Leaking at the margins

This chimes in with my own experience. Over time, I have built in more opportunities for people to share their self-identified roles and the tensions they are experiencing. This has taken place within formal 'work' assignments, in more formal learning situations, and in informal networking and 'conversations at the margins'.

If opportunities are not built in, the conversations about how bad things are still happen – unplanned and surprising (unsettling) during formal session time, or during breaks, while clearing up after a workshop, or (in the case of this organisational change agent) in the relative safety of an e-group:

"Anyone else feel like packing it in and going to the pub?"



2. Significance

As a consultant to such change agents, and as someone who sees myself at the same time as a change agent in my own right, I am interested in understanding the significance of this identification with a wider change movement which still has so much work to do. There are of course positive implications, which I do not intend to dwell on here – such as increased motivation and vision, and the potential to bring in a different perspective to an organisation which has a narrow focus on traditional measure of success, for example. In this short presentation, I want to look at tensions.

There are four main areas of tension and choice which I can see:

- Organisational agency – How can our change agents effectively manage the tensions thrown up by this recognition of being close to or beyond the brink, and the perception of slow incremental change or relatively low ambitions in one's own organisation (of there being a low degree of organisational agency)?
- Eco-doom at work? Should we enable these conversations about very troubling global trends - and people's emotional responses - to take place as part of 'work'?
- Values in conflict - If leaders and members of the change team see themselves as part of a wider sustainable development movement, and others in the organisation do not see themselves in the same way, what then?
- Commitment to what? How do we support the change agents in managing the gap between what is expected of them at work, and what they see as being needed by wider society and the planet?

3. Your own experience

Consider these questions:

- Does this echo your own experience?
- What would your own responses to the survey questions be?
- In your experience, how do sustainable development change agents see themselves?
- Have you experienced these tensions?
- What do you do, to manage negative emotions related to the scale of the wider societal challenge?

4. Some practical responses

As a consultant working in this field, I am both an observer of the experiences of other change agents, and I can also reflect on my own experience. Perhaps it is similar to yours?

Earlier work with clients did not seek to explicitly provide an opportunity to vent feelings or explore the tensions between being an organisational servant and being part of a wider societal movement. Instead, these things either arose spontaneously in workshops or - more commonly - took place 'at the margins', in the informal conversations which take place after the work has finished. Clients talked about their fear and anger, and I veered



between trying to reassure them (rescue them from their feelings), confessing my own fear and anger, or changing the subject. My own fears caused me the occasional literal sleepless night.

I was curious about - and affected by - this strong emotion 'leaking' into serious client-focussed work on sustainable development, but initially I did not see it as part of that serious work.

Over the last five years, my perspective on this phenomenon has changed. The presence of an emotional dimension to the experience of change agents is too frequent to be treated as an incidental phenomenon, and I think we need to consider how to respond to it in an intentional rather than an amateurish way.

There are models and tools which I have found useful have helped to explain and to normalise the responses, and render them amenable to reflection and exploration in group and one-to-one settings.

These models include the Kubler Ross change curve, Ainger's descriptions of tensions between individual values and organisational values, Ballard's work on levels of response to climate change and the 'emotional chasm' which separates initial levels of awareness from 'higher' levels (see Walker 2006 for more on all of these).

The tools I've come across which help include using 'human scales' to catalyse group discussion, active listening and good questions to create a safe space for sharing, and Nancy Kline's work on identifying and removing limiting assumptions. To break down very large transitions into something more manageable, the 'solutions focus' work of McKergow and Jackson has been useful.

These have all been used in situations where the organisational change agent is uncertain how ambitious to be, uncertain of their ability to make enough of a difference, and uncertain of whether their awareness and values are shared in their organisation or change team.

The answers they found are – of course – their own.

5. Sources of further reading and learning

See the references list for some further reading which I have found very helpful in developing my own practice.

In addition to reading more, sharing and reflecting with other practitioners has been vital to me. There are a number of networks and bodies which are useful for this purpose, including AMED, ASP, CPI Alumni, Forum for the Future Business Network and others. These and others which you are already a part of can be especially useful if people are willing to share openly and in a generous spirit of enquiry.



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