# The Generative Change Model – creating the agile organization while dealing with a complex problem[1]

Gervase R. Bushe Ph.D.

For the past several years I have been trying to understand what is going on when transformational leaders and OD consultants are successful. One answer has been the principles now labelled Dialogic OD. Recently, Bob Marshak and I have developed another answer that I hope you will find helpful – the Generative Change Model[i].

The Generative Change model is an antidote to the planned change model and overcomes many of the widely noted deficiencies of traditional planned change, when you are dealing with complex, adaptive challenges.

Figure 1 – The Generative Change Model
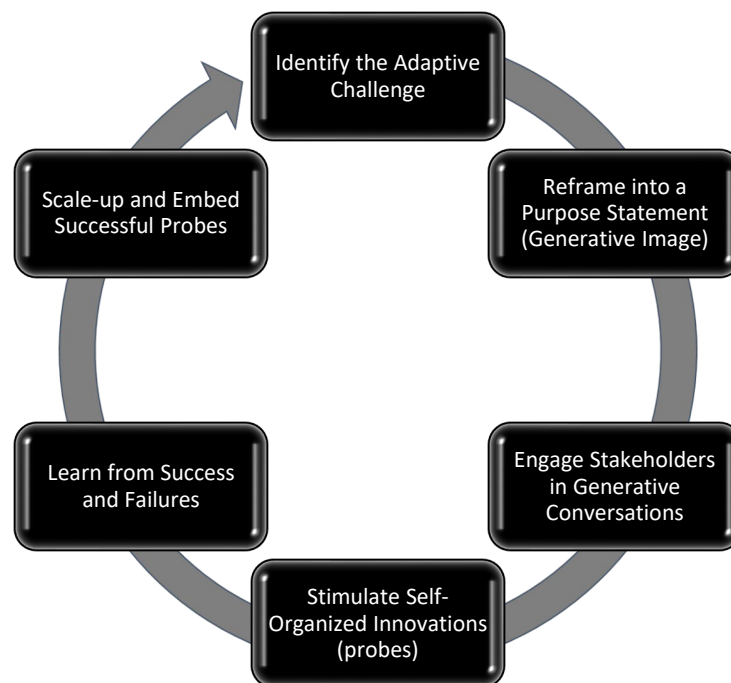
Since complex situations are those where it is not possible to understand what effects what except in retrospect, envisioning a solution that actually solves such issues is a hit or miss affair. A more

---

[1] The following is excerpted from Gervase's new book, *The Dynamics of Generative Change*, available on Amazon.

consistently successful approach is to try some safe-fail experiments and see what happens. Snowden[ii] calls these "probes. Collins and Hanson[iii] call this process "fire bullets, then cannonballs." Rather than assuming anyone is smart enough to anticipate all the possible permutations of all the factors influencing a situation ahead of time (the vision), assume you can't predict what will work. Instead, launch as many probes as possible and learn as you go. When something works, scale it up. There are many other names for probes, like experiments, pilot projects, prototypes, and so on. What you do, essentially, is to keep firing bullets until you hit something; then you bring in the cannon.

The Generative Change Model identifies the steps required to engage the people who will have to change (stakeholders), in conversations where they come up with new ideas (probes) they are willing to act on. They are encouraged to self-initiate action while leaders pay attention to what's working and what isn't. The good ideas and innovations are scaled up, and opportunities for advancing the change agenda are capitalized on. More importantly, the generative change process creates a more adaptive, agile organization, better able to tackle increasing complexity and produce far more change far more quickly than anyone familiar with planned change would consider reasonable.

Most of the people reading this will already be familiar with Dialogic OD methods that are well designed to create generative conversations. Here are a couple of other ideas that might help you be more successful at using those methods.

Purpose, not vision

A purpose is different from a vision or goal, and it is essential to successful generative change. Vision is necessary for top-down, planned change processes to have any chance of success. But they are too much of a straight-jacket for the emergent, generative approach to change. A vision describes a future state. A purpose describes what the group or organization is trying to do every day. It can often describe a state you may never attain, like eradicating poverty or eliminating clinical errors.

A vision is a specific way to attain a purpose. For example, delighting customers in a purpose. One hundred percent on time delivery is a vision for how to accomplish that purpose. A leadership group has decided that this is the best way to attain that purpose, and now others have to line up behind that vision (buy the vision, get on the bus, etc.). There is much less room for experimentation, and for tapping into the creativity and intrinsic motivations in the people who will have to change. One hundred percent on-time delivery is only one way to delight customers, and may not be the most important thing to some customers. What happens to all the ideas that front line employees, who deal with customers every day, have for how to delight customers? How much less committed to delighting customers will they feel if they are being stressed by a 100% on-time delivery promise, especially if it's for customers who have other priorities that can't be satisfied because of constraints from on-time delivery?

When people have a common purpose, they are far more likely to self-organize in a way that supports the collective good. When they don't have a common purpose, they are more likely to self-organize in a way that supports their individual needs, wants, and agendas. Inherent in leaders' hesitation to use loosely guided, emergent change processes, is a belief that people mainly look after themselves and not the organization's needs. But when people care about accomplishing the same thing, left to themselves, they will self-organize in the best way they know how to succeed.

Generative Images are the Most Powerful Purpose Statements

A purpose that is going to power a generative change has to combine the adaptive challenge the sponsor wants to manage with the inherent motivation of the stakeholders who will have to change. This can't be something just the sponsor or senior leaders care about. It's important to have a good sense of what the people you need to engage in the change process care about. Table 1 shows some generative images that have guided generative change projects,

Table 1. Adaptive Challenges and Generative Images

Adaptive Challenge	*Future-focused, possibility-oriented purpose (Generative Image)*
How do we get unionized employees from all parts of the supply chain to generate and act on ideas for increasing standardization of work processes so they can have the right material in the right place at the right time without a lot of stress and panic?	Stress Free Customer Service
How do we increase the safety of miners who have resisted implementing new policies and procedures designed to increase safety because they feel they are too cumbersome and involve adding unnecessary work to their jobs?	Easy safety
How do we get the other departments in the organization to actively partner with the finance group in developing more adaptive, agile, financial controls?	Painless budgeting

A generative image[iv] is a combination of words that are new or unusual in the group in which they are used. To be generative, an image needs three qualities. One, it allows people to see a situation in a new way so that new conversations can take place that hadn't taken place before. It opens up people to think about options that hadn't occurred to them in the past and by doing so, creates pathways for new decisions and new behaviors. To enable generative change, it needs to have a second attribute - it is compelling; people want to engage in conversations about it. There needs to be something about the words that attracts people, even if they aren't sure what it means. Who wants to engage in a conversation about financial controls? How about painless budgeting? A generative image motivates people to show up for new conversations. Third, generative images are ambiguous and hard to define even as they are attractive – this allows them to be a continuous source of new ideas.

If you are able to reframe the adaptive challenge your sponsors want to take on, with a generative image that captures both that, and what the stakeholders who will have to change really care about, crafting generative conversations and getting people engaged is pretty easy.

Launch self-initiated probes and learn as you go

What most distinguishes generative change from what usually happens is that events are designed and hosted to help people with similar motivations and ideas find each other in order to design changes they

will then to act on without any further permission. They are encouraged to go do it. Leaders do not decide what will happen next. And most importantly, they describe all resulting actions as experiments. The message is "we don't expect everyone to succeed, but we do expect you to try. We will learn as much from the failed experiment as the one that succeeds, and we are here to support you and learn as we go".

It is possible, and often done, to run generative conversations that conclude with proposals for change that are given to leaders to do with as they see fit. There is nothing wrong with that, but you are now in a planned change scenario, with all the same problems and pressures that change management entails. These never result in transformational change[v]. What is essential for leaders of generative change, is to ensure there are 1) processes for resourcing projects that emerge from generative conversations, and 2) processes that ensure leaders can see what emerges, and follow up. This is when leadership is most critical and when opportunities for real transformational change present themselves.

[i] Marshak, R.J. & Bushe, G.R. (2018) Planned and generative change in organization development. *Organization Development Practitioner, 50*:4, 9-15. Bushe, G.R. (2019) Generative leadership. *Canadian Journal of Physician Leadership, 5*:3, 141-147.

[ii] Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. *Harvard Business Review, 85*:11, 68-76.

[iii] Collins J., & Hansen, M.T. (2011). *Great by choice*. NY: Harper Business.

[iv] Bushe, G.R. (1998) Appreciative inquiry in teams. *Organization Development Journal,* 16:3, 41-50. Bushe, G.R. & Storch, J. (2015) Generative Image: Sourcing novelty. In Bushe & Marshak (eds), *Dialogic Organization Development. (pp.101-122).* Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

[v] Bushe, G.R. & Kassam, A. (2005) When is appreciative inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *41*:2, 161-181**.** Bushe, G.R. & Nagaishi, M. (2018) Imagining the future by standing on the past: OD is not (just) about change. *Organization Development Journal, 35*:3, 23–36., Maxton, P.J. & Bushe, G.R. (2018) Individual cognitive effort and cognitive transition during organization development. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 54*:4, 424-456.