

“Change, more often, is messy, meandering, circuitous, and chaotic. If we pay close attention to the sensations we experience, rhythms teach us how to prepare ourselves for the future.”

The Rhythms of Change

By Maggie Moore

AS SCIENTISTS CONTEMPLATE the universe, “rhythm” is a word that is often used to describe its nature¹. Although this word is associated more with music than science, the rhythms written about here are not musical. They are among the rhythms that are natural to humans – heartbeats, pulse rates, breathing to name a few. These are rhythms that move us through change. Sensing these rhythms can help us interpret and understand what is changing around us, how we are responding, and what we can do about it. The rhythms represent a continuous pattern of development and demonstrate a capacity for change that we don’t typically think about. But the pattern is there, and getting to know it allows us to thrive in an ever-changing world. As scientists get closer to understanding the universe, rhythms seem to be at the heart of things. It should be no surprise that rhythms also seem to be at the heart of us.

This paper describes the *Rhythms of Change* – a developmental pattern that all of us engage in to learn, grow and change. Secondly, it suggests ways in which leaders of change in organizations can promote change by respecting and working with this natural developmental pattern.

It is not uncommon for people to think of change as an event that has an ending even though life teaches us that change occurs continuously, in multiple and simultaneous processes that are not linear. Change does not usually happen

in the series of steps outlined in a plan. More often it is messy, meandering, circuitous, and chaotic. If we pay close attention to the sensations we experience, rhythms teach us how to prepare ourselves for the future. They guide us through the developmental process of learning and growing – the process of life itself.

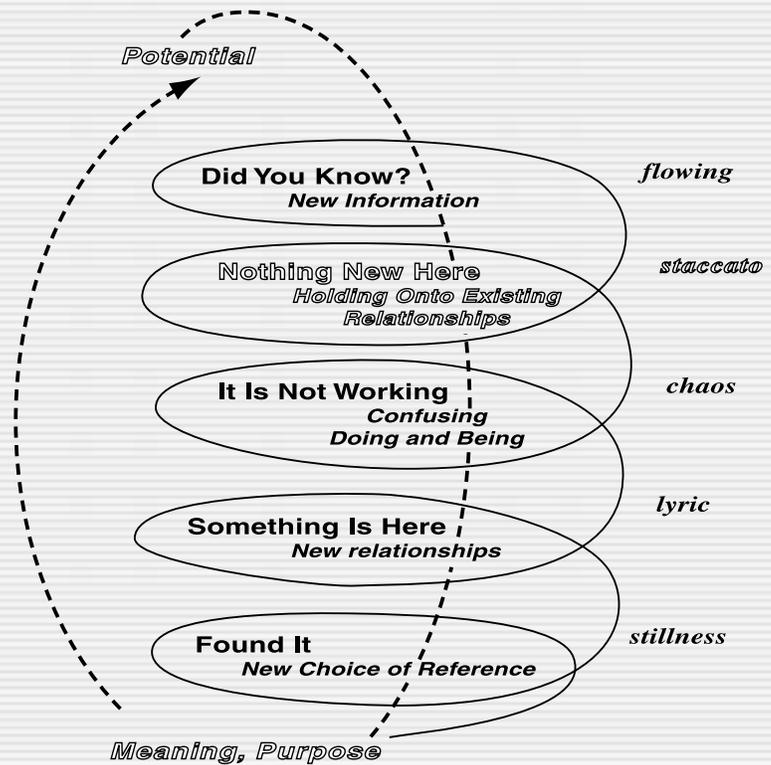
In *Figure 1*, the *Rhythms of Change* appear in a spiral because they are elements of a pattern that we move through continuously. This Spiral bypasses our existing frameworks, mental models, habits of thinking, filters, lenses and expectations of how change occurs. The Spiral offers an unusual view of our natural developmental process and an opportunity to gain deeper understanding of our capacities for change. You may wish to think about your own example of living through a challenging change as you read about the rhythms. See if they describe your experience.

The rhythms are expressed in a language of sensation². They are Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyric, and Stillness. New language is useful in breaking old habits of thinking about change. It helps us reconsider how change occurs and what we might attend to if we wish to know more about what is emerging, how we and others are responding, and what can be done to support the developmental process.

Figure 1 THE RHYTHMS OF CHANGE

This spiral shows a natural progression of rhythms as we move from potential to expanded meaning and purpose. We encounter them as we become aware that change is occurring and engage with it. We cycle through a series of sensations, including confusion, resistance, and even fear, until we make sense of what is going on. Our sense making occurs as we use new information to understand what is shifting in our relationships – with people as well as our thought patterns and mental frameworks – and what we identify as the whole – choice of reference, the whole we choose to see. As we move through the rhythms, we are expanding consciousness. We have a growing sense of how we are connected to everything else. This awareness and understanding is about recovery...recovery of wholeness.

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POTENTIAL

The Spiral starts with potential. I mean to put emphasis on this word. It is often used, but perhaps not well considered in terms of meaning. My dictionary says that potential is latent excellence that may or may not be developed. (Latent excellence in a child; in a partnership between colleagues; in a group; in an organization.) Potential can also be described as hidden doorways of opportunity that contain the means to fulfillment. Potential is infinite possibilities, mostly unimagined. Potential is complex, unbounded, unquantifiable, unqualifiable and absolute. There is always potential for growth and change, except when there is death. And yet potential is only what we make of it in any given circumstance.

FLOWING

Flowing is the first rhythm of change. The flowing energy of organizations and the people in them is usually related to information. When information is flowing and we are moving with the flow, our own energy is in sync with what is unfolding. We move along without disruption. Things are as we expect them to be. We seek and handle this flow of information in an easy-going manner. Our language evidences natural inquisitiveness and curiosity: “Do you know....? Have you heard...? Do you know what

I just learned?” We experience the feeling of being in sync with others because we believe they are looking at the same information with the same purpose and working toward the same goals.

STACCATO

Flowing is interrupted by the sensation of Staccato, a feeling of being abruptly disconnected or detached. It is a subtle indication that something is changing. We may feel startled, surprised, jarred or blocked in some way. Staccato signals the need to look closely for what is different and direct our attention to what is trying to emerge so we can move with it. If we listen to this signal, our questions are “*What is changing? How do I work with it? What is required of me?*”

If we are not paying attention or didn’t notice the subtle indication, we begin to lose our place in the change that is unfolding. This can happen for several reasons. Perhaps we simply were not attentive enough, or the information stopped flowing in our direction. Perhaps we evaluated the need for the change being suggested, and did not agree that change is necessary, or we don’t believe that it has anything to do with us. Maybe we are over-confident in habits of thought and behavior, or believe we can control what happens next so we don’t have to change.

In any case, when we resist, discount, or fend off the sen-

sation of Staccato, it gets bigger and louder. Our resistance is about holding on to the way we have seen things in relationship to one another – mental models and behavior patterns that are established and inform us as to how we see ourselves, how we see others and how we all relate to a larger whole (e.g. the organization). We are insisting that things will remain the same for us – that we will stay in relationship to the people and work just as we have been. In fact, relationships are changing and this is the time to renegotiate our place in the scheme of things. In essence we are bumping into information that disconfirms our existing beliefs, mental models and patterns of behavior. But rather than taking in the message, we may find ourselves and others saying things like *“We’ve heard all this before...there is nothing to be gained by changing...I can handle this...this is just a small disruption that I don’t have to pay attention to.”*

CHAOS

When information continues to be so disconfirming that we literally feel things are breaking apart, we are in the abyss of Chaos. Our mental models or ways of making sense of things no longer hold up. In efforts to control events, we try to move away from our anxiety by doing something...anything. No matter what we do, no matter how hard we try to fix it, things don’t work the way we believe they should. We speak of what is going on like this: *“Everything is breaking apart...things are out of control...this is not working...who is in charge?...why don’t they do something?...what do you mean I have to try harder?”*

What is not working is our previous ways of making sense of things. We suddenly know that we no longer have a way of explaining to ourselves and others what has happened or why. We busy ourselves with activity. We become frantic. Our energy is scattered in many directions with no sense of accomplishment. We confuse the need to do something – *doing* – with *being* – being present with what is happening and how we are connected to it.

Chaos is less of an abyss if we recognize that its purpose is to break apart our old habits of thought and behavior, and

explore new prospects. Our old habits no longer serve us in the current situation. We can ask ourselves: *“What is chaos teaching us? What has changed? What new information is being presented to us? What new relationships are apparent or required? Where do I fit in this new scheme of things?”* As we explore these questions, we move away from the harsher aspects of the experience and get in sync with learning and change. Doing so hastens our entry into Lyric. However, even an old hand at the change spiral can lose her confidence in the midst of chaos. The changes we are confronted with in our cities, organizations, society and the world these days are extremely challenging. No amount of skill can ensure that change does not become painfully chaotic. Fortunately, the shift into Lyric also happens when we get tired of fighting off those changes we fear. At some point we exhaust ourselves, or see that all of our activity is feeding into a vicious cycle of more anxiety and more activity. With fatigue comes surrender, acceptance of change, and a segue into Lyric.

LYRIC

When we are learning, we are leaning into our anxiety. We see that our resistance can teach us about what is important to us and why it is worth saving, or not. In Lyric, which is light and graceful, we slow down so we can attend to what has emerged. Our energy is paced, we are able to get rest, and think more clearly. We allow what has happened, rather than busy ourselves with activities aimed at controlling what is. We begin to notice and investigate new relationships between people and the work they do. We find ourselves and others saying: *“Something is new here... isn’t this interesting...do you see this?... I hadn’t noticed it before... what does it mean?... how can we learn more about it?”*

STILLNESS

When we move into Stillness, we see ourselves differently. Our choices of reference – how we refer to ourselves in the new scheme of things – develop and expand. We begin to identify with a larger whole – something outside of ourselves that has value for us. We have a greater sense of relatedness and connection. This awareness quiets and replenishes us. We say things like: *“I can see it clearly now... we’ve found something important... this really makes sense... I wish I had understood this before.”*

From the larger whole, new patterns become apparent and what we pay attention to begins to shift. Different pathways that were impossible to see before become available. Out of this new understanding, new **meaning** is created and a renewed and expanded sense of **purpose** emerges, which opens us more to **potential**. And then what flows from potential is more than before.

People have asked how Stillness is a rhythm. The experience of Stillness can be described as the pause between the

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notes. It is the timbre of a bell, the clear sound that fades slowly and imperceptibly after metal has been tapped. It is watching a sleeping child breathe. It is music that makes us feel still inside. It is stepping onto the back porch at dusk as the crickets start up. It is waking at sunrise to the birds calling. It is being in synch with nature. It is the rhythm of heartfelt quiet and renewal.

The *Rhythms of Change* go on forever, drawing us into different experiences, untried approaches, and remarkable outcomes that punctuate a landscape of uncharted territory. We have this choice: to force our old ways of seeing onto the events unfolding around us, thereby constraining what is possible, or exploring potential that can be a source of renewal, replenishment and sustainability.

In the Spiral, the rhythms appear in a certain order; however, they do not necessarily become apparent in this order. Some rhythms may be hardly noticeable. Some may take up a lot of time and space. Each rhythm is instructive. None is better than another. Each contains new ways of knowing what is changing. And each directs us to how we can learn more about what is trying to emerge: learning, growth and generative change.

We already are familiar with the *Rhythms of Change*. They are natural to us. We have had the experience of Flowing and Staccato. We have had the experience of a crisis in which everything feels as if it is breaking apart. We have had the experience of recovering from a crisis and finding that we did indeed know how to recover and do well in the new situation. These experiences and this knowledge show us that we do not need to resist what wants to emerge. Nor do we need to strive to maintain the status quo. When we accept Staccato and Chaos as part of the process of emerging order and realignment rather than something to avoid, we can thrive. We can be willing to look at new information and its impact on existing relationships with curiosity rather than fear. We can be better able to see the potential inherent in new relationships. And we can tap into a greater sense of connectedness and belonging that brings renewed meaning and purpose to our lives.

GUIDING CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Understanding the Rhythms of Changes gives us a basis from which we can lead and guide changes that need to occur in organizations. The Spiral is a framework in which to consider what will support people in moving through their development and what help looks like in the rhythms of Staccato and Chaos. The three keys to providing guidance are found in the Spiral itself – information, relationships, and choice of reference.

The Spiral corresponds with three dynamic elements that are fundamental to the ways all living systems organize themselves. People, families, communities, work groups and organizations are all living systems. Energy flows through their networks of connections just as energy flows through the Spiral. By tuning into how information flows (or not), how relationships

work (or why they don't), and the ways in which people refer to themselves, we can make visible dynamics that are typically invisible. Once visible, the dynamics can be influenced to promote change.

These three dynamic elements have been described as the Three Domains of Self- Organizing Systems³:

Information: the ways in which we get, generate and use information.

Relationships: the ways in which things are connected – people to people, work to work, the purpose of one department to another, all the parts of a whole system, etc.

Self-Reference: the ways in which we think of ourselves (reference ourselves) in the context of what is happening around us.

Although they have a huge effect on how people in organizations approach problem solving and change, very often the dynamics within and between these elements go unnoticed. Consequently old structures and habits of thought can unintentionally get in the way of change and innovation. We can explore these patterns – call them into consideration – with open questions and continuing dialogue that make them visible. This has the effect of “jiggling” the most basic elements in the system, which results in people choosing to re-organize themselves on the basis of new ways to deal with information, relationships, and/or self-reference (choice of reference). Things begin to change as soon as the patterns become visible because people can see that old ways of doing things don't serve their purposes. This shift allows development and creativity to occur on many levels at once.

In other words, organizational dynamics and the developmental processes of people operate on the same basic elements. Working with these elements in the organizational context directly effects how workers respond to change. How the elements of Information, Relationships and Self-Reference work in your organization is an important consideration when leading change. Watching and listening to reactions of managers and workers provides a lot to work with. They tell us what rhythms they are in.

In response, we can ask questions that generate more information and understanding – in them and in us. When we notice the Staccato or Chaos rhythms, these questions will support movement through the Spiral: *What do you think is changing? Why do you think this is happening? How can we move with it? What is required of us to change? What has already changed? What new information is being presented to us? Do we have the relationships we need to get the work done? Are we connected to the right people for support? Do we have to work differently than before? Why?*

We can also promote change using the three elements by designing ongoing dialogue that allows people to process what is happening together. Doing so provides a context in which workers and managers can find what they need for their individual developmental processes. It also ensures that we are not doing anything inadvertently to hinder movement through the Spiral. Here is a template of questions that can be tailored to

your organization's needs.

INFORMATION

Providing the best information you have about the change being proposed is not enough. This element is just as much about **generating** information with those who will be touched by the change. The new information generated through the dialogue initiated by the following questions gives change leaders more information about what the change entails and what kinds of supports will make a difference in implementation.

- *What change are we proposing? Why?*
- *What evidence do we have that there is a need to change?*
- *What more evidence do we need?*
- *How does this change affect the work of the department (organization, work group)?*
- *What will it take for this department, (work group, etc.), to implement this change?*
- *How can management help?*

RELATIONSHIPS

In a living system, like an organization, every part is connected to and affects every other part, directly or indirectly. It's hard to see all of the interplay because the network of relationships is so dense. Questions like the following highlight relationships that need to be attended to as the organization changes. They also generate better questions – questions that no one thought of asking before, the answers to which bring startling findings that lead to better ideas and solutions.

- *How do workers of different departments need to connect with each other in order to implement this change?*
- *What structure do we need to make that possible?*
- *How do we view our work in relationship to the work of others?*
- *How does the purpose and progress of our department connect to that of other departments?*
- *What do our customers need to know?*
- *What do our vendors need to know?*
- *How do we invite them into this ongoing dialogue?*
- *Who do we need to be talking to in order to gauge our progress?*

SELF-REFERENCE

If employees can see themselves as part of the future the organization is creating for itself, they will support change that seems to be moving in that direction. On-going dialogue helps people discover how they want to participate as contributors to the future, and it also allows them to become stronger contributors to the organization's success.

- *What business are we in?*
- *What business do we want to be in?*

- *What values guide our work and inform our aspirations?*
- *How do I fit in the scheme of things around here? Does this change include me?*
- *Who am I in relation to this company?*
- *Who am I in relation to the user of my product?*
- *Is this the work I want to do?*

CONCLUSION

In their book *Profit Beyond Measure*⁴, Tom Johnson and Anders Broms eloquently describe the need and importance of business practices that reflect the nature of living systems. The implementation of change in organizations is a practice that must also reflect a living process, or else change will not result in the success that is hoped for. This paper offers a framework for taking into account a natural development process of growth and change. And it explains how that process interacts with the basic elements upon which we organize in order to work together.

As the Spiral suggests, we learn by engaging with each other and work, and discovering what we will bump into as we go forward. It goes on forever, as we always have more to learn. My hope is that this paper provides a map that supports us in our continuous exploration – the process of life itself. ■

NOTES

- 1 William Forward and Andrew Wolport, editors, *Chaos, Rhythm and Flow in Nature*, Floris Books, 1993.
- 2 The names of these rhythms were first used by Gabriella Roth in dance.
- 3 The Three Domains of Self-Organizing Systems were identified during dialogues at the Berkana Institute, which took place 1993-1996. They were derived from self-organizing systems science for social systems.
- 4 H. Thomas Johnson and Anders Broms, *Profit Beyond Measure: Extraordinary Results through Attention to Work and People*, Free Press, 2000.