

Change Management: Metaphors to Navigate By

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The movement of water is an observable natural phenomenon. The trickle of water in a desert is a welcome sight, and through it, plants and animals thrive. When there is an abundance of water, people tend to build their lives around it—next to rivers, lakes and oceans. Consider people’s reactions to an unexpected change in water level, though. In the case of a tsunami or a sudden flood, people may leave an area out of necessity. Or they may decide to return and rebuild later. Organizational change is like water. It can appear gradually, through influence, or it can appear suddenly, by the force of authority. Effective, lasting change, however, takes place through influence, and not through authority. Allow me to share with you my observations on the wisdom of water, based on both my background in religious studies and my experiences in leading a major change initiative at a community college.

We have all seen how autocratic methods wielded by leadership can steamroll and destroy morale, because they do not utilize, and are often dismissive of, the creative ideas of those on the ground. The results are shaky, at best, because groundwork is often not laid first, and changes are not thoughtful. The more intuitive methods of leadership that borrow from the wisdom of water can help navigate successful change management, with the surprising result that changes can actually stick. Knowing when and how to use influence requires intuition. The process is similar to what Malcolm Gladwell describes in *Blink*: a split-second decision based on prior knowledge or experience that happens so quickly and seamlessly that one may imagine that there was no thinking involved (2005). More experienced leaders can potentially have this intuition based on what they have seen happen in the workplace, but there is no guarantee that they will. Many leaders continue to rely on authority rather than influence. Why? Because no matter how simple

we can make it sound, it's difficult to do. The following metaphors can serve as guides for change through influence: (1) a river, (2) a wall, and (3) a soup pot. Each metaphor represents a common scenario in an organization, and for each one, I have an example from my own experience to share.

Having come from a faculty role to a leadership role directing a large-scale grant project at a multi-campus community college in New York, I've been grappling with change management for about four years now. The position requires that I be an agent of influence in both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, while having little formal authority beyond my office. At first, navigating the world of influence rather than authority almost drove me over the edge, but soon it drove me to read and study. In my toolkit was my training in the Chair Academy's Foundations and Advanced Leadership programs. I had also read many books, and had countless conversations with mentors and colleagues.

It has been my observation that in higher education, people work organically—*between* the fixed areas of responsibility established by an organizational chart. We know this for two reasons. First, because institutions of higher education are made up of various cultures: academics, Student Affairs professionals, bureaucrats, and administrators. Each culture has its own training protocols, manners of advancement, and career trajectories. Very little of this complex picture is expressed in the organizational chart of any institution of higher education. The second reason we know people work organically and outside of a chart is that we inevitably see people gaming the system. “Gatekeepers” control the flow of information, “mavens” know everyone, and the “new kid” is an unknown until he or she finds a place within these informal structures. These are all

hallmarks of a structure that defies hierarchy. Higher education Darwinism says that the creatures that adapt to their environment will survive.

However, this does not mean that one needs to adopt the wiles of the worldly and become a less-than-ethical person. Instead, one can and should consider ones natural resources. In any kind of shifting or unmapped landscape, one can always find rivers. One should always know where the rivers are. It is an attribute of a river to seek the valleys and the lowest points of the terrain. And remember that a river is simply water, gradually and imperceptibly carving its way through the landscape. The points at which change happens are those points where Lao Tse, the Taoist sage says "the soft overcomes the hard" and "the weak overcomes the strong."

Nothing in the world is weaker than water  
but against the hard and the strong  
nothing excels it  
for nothing can change it  
the soft overcomes the hard  
the weak overcomes the strong  
this is something everyone knows  
but no one is able to practice (Pine, 1996)

This is from Lao Tse's *Tao Te Ching*. The "hard" and "strong," can refer to a person who is obstinate or ego-bound. The "soft" and "weak" refers can refer to a person who is yielding and self-effacing. The workplace does not seem to reward the latter, so you may not like what I am about to say. The polarity presented here calls upon the value of personal humility, even in the face of arrogance. In administration, and in faculty roles, too, one can find oneself in a cutthroat world where survival of the fittest is the rule. The temptation is often to take on the characteristics of aggression. However, consider this. If you are water, your course of action has a guide: "Water sets the example for the right conduct....[I]t flows on and on, and merely fills up all the places through which it flows;

it does not shrink from any dangerous spot nor from any plunge, and nothing can make it lose its own essential nature. It remains true to itself under all conditions” (Wilhelm, 1967). In the midst of confrontational situations, one does well to remain aware of one’s own reactions. If you find your reactions transforming you into a carnivorous beast, then you must accept that you will be bound by your newly-cultivated nature to fight other carnivorous beasts. However, if you are water, you simply move on.

In nature, one of the ways a river picks up strength is when it joins another river. In order to encourage growth in an initiative, try to discover untapped strengths in an organization’s current structure. These strengths live with people who are doing unacknowledged or uncoordinated work, and hence performing invisibly. These are people who are able to get things done in spite of disorganization or seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Oftentimes, they are the ones people forget to thank. They are also water. The rest of the organization may be taking them for granted, but you shouldn’t. They are your allies.

Now that we have identified the attributes of water, and what those attributes look like in the people who have them, let us look at what a change proposal looks like to employees in an institution. It is a shift in the way things are done that can radically affect someone’s happiness and satisfaction at work. In other words, it is a huge rock in the middle of their river that can either tip the canoe of happiness they are traveling in, or tip the canoe of the person next to them, which may affect them through a ripple effect. Before imposing a change, employees need to first be able to see the vision of the change that is being proposed, and agree that it is both doable and good. That is, for best results, the placing of the rock in the middle of the river should be an agreed upon change that is

clearly beneficial. Agreement is sometimes called “buy-in,” but that phrase is misleading. Not only does it not do justice to the intelligence of those who ostensibly need to be convinced, it is not helpful in describing what really needs to happen. Change requires *commitment* on the part of those who will be affected, not just “buy-in.”

The research on change management is complex, but there seems to be agreement on one thing: real change is hard. The 2013 Strategy&/Katzenbach Center survey found that the success rate of major change initiatives globally is only 54 percent (Aguirre, Alper, 2014). One thing I found to be true is the common aphorism in change management: “go slow to go fast.” Going slowly is most definitely not the same as not going. It is certainly slower, but it is much more powerful. One can see this by watching the tide come in. I once filmed water coming up our street on Long Island during one of Superstorm Sandy’s tidal surges. It was just a trickle coming further and further up the street with every wave. However, that same water came into the house during the next tide, despite the stone wall that was serving as a barrier in front of our property, and the additional sandbags we had piled up the day before to prevent the waters from coming in. Although there was a substantial clean up effort when the waters receded, it was intellectually fascinating to me, to watch the power of water in action.

One kind of change that requires this kind of slow work is “culture change.” At times during the implementation of the grant project, various administrators at the college cited “culture change” as an obstacle. I understood from their tone that they meant that *culture change* was an impenetrable wall that would hold any initiative back. Later we found that it was not true. There may have seemed to be a wall, yes, even a “stonewall.” But we found that it was like the wall in front of my house—porous. There were spaces

between the stones. To consult ancient wisdom once again, Aziz al-Din Nasafi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian mystic, explains why things that are more subtle can penetrate those which are not in his *Maqsad al- 'Aqsa*.

If a washbasin is filled with earth in such a way that in the washbasin there is no more room for earth, inside of the washbasin there is a place for water. So in that place where earth could not exist, water could; inside of the water, there is a place for air. So in that place where water could not exist, air could. And inside of the air, [233] there is a place for fire. So in that place where air could not exist, fire could. The reason for this is that anything that is more subtle is also more pervasive, more comprehensive, and more encompassing (Nasafi).

Here Nasafi is saying that there are spaces between the stones, and within those spaces, even more spaces. The subtlety of each element was the key to understanding how it was true. Organizations are the same. They have rigid, immovable aspects, like hierarchy and job descriptions. But what is more subtle and more pervasive than those things?

Enthusiasm, credibility, trust, and respect: these are all attributes that have the power to influence that authority does not have.

It is well known in leadership training grounds that trust is an essential element needed for effectiveness in organizations. In addition, it is worth noting that the onus seems to be largely on the leader, while those who are on the ground are merely deciding whether or not they are willing to put their trust in him or her. Keep in mind that trust is built on integrity, not common cause. Even a band of thieves has a common cause for the time they are together. A *trusting* relationship is formed when someone believes that another person has integrity. And as it happens, a leader's behavior has been deemed more critical than any other person's behavior in determining the level of trust that develops in an organization (Gardner, 1990). However, building trust is similar to

behaving like water. It is very difficult work. Moreover, the nature of it is as Lao Tse has said: it is “something everyone knows/but no one is able to practice.”

If a leader is at a beginning point where trust needs to be established, one thing she or he can do is search out opportunities for collaboration between divisions, and support efforts that would increase levels of trust. This can be done in cases where one can clearly identify what others want or need. However, the next step requires active listening to differing views and finding ways for people to share credit for resulting solutions. The challenge arises when multiple agendas exist, and some people are allowed to "win" and others are not. Such developments tend to erode trust. Rather, the leader should allow his or her desired outcomes to be effaced, at least momentarily, and look for win/win solutions for the participants of the discussion. If leaders espouse the importance of true collaboration, then they need to structure opportunities for it to occur, and maintain the trust that is created through each collaborative experience (Wilcox, 1992).

Now that you see the power of influence rather than authority, I'd like to recall the story called “Stone Soup”—the one about the itinerant “cook” who showed up in town one day, put a stone in a pot, and announced that he was making stone soup. People were cynical at first, and said they didn't have any ingredients to add, but eventually they started to bring ingredients out of their homes. It's just a story, but it's a kind of mythic narrative to me. I felt like this itinerant cook when I had a lengthy grant narrative in front of me, with little authority to implement. So I wondered about this itinerant cook: how did he keep his countenance when people said they had nothing to give? I imagined that he might have looked like the Taoist sage, nodding patiently as he stirred the pot, having confidence in the nature of water, stones, and people. Somehow he knew that the soup



would come together. On many occasions I felt as if I were he, sitting, stirring. I came to believe that no matter what, the recipe for change management is always the same: (1) gather people, (2) listen to them, (3) add ingredients, and (4) stir. While all of this is happening, you are at the same time demonstrating your integrity through active listening, and building trust by delivering a result that is truly collaborative.

When should one pull out a soup pot? The moment that one can see a type of change that requires influence rather than authority, or in other words, leadership instead of management. “Management” manipulates people as resources, the same way one would order photocopy paper, or lines in a budget. It offers mandates and strict guidelines. Leadership offers people a vision and a scaffold, and asks them to supply the details of the larger vision.

My very first experience with stone soup was in the English department in 2008. Suffolk County Community College was, and still is, the largest community college system in the state of New York. It has three campuses, and three departments charged with the teaching of writing. However, the campus cultures were unique in various ways: the group of faculty at each campus was different, the students at each campus had different needs, and the resources that had developed over time had taken on different configurations at each campus.

The Ammerman campus—the largest and oldest of the three—had a vibrant writing center with professional and peer tutors. The center had been nurtured and developed since its creation in the 80s and was being led by a dynamic faculty coordinator. This writing center was reputed to be excellent at assisting students with all forms of writing on both a walk-in or appointment basis. In 2008 the center had

developed to the point where they were seeing thousands of students every semester. In contrast, the other two campuses had a more limited capacity to help students with writing. Instead of writing centers, they had a handful of tutors located in a larger academic support center who helped students on an appointment-only basis.

The inequity had been a sore spot for many years, especially since one of the campuses—the Michael J. Grant Campus—had a student population that had grown twice in size since the 80s. Students from the poorest areas of Long Island attended this particular campus, and many took two buses to get there. There were many first-generation students, and a large population of ESL students. Many students were under-prepared, and desperately needed tutoring and personal engagement. At this campus, the student experience seemed marked by real hope, but marred by a lack of resources.

The root of lasting change in any organization is not only a belief that the changes are necessary, but that change is a kind of investment for the future. Why is the leap of faith to make an investment so difficult? There is always a problem of perception. When one envisions a change that needs to be made by someone *else*, it seems like a small change. But when one is faced with the personal decision to change something, it seems like an enormous change. The change suddenly feels like the elephant that represents a person's emotions around change in Chip and Dan Heath's *Switch* (2010).

For example, from the faculty perspective the question was: why didn't the College give this campus a writing center? It seemed simple. The faculty could see it was necessary for their students, and the success of the existing center at Ammerman Campus seemed to offer convincing evidence that it was good for students. Did the administration think it *wasn't* a good idea?

Not really. From the administrative perspective, the concerns were more along the lines of: who would run such a place? How would it function? Someone needed to create a plan for it and make sure it was in the budget for the following year. By the way, what costs would there be? These questions seemed large and looming, and the task of answering them seemed less important than the more urgent matters at stake, like accreditation, or the bottom line of the institution. It is for this reason that we should not be surprised when most far-reaching changes happen only when there is an external mandate like an accreditation visit. In fact, the mandate came to meet the writing center, and this is how it happened.

In 2009, the College administration was struggling to apply for a Title III grant for \$2M, and a call for proposals went out to the faculty at large—a Wiki page would be available for submissions. This had never happened before at the College. However, one by one, submissions went up on the Wiki site and were visible to all. Software and equipment to streamline admissions, a reorganization of faculty advising, the creation of learning communities—day after day, the list became longer. The English faculty at the Michael J. Grant Campus discussed some of the merits of other proposals that had gone onto the Wiki page during a department meeting, and eventually one of them had a thought: Why not make a writing center proposal? This particular faculty member reflected on how much work it would be, and knew she couldn't do it alone. Later that night she called one of her colleagues in the department, and shared the idea. Together, they called one more person. And then there were three. The more they talked, the more excited they got. That night, when they decided to depart from the status quo, they were contributing to stone soup. Then they decided to call on others to share.

This small group was hard working, but they knew that no one could ever accomplish as much as a larger group. Their department members were an eclectic, sometimes outspoken mix of faculty, who were not known for coalescing around a single idea and bringing it to fruition. Instead, they were quite good at obstructing a change they didn't believe in. This may sound negative, but it isn't really. Stubbornness as a quality also points to resoluteness, and eclecticism as a quality can point to a broad skill set. In fact, the introverts in the group were potential planners and designers. The extroverts were potentially an energetic force of laughter and good will. And some others had shown themselves to be doggedly persistent on projects they cared deeply about.

So the small group decided to share the idea with two more people. One was the most extroverted person in the whole department. If she liked it, they knew they would find the energy to make it happen. The other person was one of the most senior members of the English department, who possessed a great deal of gravitas. As it happened, the extrovert loved the idea, and the possessor of gravitas also thought it was great. So they began the work of getting everyone together.

Newer faculty who were in the promotion cycle had full plates already, but were willing to set aside time for the few meetings it would take. Veteran faculty had their own disappointments over the years, but they had chutzpa they weren't afraid to use in service of the students. There were sixteen collaborators in all. The original small group, the introverts, took turns writing up results and organizing meetings. Organization was key. No talking heads. Just working groups. Two planning meetings were held to produce the final product: (1) research on the impact of writing centers on student success, (2) a

philosophy for a center, (3) a description of the space, (4) an equipment list, (5) a personnel list, (6) a timeline for the roll-out of the center, and (7) an assessment plan.

Two faculty members put their names on the final proposal—one was part of the original small group that had subsequently spent long hours thinking, writing, and organizing, and the other was one of the veteran faculty members who had played the crucial role in encouraging *every fulltime member of the department* to come to the planning meetings. When the proposal made it into the final design of the Title III grant application, although there were only two names on the original proposal, this department knew they had done it together as a team.

The small group followed through with refining the design as it was melded into a much larger grant proposal for the College, and a larger budget was shaped and finalized. In October of 2010, when the College was awarded a Title III grant for \$2M, a long-time dream had come true for the faculty and students at the Michael J. Grant Campus. The College now had resources, a plan, and a mandate to create not one but *two* writing centers—one for the Michael J. Grant Campus, and one for the Eastern Campus. All three campuses would finally have a writing center, giving every student access to writing help.

There is a lesson to take from the success of the story—that it is important for leaders to construct paths of influence, or riverbeds, that will create win/win scenarios for large groups. To do this, find strategic, creative types of leaders in your organization, no matter what the level. A small group of three or four people who have the ability to speak all “languages” in the organization—faculty who understand how administration works, administrators who have an academic background, and anyone who can speak the

complex language of “compliance.” These are the people who will be able to figure out quickly what will appeal to all constituencies and create win/win solutions.

In this case, major change happened quickly. The grant was awarded in Fall 2010, and students began arriving to be tutored in the two new writing centers in the Fall 2012. This change took place quickly, because the designers, writers, and administrators involved in the grant project collaborated, and therefore empowered each as a group (Anderson, 2012). Each one had put aside their cynicism, decided to trust again, and began contributing to the “stone soup.” It was because someone had made the decision to put the pot on the fire, fill it with water, and plop a stone into it. Someone had gathered the people together, listened to them, kept adding ingredients, and kept stirring.

In all cases where change is desired, there is no need for an official announcement. If you are the leader, simply decide which metaphor can guide your desired changes. Is it the river? The wall? The pot? Simply pick one and be consistent in your imitative behavior of water. The behaviors that will ensure that you are acting like water are humility and integrity. If these sound like servant leadership traits, they are. Water is at the core of servant leadership.

Another realm where the water of influence took hold at Suffolk County Community College during the period of the grant was in the area of faculty advising. For many years at Suffolk there was an unofficial assumption that faculty were under the direction of Student Affairs to advise and mentor students, especially during critical enrollment periods. This unofficial policy required faculty to “volunteer” for the other side of the house and act as temporary extra help for the professional advisors. Over the period of the grant, though, best practices at Suffolk evolved to the point where Suffolk now helps

support faculty who advise with targeted resources. The college provides a wealth of materials geared exclusively toward the faculty/student relationship, so that faculty can feel comfortable advising either in their offices or in a new space that is supervised through Academic Affairs called the “Academic Advising and Mentoring Center” (AAMC). If faculty members choose to advise students in the AAMC alongside other faculty, they have back-up information & resources to help them, and if not, the AAMC staff help connect students to faculty where they are in their offices. It is a solution that recognized many faculty members’ natural strengths in mentoring students, and offered a broader path for them to join in the work—a wider riverbed for water to flow.

The changes came about gradually. A Faculty Advising Committee was formed, made up only of faculty, to discuss the long-standing issues and difficulties. This committee designed a survey in order to gather input from the rest of the faculty and other college personnel. In the end, it was this group that guided the changes that the college made. This group saw in front of them an evolving set of faculty advising best practices that they themselves would devise. And when best practices seemed clear enough, they created professional development workshops, which were placed online for easy access, and a short guide for faculty advising. It was a major change initiative that had its messy moments. As the leader of the initiative, sometimes I felt very alone in experiencing the lowest points where the water needed to go as it traveled. These were periods of disappointment and frustration, where it seemed that there were hidden crevices that would swallow up all the water, no matter how much flowed in. Some faculty quit under the stress of the built-up resentments that were being expressed.

Regardless, it was true that the water had to go into the low areas and fill them. It took time. But in the end, the changes we saw were a testament to the power of water.

This is not to say that any of the changes we implemented at the college were easy. Or that any one of the changes we made will not experience a damming up of one of the rivers that is nourishing it. And fair warning: the beginning is always painful. My role felt painful at first, as I struggled to gain my bearing in unfamiliar terrain. Without knowing it, though, I must have been behaving like water. In the first few years of the grant, major change started to happen. As we began hitting performance indicators one by one, and exceeding them, the project team experienced a rise in confidence. Now in the middle of our fifth and last year, the grant project has implemented about twenty new institutional elements, and has been considered quite successful by Department of Education standards.

Other institutions reach out to consult with us regarding some of these elements, and when we get phone calls, I do share specifics, like how our college was able to create a Virtual Learning Commons inside a Luminis 5.1 enterprise system to help students who had trouble coming onto campus for extra help, and what kinds of software we used to create approximately one thousand learning objects (mini-online tutorials). Or how many students visit our new writing or advising centers. But to me, the particular pieces merely feel like ingredients, like the vegetables you might choose when you're going to make soup. More important, I think, is the *way* those things were put together and how they continue to be put together on the ground. How, for example, did it happen that faculty members took the time to plan, design and develop online materials, when they had very



little experience with technology? And how did it happen that faculty got past the tensions around advising to devise a system that worked for them?

A good cook may look at a recipe card once, to get a general sense of some ingredients, but after that, he or she works without it. Cooking is about understanding attributes of ingredients, like the relative sharpness of an onion. A person who is managing change through influence understands the attributes of an institution. There may be different constituencies, yes, and those are important to get to know and understand, but the most important attributes to understand, though, will always be the ones that belong to water. As Lao Tse says, water's attributes are easy to understand but difficult to put into practice. The one who follows the path of water will surely go down into the valleys and the lowest points, but this person will also exert an influence that is unstoppable.

What I'm suggesting is that you can be that person. You don't need to have formal authority. Being mindful of the powerful attributes of water can help you find the places where water naturally enters and exerts its influence. Those spaces often look miniscule, insignificant, but they are the places that others often overlook. The process of waiting for spaces to fill is slow. Patience *is* required. But if you are confident with your understanding of the power of water, you can also be the itinerant cook. You will have wonderful conversations with others when you are stirring the pot, and you can observe the effects of subtle elements upon each other. Moreover, you will continue to be surprised at the ingredients that people are willing to add into the pot. Cooking is a naturally creative process, after all, and it is so much more rewarding for all when everyone involved knows they will have a cup of the soup in the end.

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