

RULES OF THUMB FOR CHANGE AGENTS

by Herbert A. Shepard, 1974

The following aphorisms are not so much bits of advice as things to think about when you are being a change agent, a consultant, an organization or community development specialist --or when you are just being yourself trying to bring about something that involves other people.

RULE I: STAY ALIVE

This rule counsels against self-sacrifice on behalf of a cause that you do not wish to be your last.

Two exceptionally talented doctoral students came to the realization that the routines they were being put through to get their credentials were absurd, and decided not to complete the degree because they would be untrue to themselves to conform to and support an absurd system. That sort of reasoning is almost always self-destructive. Behind the noble gesture there are usually some childhood-based conflicts that are neither understood nor admitted. Besides their gesture was unlikely to have any impact whatever on the system they were taking a stand against.

This is not to say that one should never take a stand, or a survival risk. But such risks should be taken as part of a purposeful strategy of change, and appropriately timed and targeted. When they are taken under such circumstances, one is very much alive.

But Rule I is much more than a survival rule. The rule means that you should let your whole being be involved in the undertaking. Since most of us have never even been in touch with our whole being, it means a lot of putting together of parts that have been divided, of using internal communication channels that have been closed or were never opened. Staying alive means loving yourself. Self-disparagement leads to the suppression of potentials, to a win-lose formulation of the world and to wasting life in defensive maneuvering.

Staying alive means staying in touch with your purpose. It means using your skills, your emotions, your labels and positions, rather than being used by them. It means not being trapped in other people's games. It means turning yourself on and off, rather than being dependent on the situation. It means choosing with a view to the consequences as well as the impulse. It means going with the flow even while swimming against it. It means living in several worlds without being swallowed up in any. It means seeing dilemmas as opportunities for creativity. It means greeting absurdity with laughter while trying to unscramble it. It means capturing the moment in the light of the future. It means seeing the environment through the eyes of your purpose.

RULE II: START WHERE THE SYSTEM IS

This is such ancient wisdom that one might expect its meaning had been fully explored and apprehended. Yet in practice the rule --and the system --are often violated.

The rule implies that one should begin by diagnosing the system. But systems do not necessarily like being diagnosed. Even the term "diagnosis" may be offensive. And the system may be even less ready for someone who calls himself a "change agent". It is easy for the practitioner to forget the hostility of jargon that prevents laymen from understanding the professional mysteries.

Starting where the client is can be called the Empathy Rule. To communicate effectively, to be able to build sound strategy, the change agent needs to understand how the client sees himself and his situation, and needs to understand the culture of the system. Establishing the required rapport does not mean that the change agent who wants to work in a traditional industrial setting should refrain from growing a beard. It does mean that, if he has a beard, the beard determines where the client is when they first meet, and the client's curiosity needs to be dealt with. Similarly, the rule does not mean that a female change agent in a male organization should try to act like one of the boys, or that a young person should try to act like an old person. One thing it does mean is that sometimes where the client is, is wondering where the change agent is.

Even unwitting or accidental violations of the empathy rule can destroy the situation. I lost a client through two violations in one morning. The client group spent a consulting day at my home. They arrived early in the morning, before I had my empathy one. The senior member, seeing a picture of my son in the living-room, said: "What do you do about boys with long hair". I replied thoughtlessly, "I think he's handsome that way." The small chasm thus created between my client and me was widened and deepened later that morning when one of the family tortoises walked through the butter dish.

Sometimes starting where the client is, which sounds both ethically and technically virtuous, can lead to some ethically puzzling situations. Robert Frost* describes a situation in which a consultant was so empathic with a king who was unfit to rule that the king discovered his own unfitness and had himself shot, whereupon the consultant became king. Empathy permits the development of a mutual attachment between client and consultant. The resulting relationship may be one in which their creativities are joined, a mutual growth relationship. But it may also become one in which the client becomes dependent on the consultant, so that he can be manipulated by the consultant. The ethical issues are not associated with starting where the system is, but with where one takes it.

Are the use of complacency shock, pulling out the rug of familiar structure, and two-by-four confrontation of differences violations of this rule? Of course, but they do help to determine and to reveal where the client is, some- times at the cost of the relationship. They are often productive if the client is committed to the scene and the consultant.

*Robert Frost, "How Hard It is To Keep From Being King When It's In You And In The Situation", from *In The Clearing*, pp. 74-84. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962).

RULE III: NEVER WORK UPHILL

This is a comprehensive rule, and a number of the other rules are corollaries or examples of it. It is an appeal for an organic rather than a mechanistic approach to change, for building strength and building on strength. It has a number of implications that affect the choices the

change agent makes about how to use himself, and it says something about life itself. The following are some corollaries.

RULE III, Corollary 1: Don't build hills as you go.

This corollary cautions against working in a way that builds resistance to movement in the direction you have chosen as desirable. For example, a program which has a favorable effect on one portion of a population may have the opposite effect on other portions of the population. Perhaps the commonest error of this kind has been made in the employment of T-group training in organizations -- turning on the participants and turning off the non-participants in one easy lesson.

RULE 111, Corollary 2: Work in the most promising arena.

The physician-patient relationship is often regarded as analogous to the consultant-client relationship. The results for system change can be unfortunate. For example, the organization development consultant is likely to be greeted with delight by executives who see in his specialty the solution to a hopeless situation in an outlying plant. Some organization development consultants have disappeared for years because of the irresistibility of such challenges. Others have whiled away their time trying to counteract the Peter principle by shoring up incompetent managers.

RULE III, Corollary 3: Don't use one when two could do it.

To be less cryptic; don't do anything alone that could be accomplished more easily or more certainly by a team. Don Quixote is not the only change agent whose effectiveness was handicapped by ignoring this rule. The change agent's task is an heroic one, and the need to be a hero does not facilitate team-building. As a result, many change agents become "spread too thin," through failing to develop partners who can carry on the work and use the change agent's skills efficiently.

RULE III, Corollary 4: Don't over-organize

The background of democratic ideology and the theories of participative management that many change agents possess can sometimes interfere with common sense. A year or two ago I offered a course, to be taught by graduate students. The course was over-subscribed. It seemed that a rational process for deciding whom to admit would be desirable, and that participation of the graduate students in the decision would also be desirable. So I demanded a good deal of data about themselves from the candidates for admission, and xeroxed their responses. Then the graduate students and I held a series of meetings. Then the candidates were informed by letter of the decision. I suppose I spent ten days in this absurd process, and each of the graduate students wasted a day or two. In the end we concluded that a completely arbitrary decision rule --like first come, first served --would have given as good results with much less anguish for the candidates, the students and myself.

RULE III, Corollary 5: Don't argue if you can't win

Sometimes there is a hill in the path of change which must be confronted. Thus one may begin working with people in the middle of a power structure because they are eager to learn and to move --working with them is not working uphill -- but the undertaking will become a hill-building exercise unless there is a strategy for gaining the support of the top of the structure. If the strategy encounters opposition rather than interest, the change agent

may consider a confrontation mode for achieving his purpose. Unless he has developed a constituency of support which matches or exceeds the power that the opposition can muster, he should decide against confrontation.

RULE III, Corollary 6: Play God a little

The change agent's life is his own, and it is as short as any other man's. It is important to evaluate a given context, opportunity, or need: is it appropriate for your skills and learning needs and fulfillment? Is there as much potential for change in it as in competing opportunities? For example, the public educational system is a mess. That doesn't mean we know how to save it, or even whether it should survive. It certainly doesn't mean that the change agent is morally obligated to try to improve it, destroy it, or develop a substitute for it. If there is a moral obligation, it is to the development of his own talent and potential.

RULE IV: INNOVATION REQUIRES A GOOD IDEA, INITIATIVE AND A FEW FRIENDS

As implied above, little can be accomplished alone, and there is evidence from experiments on the effects of group pressure on individual perception to suggest that the change agent needs a partner, if only to maintain perspective and purpose.

The quality of the partner is just as important as the quality of the idea. Like the change agent, partners must be relatively autonomous people. As an example, the engineering staff of a chemical company designed a new process plant using edge-of-the-art technology. The design departed too radically from the experience of top management, and they were about to reject it. The engineering chief suggested that the design be reviewed by a distinguished chemical engineering professor. The principal designers were in fact former students of the professor. For this reason he accepted the assignment, charged the company a fee for reviewing the design (which he did not trouble to examine), and told the management the design was brilliantly conceived and executed. By this means the engineers not only implemented their innovations, but also grew in the esteem of their management.

A change agent experienced in the Washington environment reports that he knows of only one case of successful interdepartmental collaboration in mutually designing, funding and carrying through a joint project. It was accomplished through the informal collaboration of four bright young men, one from each of four agencies. They were friends, and met weekly for lunch. They conceived the project, and planned a strategy for implementing it. Each person undertook to interest and influence the relevant key people in his own agency, and the four served one another as consultants and helpers in developing ways of bringing his influence to bear in each agency.

An alternative statement of Rule IV is as follows: Find the people who are ready and able to work, introduce them to another, and work with them. Perhaps because many change agents have been trained in the helping professions, perhaps because we have all been trained to think bureaucratically, or mechanistically, concepts like organizational position, representativeness or need are likely to guide the change agent's selection of those he works with. A more powerful beginning can be made by finding those persons in the system whose values are congruent with those of the change agent, who possess vitality and imagination, who are willing to work overtime, and who are eager to learn. Such people are usually glad to have someone like the change agent join in getting something important accomplished, and a careful search is likely to turn up quite a few. In fact, there may be

enough of them to accomplish general system change, if they can team up in appropriate ways. In building such teamwork the change agent's abilities will be fully challenged, as he joins them in establishing conditions for trust and creativity, dealing with anxieties about being seen as subversive, enhancing leadership, consulting, problem-solving, diagnosing and innovating skills, and developing appropriate group norms and policies. Certain norms and policies appear to be important for, even critical for, group effectiveness. The group should maintain its information or invisible status; it may have projects which eventuate in legitimized formal bodies, but it should not act as part of the power structure. Any undertaking of the group should be the property of one of its members, with others in support roles. In planning strategies which involve coordinated action on the part of several members, no member should be bound by the decisions emerging from consultation, but should adapt his behavior according to what he finds in the action scene.

RULE V: LOAD EXPERIMENTS FOR SUCCESS

This sounds like counsel to avoid risk-taking. But the decision to experiment always entails risk. After that decision has been made, take all precautions.

The rule also sounds scientifically immoral. But whether an experiment produces the expected results depends upon the experimenter's depth of insight into the conditions and processes involved. Of course, what is experimental is what is new to the system; it may or may not be new to the change agent.

Build an umbrella over the experiment. A chemical process plant which was to be shut down because of the inefficiency of its operations undertook a union-management cooperation effort to improve efficiency, which involved a modified form of profit-sharing. Such plans were contrary to company policy, but the manufacturing vice president at headquarters was interested in the experiment, and successfully concealed it from his associates. The experiment was successful: the plant became profitable. In this case, the umbrella turned out not to be big enough. The plant was shut down anyway.

Use the Hawthorne effect. Even inadequately conceived experiments are often made to succeed when the participants feel ownership. And conversely, one of the obstacles to the spread of useful innovations is that participants are not likely to feel ownership of them.

Build on strength. For example, if the change agent hopes to use laboratory training as part of his strategy, the first persons to be invited should be those who consistently turn all their experiences into constructive learning. Similarly, in introducing team development processes to a system, begin with the best-functioning team.

Maintain voluntarism. This is not easy to do in systems where invitations are understood to be commands, but nothing vital can be built on such motives as duty, obedience or responsiveness to social pressure.

RULE VI: LIGHT MANY FIRES

Not only does a large, 'monolithic development or change program have high visibility and other qualities of a good target, it also tends to prevent subsystems from developing ownership of, and consequent commitment to the program.

The positive implication of the rule is more orderly than the random prescription --light

many fires --suggests. Any part of a system is the way it is partly because of the way the rest of the system is. To work towards change in one subsystem is to become one more determinant of its performance. Not only is the change agent working uphill, but as soon as he turns his back, other forces in the system will press the subsystem back towards its previous level of performance.

If many interdependent subsystems are catalyzed, and the change agent brings them together to facilitate one another's efforts, the entire system begins to move. Understanding patterns of interdependency among subsystems can lead to a strategy of fire-setting. For example, in public school systems it requires collaboration among politicians, administrators, teachers, parents and students to bring about significant innovation, and active opposition on the part of only one of these groups to prevent it. In parochial school systems, on the other hand, collaboration between the administration and the church provides a powerful impetus for change in the other groups.

RULE VII: KEEP AN OPTIMISTIC BIAS

Our society grinds along with much polarization and cruelty, and even the helping professions compose their world of grim problems to be "worked through". The change agent is usually flooded with the destructive aspects of the situations he enters. People in most systems are impressed with one another's weaknesses, and stereotype each other with such incompetencies as they can discover.

This rule does not advise ignoring destructive forces. Its positive prescription is that the change agent be especially alert to the constructive forces which are often masked and suppressed in a problem oriented, envious culture.

People have as great an innate capacity for joy as for resentment, but resentment causes them to overlook opportunities for joy. In a workshop where a married couple were discussing their sexual problem and how hard they were working on it, it became clear that it would never be solved, simply because sex is not a problem but an opportunity.

Individuals and groups locked in destructive kinds of conflict focus on their differences. The change agent's job is to help them discover and build on their commonalities. The unhappy partners focus on past wrongs, and continue to destroy the present and future with them. The change agent's job is to help them change the present so that they will have a new past on which to create a future.

RULE VIII: CAPTURE THE MOMENT

A good sense of timing is often treated as though it were a "gift" or "intuition", rather than something that can be learned, something spontaneous rather than something planned. The opposite is nearer the truth. One captures the moment when everything one has learned is readily available, and when one is in touch with the events of the moment.

A few years ago my wife and I were having a very destructive fight. Our nine-year old daughter decided to intervene. She put her arms around her mother, and asked: "What does Daddy do that bugs you?" She was an attentive audience for the next few minutes while my

wife told her, ending in tears. She then put her arms around me: "What does Mummy do that bugs you?" and listened attentively to my response, which also ended in tears. She then went to the record player, and put on a favorite love song (" If Ever I Should Leave You") , and left us alone to make up.

The elements of my daughter's intervention had all been learned. They were simply available to her, and she combined them in a way that could make the moment better. Perhaps it's our training in linear cause-and-effect thinking that makes us unable to see the multiple potential of the moment. Whatever the reason, the solution is not to enter the situation blank, and hope that spontaneous action will move it forward. It is not enough for the change agent to have a plan or strategy. He needs as many plans as possible. It's not enough for him to have a framework for diagnosis; he needs many frameworks. It's not enough to involve his head in the system; he has to let his heart be involved too. If he has full access to his organized experience, to himself, and to the situation, he is free to be spontaneous --and capture the moment.