

**Four Rooms and Three Keys**  
***Creating Organizational Change in Uncertain Times***

Let's face it. There is a lot of fear and uncertainty out there right now. So what does that mean for those of us looking to implement strategic changes in our organizations over the coming 12-24 months? One of the major challenges of the past decade has been 'How do we generate a sense of urgency when business is good?' I'd like to suggest the challenge for the coming years may well be 'How do we reduce learning anxiety and inspire confidence to reduce fear, paralysis and resistance to change?'

Fear and uncertainty may not necessarily be a bad thing if an organization is looking to make a radical change. In an HBR article of March 2002, 'The Anxiety of Learning', Edgar Schein describes two types of anxiety experienced during a change process: learning anxiety and survival anxiety. Survival anxiety occurs when people recognize they will need to change in order to fit into the new order. Learning anxiety comes from the difficulty of mastering new skills or mindsets and the loss of routines that brought past success. Schein poses a challenge to those of us who plan and implement change interventions: that we figure out how to reduce learning anxiety while we increase survival anxiety through compelling, non-coercive means.

The Four Rooms of Change is a theory that deals with change, with what happens with people and organizations in transition and with how they can influence the change process by taking responsibility for their emotions and actions. The model was developed by the Swedish psychologist, Claes Janssen, in the late 60s and early 70s as part of his groundbreaking research on the dynamics of change. The four rooms - or psychological states of mind – are Contentment, Self-Censorship & Denial, Confusion & Conflict and Inspiration & Renewal.



Four Rooms of Change®

If we think of our experience of change in terms of a journey we have to start somewhere; and that is in the 'contentment room'. Everything feels fine, we are relaxed and in control and we have no desire to change anything. Then something happens and our external environment changes. This can happen very quickly or very slowly - either we fall through what Janssen refers to as the 'trap door' as the result of a significant event or we find ourselves gently descending over a period of time into the 'denial room'. An interesting contrast here might be between working in the traditional newspaper industry which has gradually lost market share to online media over a number of years and working in the financial services industry which experienced the collapse of Lehman Brothers virtually overnight.

Denial means that - while we may have general sense that something is different or not quite right - we are very successful at convincing ourselves that everything is okay. We may find ourselves struggling to stay positive or 'putting on a mask' to show others that we are relaxed and in control. Sooner or later we have to face reality and we enter the 'confusion room'. This is where emotions finally take over – fear, anger, sadness, self-doubt and feelings of inferiority are common. This is obviously not a good place to be and many of us make an unconscious choice to go back into denial rather than press on with our journey. But press on we must. By facing our fears and working through the confusion and conflict we can find new hope, new inspiration and a way forward. We have entered the 'renewal room'. Suddenly we have sense of 'getting it all together', we are energized and we experience the desire and find the creative resources to make things happen. Finally we are ready to complete our journey and step back into the contentment room.

While the global economy was booming we struggled with the 'business as usual' mentality within our organizations; and looking back we can now see how people had slowly slipped from the 'contentment room' to the 'denial room' – from the boardroom to the factory floor. 'Why should we change when we are meeting or exceeding all of our business objectives?' Anyone who dared suggest that the very survival of the organization might be at stake might have been laughed at or ignored. Today as we move from boom to bust – individuals, groups and organizations find themselves in a state of confusion and chaos. Many CEOs are either unwilling or unable to commit – at least publicly - to sales and profit targets due to the economic uncertainty. Survival anxiety has increased dramatically. People are afraid of what the future will bring.

So does that mean we are now ready to change?

Well – and perhaps counter-intuitively – the answer may be 'No'. In his wonderful book and an article published in Fast Company, 'Change or Die?', Alan Deutschman reminds us that while over 1.5 million people in the United States undergo major heart surgery every year, two years after surgery 90% of patients have not been able to change the behaviour that caused their health problems to begin with. The reason is not insufficient survival anxiety or fear of death but excessive learning anxiety and the paralysis and resistance to change that this brings.

Alan Deutschman describes programs which supported patients to create radical changes in their lifestyle and avoid the need for heart surgery. Those programs provided patients with three things; new hope, new skills and a new mindset. Creating change in uncertain times means unlocking the door to the 'renewal room' using these three keys. Firstly, we need to form a close relationship with people that inspires and sustains new hope. Secondly, we need to help those people to learn, practice, and master the new habits and skills that they will need. Thirdly we need to help them learn new ways of thinking about themselves and their situation.

The power of the Four Rooms of Change® as a model lies both in its simplicity and in its depth. It applies to us as individuals but can also apply to teams, groups and the organization as a whole. The model reminds us that the dynamics of change are normal, healthy and – most importantly – as inevitable as the four seasons of summer, autumn, winter and spring. Perhaps the most powerful learning for me has been the fact that individuals and groups within the same organization can be operating from different rooms at the same time. When used as part of an organizational assessment or 'discovery process' the model and its associated tools provide a powerful platform and a common language for organizational dialog which then ultimately leads to significant and sustainable organizational change.

Change interventions that reduce learning anxiety by providing new hope, developing new skills and inspiring a new mindset will create the changes and results that our organizations will need in the next economic cycle. And that's the bottom line.

## References

*The Anxiety of Learning, Diane L. Coutu, Harvard Business Review, March 2002*  
*Four Rooms of Change®, Claes Janssen*  
*Change or Die, Alan Deutschman, Collins 2007*

## For More Information

For more on the Four Rooms of Change® and its associated tools please go to [www.fourroomsofchange.com.au](http://www.fourroomsofchange.com.au) contact us at [info@clarionlearning.com.au](mailto:info@clarionlearning.com.au).

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