

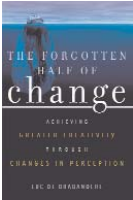
Perspectives

The Forgotten Half of Change



THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

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This article is adapted from the author's new book, The Forgotten Half of Change: Achieving Greater Creativity Through Changes in Perception (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2005).

In the country, I had a dog that used to take sly pleasure in jumping over the garden fence and escaping into the neighboring fields. So one day I decided to remove the ugly wire netting, which no longer served any useful purpose. Imagine my surprise the next day when I saw my dog jumping up at the exact point where that fence had been—and with the same sly pleasure.

But before you laugh at him, think a moment. Maybe he's laughing at us—incapable of getting out of the boxes that we make for ourselves, squatting inside fences that disappeared long ago, and shut inside imaginary walls.

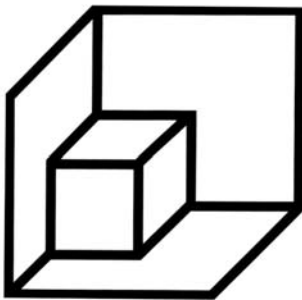
There is a clear lesson here for business leaders: Sometimes, in order to lead, you need to change perceptions, not reality. Indeed, your business is one thing, but the way you look at it is another—and too many people forget this sometimes crucial second half of the change process.

Consider the couple who always arrive late. They could use an appointment book or wake up earlier or schedule more time between meetings. But change is not just a matter of bet-

ter organization. If they limit their change to action only, they will arrive late again within weeks, back to their old bad habits. To make a permanent change, they need to change the way they look at punctuality.

In fact, they will need to change *twice*. And that is a task faced by many business leaders. Running a company is a task that straddles two distinct dimensions. There is, of course, the daily management role, which entails making decisions to improve processes and the like. This is where the CEO *acts* for the benefit of the company. But there is another dimension that is parallel to this one and just as essential. This is where the CEO imagines change, seeks out new ideas, invents the future. This is where the CEO *thinks* for the benefit of the company. In the end, successful companies evolve up a steady slope and a stepped staircase, both at the same time.

You can visualize this continuous and discontinuous evolution with the help of the geometric metaphor below. Slowly turn the drawing upside down. When the rotation is modest,



your perception of the drawing doesn't change. But turn it a little more, and what you see is totally different—even though the “reality” of the drawing hasn't changed at all.

Now, back to the slope and the staircase. The trick is to know when the staircase needs more of your attention, to anticipate the day when strategic vision is exhausted and contributes less and less to keeping things moving. This is the moment at which to turn from innovation to creativity. (To understand the key differences between the two, see the exhibit below.)

Navigating a Different World

Being creative isn't easy. It requires more than a quick course in “thinking,” because our minds insist on seeing the world as it was. Yet for most

CHANGE COMES IN TWO WAYS: THROUGH INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Innovation Changes Reality

Innovation requires *action*
It is a challenge for a team
The process is continuous
It takes a long time
It delivers something new to the system
Its impact is measurable
Project management is required
The fuel is practical ideas and useful suggestions
The role of a consultant is to cause action

Creativity Changes Perception

Creativity requires *thinking*
It is a challenge for an individual
The process is discontinuous
It takes an instant
It envisions a new system
Its impact cannot be measured
Brainstorming is required
The fuel is questions, surprises, and strange and incomplete ideas
The role of a consultant is to encourage reflection

SOURCE: Luc de Brabandere, *The Forgotten Half of Change: Achieving Greater Creativity Through Changes in Perception* (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2005).

of us, the world that existed when we were born, and that shaped us, has changed completely. The fences are down. Can you still trace the borderline between professional and private life? Where do cosmetics stop in the drug-store and start in the pharmacy?

The disappearance of barriers is just one of many changes. Another is what Michelangelo might have called *non finito*. Many of Michelangelo's statues are unfinished. The four naked *Slaves*, for example, give the impression that the figures are emerging from the marble. The heads and torsos have been drawn out, as if to allow the statues to breathe, while the rest of the body is trapped within the marble, waiting.

The idea of *non finito* is strangely modern. It's an attitude that consists of just being ready, since we no longer know how to make forecasts. It is in opposition to the sinister approach that says, "We don't move so long as we don't know where we're going." Instead, *non finito* would say, "Let's in any case do what has to be done," even if it can't be finished. *Non finito* is humility in the face of one sole certainty: we don't know what's going to happen. *Non finito* is the will to act while leaving the future open, the habit of writing in pencil rather than ink, of actively participating in a world that is becoming, without knowing what it's going to become. In the end, *non finito* is respect for others and the liberty we grant them to finish in their own way.

Leaders will need to ask many more people in their organizations to be *non finito*. Creativity was once defined as a revolution in the way we look at things. But this revolution should not be limited to future Nobel Prize winners; the insurrection has to appeal to everyone, because every individual's eye can contribute to the imagination of us all. You have to be the scientist of your own life and be astonished four times: at what is, what always has been, what once was, and what could be.

Creating a New Strategic Vision

But how can we ask people in our organizations to be *non finito* in a world that increasingly demands and extols flawless execution? How can we ask them not only to execute but also to think and, when necessary, to transform? What does this mean for the leader who must change minds as well as matters? It means coming to grips with the challenge of creating a new strategic vision. Here are some points to remember:

1. Developing a strategic vision is above all an intellectual process. It is located in the world of thought and not in the world of action. Its objective is to change the way we see things and not the things themselves.
2. All reflection is based on a system of values that we construct from what we believe is desirable. It is essential to express these val-

ues clearly. Sticking to them is a sine qua non for strategic vision.

3. Thought has its own laws. If we want to create a strategic vision, we have to defer to it. As ideas develop more like a stepped staircase than a steady slope, a new vision implies that there is a break with the old one. What is broken is a stereotype—at least one—that supported the previous vision.
4. A strategic vision has to be easy to understand and coherent. At its start, it must not contain any contradictions or ambiguities; if it does, it is doomed to confuse people and fail.
5. The first challenge the vision will have to face is that of credibility. Whoever develops the vision will immediately have to be able to show that it is feasible—in particular, through a clear demonstration of what the available resources are.
6. A strategic vision exists only if it can be shared among those it concerns. It exists only if they take ownership of it. It has to motivate. It gives everyone involved room to be creative and space for personal development.
7. Good communication is essential; a strategic vision has to appeal to the emotions. So why don't you put it in pictures and communicate with both sides of the brain?

8. A strategic vision has to be visible from the outside—to clients, suppliers, and the public, among other constituencies—and it has to provide information on the specific characteristics of the company, on the project itself, and on the difference it will make. It can be crystallized in a strong phrase, but the temptation to create a slogan must be resisted.
9. A strategic vision is limited in space and time. It is defined by limits that are set down in advance, and it “knows” it is not eternal and that—just like its predecessor—it is based on a certain number of hypotheses that will one day no longer be verifiable. In short, it knows that it, too, will end with a break.
10. A strategic vision contains qualitative elements that can’t be tracked with traditional metrics. There are no figures that allow us to evaluate how things are progressing. Nonquantifiable objectives should therefore be accompanied by criteria, if they are not to become wishful thinking. These criteria will allow permanent comparison of what *is* with what *was* supposed to be.
11. Growing uncertainty is a fact, so strategic vision is necessarily incomplete. Because the unknown cannot be taken into account, it will be fitted out with correction mechanisms. While we can “preview” what is certain, we can “prepare” for the uncertain.

The points set out here say nothing about the quality of the vision being created. There comes a time for validation. Is it ethically acceptable, practically feasible, economically tenable? Moreover, quite simply, is this the right moment? A positive response leads to a decision to “freeze” the vision, and that decision leads to action.

To make a long story short, a strategic vision is a representation—an ambitious image of a future state that is radically preferable to the current state. It becomes a reference and thereby provides a set of concepts that allow all employees to approach their work thoughtfully and effectively.

If you keep this definition in mind, the forgotten half of change will be forgotten no more.

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