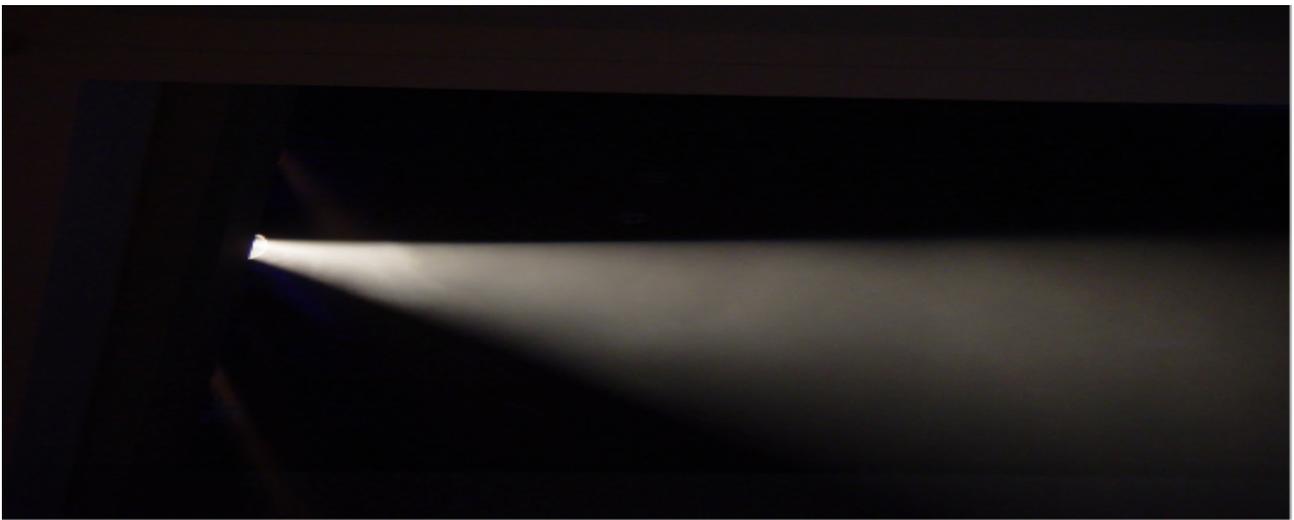


Why people can't see the future!

Dr Norman Chorn



IT'S SO FRUSTRATING FOR CHANGE LEADERS!

"Why can't people see the future? It's so obvious that we need to change - yet the people can't see that there is a better way!"

This is a cry I often hear from leaders and managers who are trying to implement change or improve things in their organisation. They complain that people don't "get it" and seem rooted in what they know or their previous experience.

In this three-part series I'll discuss three of the most common challenges I hear from leaders who seek to implement change:

- People find it difficult to "see" the future
- The "burning platform" - so commonly used in change programs - seems to run out of steam very early in the change process
- It's hard to engage the majority of people in the change process

This article deals with the first challenge of why people can't see the future. Our work in neuroscience suggests some reasons for this, and what we might be able to do about it.

WHY WE CAN'T SEE THE FUTURE

There are three factors that contribute to people's inability to see the future - or at least see it as clearly as the change leader.

Our brain is “lazy”: My partner, a psychologist, dislikes this term. Nevertheless, it refers to the brain's tendency to conserve energy and seek the quickest path from point A to B. Applying the pre-frontal cortex to rational analysis and problem solving takes effort and uses the brain's limited resources. Accordingly, these scarce resources are only applied in situations where the brain is specifically prompted by a range of cues to slow down and focus on an analysis of the facts.

Research shows that much of our thinking is “fast thinking”, a deliberate ploy to conserve the brain's scarce resources. In this mode, we make decisions based on association and compatibility with pre-established beliefs. Importantly, this thinking - and the decisions that are made in this mode - does not tolerate much uncertainty.

The brain “fills in” any missing information from a given picture or situation in order to make sense of it quickly. This allows us to recognise things quickly and act accordingly. Indeed, much of our decision-making is based on this “fast thinking”, and we are not the rational decision-makers we believe we are!

The brain's tendency to seek patterns and associate what we see with what we already know - associative memory - makes it very difficult for people to see and understand ideas they have no previous association with. They simply cannot recognise the new pattern in their “fast thinking” mode.

Difference signals danger: The brain has an overarching organising principle to minimise danger and maximise reward. Indeed, it scans the environment every few seconds to achieve this. The brain perceives the threat of danger as five times the promise of reward. From this, we can infer that the brain spends much of its time making sure we are safe from danger or the threat of danger.

Most modern organisations present a greater probability of social pain than physical pain. Social pain is induced by a real or perceived sense of social exclusion, loss of autonomy, and a threat to social relationships. These are typical social threats that are perceived when a picture of a different future is presented or envisaged.

Importantly, the brain registers social pain in a similar way to physical pain, and the brain's typical response to impending threat or danger is the well-known “fight or flight” phenomenon. In many cases, people are not even aware that they have entered a mild form of this “fight or flight” state. Research shows that this state reduces people's ability to think rationally and logically. Productivity, innovation and problem-solving behaviour is affected, and engagement falls. As experience shows, disengaged people become quite transactional in their behaviour and display little discretionary effort in their work.

A different future presents a possible threat to people and this produces a diminished ability to see the logical benefits of a change. This potential change - the future - simply produces an emotional defensiveness and resistance to the change.

We have no memory of the future: At first, this sounds ludicrous - how can we remember something that has not yet happened? However, our memory has important implications for the way we might understand the future, particularly a future we have not yet experienced.

Our long-term memory is the storage for information from previous experiences and learning. *Semantic memory* is an important part of this memory and stores general knowledge about the world we live in. It is formed by our educational, cultural and social environment. It is concerned with our general “knowing” about the world.

Episodic memory, on the other hand, is formed by specific experiences and events in our lives. It includes the information we have gathered by actually doing things or experiencing different phenomena. For example, your episodic memory would record your experiences of riding a bicycle, whereas your semantic memory would “know” that bicycles are generally ridden in summer wearing helmets, and that there are a range of competitive events for elite cyclists, such as the Tour de France.

Semantic memory stores and retrieves information in networks and classification systems that have been previously established within your brain. Your educational and cultural background will assist in establishing these pathways and structures.

If your semantic memory lacks the necessary networks, pathways and structures, you will be unable to process the information to which you are exposed. In other words, you will not be able to “see” the picture of the future that is presented. Your memory has no access to the information needed to make sense of it.

New pathways and classification systems can be created by way of new insights - i.e. where you recombine existing information in different ways to come to new ways of “knowing”. Insight is a somewhat different process for the brain and I discuss this later.

HOW CAN WE HELP PEOPLE TO SEE THE FUTURE?

Being able to see and conceive of a different future is an important piece of a successful change initiative. We have seen the natural obstacles that exist in this regard, and the insights from neuroscience provide some indication of how we can address this challenge.

I have outlined four initiatives that can assist people to see the future and facilitate more productive engagement in the change process:

1. Promote the use of “slow thinking”
2. Use socially based learning
3. Build semantic memory
4. Balance danger with appropriate reward

Promote the use of “slow thinking” at appropriate times

Since “fast thinking” is effectively the brain’s default mode of operation, we need to induce “slow thinking” to promote a rational and logical set of responses to any change messaging. In general, the brain is alerted whenever it encounters something that is unfamiliar and it subsequently produces a state of “unease”.

However, this sense of cognitive “unease” also signals potential hard work for the brain and the threat of possible danger. So, this “unease” has to be carefully constructed to avoid a lazy “fast” rejection or a “fight or flight” reaction.

Here are some guidelines to promote slow thinking:

- i. Set up cross-functional teams to address specific challenges facing the organisation. Encourage (in a facilitated process) them to share their different perspectives and to understand the different points of view being presented. Collective problem solving is an effective and creative way of addressing challenges due to the brain’s strong preference for social connection and collaboration
- ii. Take great care to demonstrate that this team activity is an important aspect of the change process - and that the team’s input will be a vital part of the ultimate solution. (Be honest in this respect). The sense that “this is different” alerts the brain to the need for “slow thinking”, while also boosting the sense of self-esteem experienced by team members whose opinion has been sought
- iii. Create a low-distraction environment for these problem solving activities. “Slow thinking” is very resource-intensive and easily prone to distractions. Create a conducive environment away from the day-to-day activities of work. In addition, the brain is a serial processor - and any multitasking reduces the quality of the thinking and problem solving
- iv. Ensure the team understands the tendency for the brain to display natural biases in decision making and problem solving. This can be done at the outset and during the facilitation process. The brain has natural biases towards:
 - *stability*: retaining the status quo
 - *action*: displaying overconfidence
 - *pattern recognition*: over-weighting of evidence consistent with existing beliefs
 - *social harmony*: preferring harmony over conflict
 - *self interest*: seeking outcomes that suit self interests
- v. Space out the problem-solving meetings to allow adequate rest and brain downtime. “Slow thinking” activities significantly drain the scarce resources of the brain. The space between sessions allow people to reflect and process information

<p>Use socially based, adult learning to promote new insights</p> <p>(We recommend Scenario Planning)</p>	<p>As mentioned above, social learning addresses the brain’s preference for social connection and is consistent with adult-learning principles.</p> <p>We recommend processes such as scenario planning in which the organisation explores a range of alternative futures that it faces. This produces a number of significant benefits for seeing the future:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is broad participation in a conversation about the organisation and its future. This promotes both a better understanding of the organisation as well as enhanced self-esteem amongst the participants • The exploration of alternative futures reduces the sense of uncertainty and fear of the unknown. People’s sense of autonomy is also heightened by having more control over their future • New insights are generated as people understand the organisation from a systems perspective. These new insights generate new ways of “knowing” and are responsible for creating new neural pathways
<p>Purposefully build semantic memory</p> <p>(We recommend well-designed leadership development initiatives)</p>	<p>Our semantic memory is built by creating new pathways, networks and classification systems. An enhanced semantic memory will increase our range of “knowing” and allow us to recognise more possibilities when considering the future. It will also allow us to recognise the concept of “alternative futures” - an important concept in scenario planning.</p> <p>In an organisational context, semantic memory can be developed in two ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well designed, experiential leadership development programs will provide the opportunity for people to learn and apply new frameworks, models and ways of thinking to their own work situation. The ability to apply these tools to their own situation is a key factor in promoting “generative learning” - the process whereby people generate new understanding of their own worlds <p>Experiential learning allows us to move from simply being aware of a concept to generating a sense of “ownership” of the concept. This creation of semantic memory enhances our ability to retrieve new knowledge and apply it in the way we behave</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study tours are particularly useful for constructing alternative mental models of a different future. By visiting and experiencing an organisation that has made a transition to a new and different future, people can visualise how this has been done. Our visual memories are highly developed and enable us to store vast quantities of related information as an “archetype”. The new pathways and classification systems created in this way will enhance the semantic memory, enabling people to see and understand a different future.

Balance the sense of danger with appropriate reward

As mentioned earlier, the brain's overarching organising principle is to minimise danger and maximise reward. The brain reacts to potential danger by activating its avoidance circuitry. This can create the familiar "fight or flight" situation in which logical thinking is impaired and people become disengaged. The reward and self-regulation circuitry, on the other hand, is activated by the possibility of reward. This promotes focus, optimism and heightened levels of creativity.

However, these responses need to be carefully balanced to achieve optimum performance. Too heavy an emphasis on reward promotes an excess of dopamine secretion - resulting in excessive risk taking and overconfidence. Too great a reliance on threat or impending danger results in high levels of cortisol secretion - and the resultant defensiveness and "fight or flight".

Balancing the two will achieve a state of alertness, coupled with managed risk taking and innovative behaviour. In practice, this can be achieved by:

- Promoting the use of "towards" imagery as opposed to "away" imagery in the change messaging. A "towards" message would promote movement towards some future state that promises rewards for the organisation and its people. An "away" message emphasises the need to change because of external threats such as new competition or customer dissatisfaction
- Construct a reasonable timeline for the change process so that there is visible movement and incentive to shift the way we do things. Nothing is worse than a change process that stalls and loses momentum - people revert to previous behaviour and become cynical about the process
- Introduce "gamification" to the performance management process. Effective gaming design activates both the reward and avoidance circuitry in a carefully balanced way by introducing a system of incentives, feedback and rewards with reasonably predictable outcomes. Some of the suggestions here include:
 - balancing teamwork and competition
 - constructing a transparent compensation system
 - making results highly public
 - visibly rewarding exemplar performance in symbolic ways

IMPROVING OUR CHANGE LEADERSHIP

I have addressed some of the issues related to the difficulties of seeing the future, and presented some guideline on how we might address these.

Further articles will focus on the use of the “burning platform” in change programs and why this approach runs out of steam early in the change process. We will also address the challenge of engagement - and why this is so difficult during a change process.

The challenge of change is significant for those who have stewardship over an organisation in these times. There is much yet to be explored and learned. Many leaders will still prefer the “old, tried and tested” ways of command and control.

But neuroscience presents us with an additional lens through which to view change. It doesn't claim to be the panacea, but it does provide us some “**hard**” scientific evidence to support approaches that have been traditionally considered as “**soft**”.



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- ›strategy in conditions of uncertainty
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