

What we talk about when we talk about choice, challenge – and leadership

Change consultant and writer **Deborah Rowland** describes a conversation about leadership she had with Ruth Cairnie, chair of Babcock International Group. They talk about the slow progress in gender equality, and what it takes for leaders to succeed. Leaders, Deborah writes, must tap their own unique talent. Deborah, who was adopted at six weeks old, describes her personal history as giving her a detached curiosity that enabled her to help systems see themselves and transform. Self-knowledge helps leaders move from judgment to curiosity, and enables them to lead change well.

The nature of choice

*“At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose your self?” (From *Towards New Shores*, by Dag Hammarskjöld)*

At one level, choice is about what we choose to *do* in life. However, if this is the only focus, we miss out on the richness that comes with choosing how we connect to our inner life – how we wish to *be*.

I love this line by Hammarskjöld, in the jewel of his book that journals his inner states of mind throughout his career as a dedicated public servant, including his term as Secretary General of the UN. In life, through our social conditioning and cultural contexts, we can get pulled into living from a thousand possibilities of self – none of which are congruent with our deepest inner essence, the unique talent that has been entrusted to us.

In a recent [film](#), Ruth Cairnie and I explored our essences – how come Ruth metamorphosed from a theoretical physicist to a stand-out leader in Shell, where she concluded as head of strategy, and now finds herself (alongside several other non-executive director positions) as chair of Babcock, one of the UK’s biggest defence manufacturers? As her early career progressed, Ruth found herself increasingly choosing to follow an inner calling to be a leader and influencer for good. My experience of Ruth’s true self is one of *eternal curiosity*. She herself vividly recalls the moment when she put aside the primary business emphasis on analytical left-brain leadership and put to the top of her personal development a focus on how she could best enable organisations and people to flourish.

How come I have spent three decades in the field of change and its leadership? Well, in my recent [book](#) I open “My life began in change, the ultimate change, when I was handed over at 6 weeks old and adopted into the welcome and hugely loving embrace of the Rowland family”. Through time I have come to learn that when I truly choose *my* self, my unique essential nature of *detached curiosity* that my adoption story bequeathed me, I can be at my best in my chosen field of helping systems see themselves and hence transform.

Question: do you notice what self you choose, from moment to moment? And how close is it to your self?

“Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response” (Victor Frankl)

When we can stand in our true self, we are free to choose our inner state of mind – and hence the quality of our response – to no matter what experience comes our way. For two decades now Ruth has been one of the many leaders who have collaborated in my research into what it takes to lead big complex change well. In the latest round of [research](#), we found that a leader’s capacity to both tune into – *and then choose to regulate* – their inner response to experience (for example, moving from judgment to curiosity) is the cornerstone of their capacity to be able to tune into and regulate the mind state and behaviour of the system around them. At Still [Moving](#), we call this, “*being before doing*”, leading change well starts on the inside.

We found that successful change leaders have learned to cultivate four key inner [capacities](#), which together explain over half the reason why big change succeeds or fails: staying present – noticing one’s inner state (thoughts, feelings, impulses etc.) in the moment and being completely OK with whatever is there; curious and intentional responding – hitting the pause button and not reacting impulsively to what comes your way but instead approaching all of experience with purpose and an open mind; tuning into the system – perceiving beyond the personal and interpersonal dimensions of experience to see deeper bigger collective forces at play; acknowledging the whole – the capacity to give all of experience, and in particular, difficulty and disturbance, a purpose and a place.

Question: as a change leader, do you consciously tune into and choose your inner state before you try to change what is happening outside of you?

Once we choose to stand in our true self and regulate the quality of our presence, we can lead big change – the disturbance of repeating patterns – with far greater skill and ease.

The quality of challenge

Today’s world reverberates with challenge – be that the externally imposed disruption of the global pandemic, or our own courage to voice against all forms of injustice, intolerance, leadership missteps, institutional failings, and the continued desecration of our planet. Social media both augments and inflames what we challenge and how we do so.

In our conversation, Ruth and I explored what we have challenged through our careers, and the skills we have learned along the way to do that well. We have both, for sure, taken risks to challenge and stretch ourselves and our surrounding systems. From this, two themes emerged: choosing *how* to challenge, and *when* to do so.

I will never forget my early training as an HR executive at PepsiCo when we were drilled by the inspiring CPO, Michael [Feiner](#), in his “art of successful pushback”. More often than not, HR had to help line leaders make difficult decisions, which required us to put aside any wish to be popular and, in its place, hold up the mirror to executive behaviour and its consequences. The first step in this art was to “recite the loyalty oath” – this was not about fawning to the line leader but voicing our genuine commitment to both the leader’s and the organisation’s success, indeed it was *because of* our commitment to serving that jointly held purpose that we owed it to the leader and the system to challenge.

Almost thirty years later, I now use my well-researched and personally evidenced framework for what we call “*making disturbance your friend*”. Challenge is essential to change. But to do that well, not only do you need to practice skilful edge and tension – the fierce naming of [reality](#), you must also deploy three other interconnected skills: attractor leadership – clearly stating the jointly held purpose of what you and others are striving for; container leadership – making it psychologically [safe](#) for people to both voice and receive challenge; and finally, transforming space – being able to challenge what is happening *in the here-and-now moment*.

So, when do you choose to challenge? Ruth and I explored how the most effective time to challenge assumptions and behaviour is in the present moment – which in the end, is the only moment in which you *can* effect change. How many times though have you sat in a meeting when your inner thoughts are about how things really need to be different right now, you have a feeling of unease, but you choose not to say anything and instead share your thoughts privately with someone else after, or not say anything at all?

Clearly you need to choose the right moment to challenge, and make sure that there is both space and permission to do so – great change leaders indeed actively *invite* people to pay attention to both *what* is being said, and also *how* it is being said, which encourages a climate of being able to notice and name repeating patterns of behaviour. Ruth and I would encourage you to do so too!

Question: how much attention do you pay to both *how* you challenge and *when* you choose to do so?

Choosing to challenge – change leadership in action

The most memorable shared experience that Ruth and I have of choosing to challenge is a significant change process she led in a global business unit where I was acting as her change coach. The experience put both of us – and others – seriously outside of our comfort zones but change requires that you find your edge and get comfortable with not being comfortable.

Great change leadership is about changing the *how*, the process through which you implement change. The *what* (i.e., is this about a restructure, change in culture, new capabilities?) is generally clear. However, if you do not consciously and intentionally choose a change approach that is *system changing*, you might find yourself using old routines to get to new places – which generally fails. A good test of this is what I call the “eek factor” – how challenging does the change process feel? If not very high, then you could be launching lots of busy action that repeats past patterns.

The first step we chose to take therefore was to radically challenge the prevailing change approach. This business unit was made up of small teams in multiple countries around the world and it was therefore critical that these teams could both own the global direction and make it relevant for their local context. Change had traditionally been done, though, in quite a rational, controlled and centrally directed way, with clear communications about the future vision and strategy being issued from the top team and the strategy and comms department and being “rolled out” – usually in sets of elegantly worded power point slides. Given the fast pace and creativity required in this change – to respond to a more uncertain external marketplace – Ruth bravely invited her team to consider a more now-and-next, emergent, empowered and messy change [approach](#).

This manifested itself in many ways but, just as an example, power point slides to convey strategy and change messages were completely ditched, and, in their place, pictures were used in open-ended employee dialogues across the globe as a stimulus to engage the local teams in both understanding and connecting to the central messages and adopting the new ways of working required. This was a radical departure from the norm, yet it led to stunning take up and enthusiasm for the necessary change in the local businesses. What felt very loose paradoxically created global unity and change readiness.

The second key factor in the *how* of change is the leadership style adopted. Adopting a more emergent approach to change requires giving up a desire to control and predict [outcomes](#) and next steps. Ruth’s leadership team (and dare I say it, she and I slightly too!) were nervous about how the new-style dialogues and use of pictures was going to work – highly unusual in a cerebrally managed culture. It felt somewhat child-like and desperately out of control. Where was the speech? What if people challenged the change direction? Such a different style required Ruth’s team to let go of their mental models of what leadership looks like.

Yet they stepped into the challenge, and one of my abiding memories is of the most “desire-to-control-process-and-outcomes” leader bravely volunteering to moderate an [Open Space](#) session at a leadership conference, a two-hour session with no pre-determined agenda! He chose to challenge himself, lead at his very edge, and it led to one of the most commitment-building, solution-finding interventions in the entire change process.

Question: how much attention do you give to the choice of change approach and leadership style when embarking on big change, and does it challenge the norm?

What about women?

There are countless [research](#) studies now about the business case for diversity. So how come, even today, the [picture](#) of senior female leadership still lags? What choices and underlying assumptions create this picture? What remains to be challenged?

In the film we explore how we believe that lack of progress lies at the feet of a failure of leadership. This is where the challenge still resides. There has to be a choice by top leaders that they believe that greater diversity of all kinds is critical, and secondly, that they will own and advocate whatever the agenda needs to be to address the situation.

This includes looking honestly at their own behaviour and encouraging others to do so. It requires a heightened quality of [attention](#), humility and a perpetual learning attention – embracing all of the inner capacities I write of earlier in this article. Out of the four inner capacities, tuning into the system was the most correlated with change success – can top leaders improve their ‘scanning power’ of the situation?

Once these inner capacities are mastered, then great change leadership behaviour will follow: attractor leadership – what is the compelling narrative for diversity and how to relate that in engaging ways; edge and tension – can challenge be encouraged and the naming of unconscious bias and unacceptable behaviour called out; container – how can leaders create the secure and open climate needed to voice challenge and take risk; and transforming space – taking the courage to intervene and create disturbance *in the moment* and not after.

On a final note, while choosing to challenge has undoubtedly been a feature of how I lead my life and work, I am also beginning to learn about *daring to allow*. While we do not necessarily agree *with* all that comes our way, at some level we need to agree *to* it all. Great change – and spiritual – leaders hold a respectful place for everything. Systems can only move when they feel whole and that everything is seen. My final hope is for a world where we can challenge without othering, debate without polarizing, and choose without excluding. Can we get alongside all?



Notes:

- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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