

# Using Positioning Theory to Make Change Happen

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, building on Boxer and John (2000) suggests that the dynamic interplay between people can make change happen or obstruct it from happening. Drawing on positioning theory, an explanation will be put forth, that first requires the reader to discard reliance on static roles to define organisations. By acknowledging that people constantly adopt and defend their positions, and accept or confront the positions of others, a clearer understanding can be derived. It is through this jousting that people accept who they are and those they are dealing with; the strong achieve positions of power and parity is negotiated. Continuous improvement requires a give-and-take win-win approach and this sort of jousting can enable or obstruct quality initiatives. It is also put forth that positioning theory should be particularly useful in dealing with continuous improvement. Positioning theory provides a way to understand discourse and may offer hints as how best to lower barriers, thus improve the likelihood of successful implementation of continuous improvement.

**Keywords:** Continuous Improvement, Change Management, Quality, Service Quality, Positioning Theory, Leadership.

## 1.0 Introduction

It is apparent from over 20 years implementing a wide variety of new ways into organisations, that sometimes change happens as planned and at others forces obstruct initiatives. Dilenschneider (1992) suggests that effective communication by leaders is the ultimate exercise of power. He relates how Deming, as the mentor for Ford's continuous improvement initiatives, demonstrated that effective leadership and communication results in learning and invoking a philosophy of continuous improvement. However, great plans are often lost in implementation.

Regardless of their intent, people can be barriers to implementation of a new way. (Boxer, 1993) Through their actions, they will enable or obstruct change as individuals, but more powerfully as a community.

Ling (1998) – drawing on Gadamer (1975) and Schwab (1969) – explains that there is a balance between parity and power when people engage in change. He suggests that 'parity is seen to be linked to deliberative positioning, either of self or other and power is seen to be linked to forced positioning of self or other.'

Rather than being static, as implied by *role*, Harré and van Langenhove (1991) put forth that *position* is a way to explain relationships to consider the dynamics of interplay. It is this dynamic factor of relationships that is suggested to be the qualitative parameter on the change-enable / change-obstruction continuum.

Coupling positioning theory with observations of continuous improvement, it becomes clear that the discourse of people may create or remove barriers. This paper synthesises current PhD research, that draws specifically on Ling (1998) regarding the use of positioning theory to understand how change can be effectively led in academic institutions. The application of positioning theory to business situations is new. Whilst it has been previously used in academic and social research, Ling's work in curriculum coordination demonstrates that it can be successfully applied to understand organisational change issues.

The core question driving this paper is *why do some companies deal with changes well and others do not?*

## 2.0 Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to identify and highlight important work concerning positioning theory and its relation to change. Hollway (1984) first used the term position in social sciences. After 40 years work in psychology and sociology, Harré holds chairs in Oxford and Georgetown Universities. In about

1990, he coined positioning theory and in 1998, with van Langenhove, edited *Positioning Theory: moral contexts of intentional action*, consolidating the work of a number of academics from around the world.

Davies and Harré (1990) demonstrate that there is a productive interrelationship between position and illocutionary force. They show that positioning explains how discursive practices enable speakers and hearers to constitute themselves in certain ways and how speakers and hearers negotiate new positions. From this, Ling (1998) suggests that people negotiate positions for themselves and others, in which they establish a balance of parity and power. Those who achieve power are able to influence outcomes and define the relationships of others and what happens in a community.

Ling (1998), drawing on Schwab (1969) and Gadamer (1975) uses positioning theory to draw an understanding, from several cases about how people use various orders of positioning to achieve their desired balance of parity and power. Using positioning theory to explain the cause of their feelings, he identifies and relates to the elation or frustration experienced by change agents. It becomes apparent that successful change agents acquire a skill in negotiation of parity and power through speech acts.

Smuts (1934) points out that true progress is enabled by the power of freedom of individuals to think and participate. Reflecting on his times, he relates the threat to progress caused by intolerance and suppression.

To understand the core issue of continuous improvement, Walton (1989) reflects on Deming's explanation that putting out fires has nothing to do with improving the situation that led to fires starting in the first place. Solving quality problems – true continuous improvement – requires people to freely focus their inquisitiveness on understanding problems and craft improvements that fix what was wrong. Leaders need to inspire people to make this focussed effort and take action to accomplish improvements. (Boxer, 1992)

Boxer (1993) and Balkema and Molleman (1999) identify congruent categories of barriers to the successful implementation of total quality management (TQM) and self-organised teams. Leadership is a common theme. Boxer and John (2000) initially related this idea with positioning theory in university services.

Slim (1957) speaks about the importance of developing leaders for business and Karpin's (1995) findings and Deveson's (1997) observations suggest that Slim was not taken seriously. Goleman (1996) introduces the concept of emotional intelligence and demonstrates that it is a driving force for good leadership.

## **2.1 Literature Syntheses**

Continuous improvement does not happen on its own (Boxer, 1992) and, if it is to truly solve problems, it must focus on eliminating root causes as opposed to repeatedly fixing symptoms. (Walton, 1989) Seeing that there is a problem in the first place requires people to accept that there is a problem and to be open to change. Davies and Harré (1990) demonstrate how people can impose their will to protect the status quo and obstruct introduction of new ways or permit and enable change.

Positioning theory can be used to explain how people engage in discourse to establish themselves in a balance of parity and power. (Harré and Langenhove, 1999) Ling (1998) supports this with detailed discourse analysis.

Power here concerns that force used to enable or obstruct change to a required new way. People will forge paths that are congruent with their personal desires and Smuts (1934) reminds that they will excel given the chance to exercise their freedom.

## **3.0 People Make Continuous Improvement Happen**

Ultimately, it is ordinary people who will make continuous improvement happen. If people are not inclined towards change, then they will create barriers to change.

### **3.1 Barriers to Continuous Improvement**

Drawing on Eisen and Mulraney (1992) and experience with a variety of clients, Boxer (1993) has identified three key barriers to the implementation of quality activities; intellectual laziness, ignorance and poor leadership. Three congruent barriers to the formation of self-organised teams have been identified by Balkema and Molleman (1999); role of leader (equates to poor leadership), attitudes of workers (equates to intellectual laziness), and skills and learning abilities (equates to ignorance.) They identified a fourth and

most significant barrier - the need for self-organised work teams. In this current paper, it is assumed that there is an unquestionable need for continuous improvement.

1. Intellectual laziness. While consulting, I occasionally have been confronted by people, sitting with their arms crossed comment about continuous improvement, 'but this is just common sense.' Their body language indicates a closed mind. Wilson (1991) offers this wonderful simile, 'Intellectual laziness and common sense are the same thing, common sense is just the trade name of the firm.' Balkema and Molleman (1999) provide an expansion to this idea, in that those involved in continuous improvement need to have social needs relating to growth, accomplishment, learning and development. Saroros and Butchatsky (1996) describe the need to create in people an enthusiasm for using their minds.
2. Ignorance. People often do not want to know. The respected quality guru Philip Crosby (1989) has said, 'the problem with quality is not what people do not know about quality; the problem with quality is what people think they know about quality.' Comments made at the 2000 annual general meeting of the HR Nicholls society (a right wing think tank) reflected this problem, 'some people do not understand, or do not want to understand.' This leads one to wonder whether or not those with extreme views, or stubborn dispositions impose a myopic condition on themselves. Goleman (1996) identifies 'ability to handle conflict' and 'helping others to learn' as components of emotional intelligence, which suggests that it is emotional intelligence that may be deficient here. Balkema and Molleman (1999) reduce this further to skills and abilities of people involved.
3. Poor Leadership. Karpin (1995) identified the need to develop globally competent strong leadership throughout society. Yet, almost 40 years earlier, Slim (1957) warned Australian business leaders that the needs of business was '... outstripping the supply of (people) trained in management ...' and urged them to develop leadership abilities even at the most junior positions. If there are people who value von Humboldt's 1803 concept of 'individual freedom and solitude' (de Winter-Hebron, 1993) they will likely be hard to lead and if promoted to positions of authority, it is unlikely that they will have developed leadership skills. There is likely a dearth of leadership in many organisations (Karpin, 1995, Slim, 1957, Goleman, 1996) and, following from Crosby's comments about the problem with quality, perhaps *the problem with leadership is what people think they know about leadership*. Following from the findings of Balkema and Molleman (1999) and Saroros and Butchatsky (1996), leaders should identify opportunities for continuous improvement, enable it to occur, and coach people through the process.

Initial research into this area suggests that these barriers could likely be caused by a lack of effective discourse and that through appropriate discourse they could be eliminated.

### 3.2 Positioning Theory Basics

A relatively recent approach to understanding discursive practices is positioning theory (Harré, van Langenhove, 1999), which endeavours to understand people's positions rather than the roles they assume. By doing so, the dynamics of unfolding storylines and metaphors used to describe situations can unveil what is happening in a given group. A person can assume a position or a position can be imposed on that person. Likewise, a person can challenge the position assumed by another, or challenge the position imposed upon themselves. While discourse produces position, it is the resulting position (from the aggregate of jousting) that influences outcomes of discourse. For example, a person seen as an authority (who has positioned themselves, or been positioned by others) can enable or obstruct change.

Building on Harré, van Langenhove, Ling (1998) uses positioning to provide insight into parity and power. A simple synthesis of these ideas is presented as follows:

- Parity results from deliberate positioning of self and others
  - Deliberate self positioning is an expression of self identity
  - Deliberate positioning of others results from talking about other people and can or cannot be accepted by the person being spoken about
- Power results from forced positioning of self and others.
  - Forced self positioning occurs as a reaction to positioning by another, for example accepting a job description at work
  - Forced positioning of others tend to result from complex situations, where one person forces another person to position another, such as a criminal trial.

Intellectual laziness might seem like a passive form of resistance, but it creates a confrontation for the initiator of the change. They are in effect being positioned as someone of less authority and capability. Unless the initiator of change deals with that position and demonstrates that they are indeed in a position with more authority and capability to affect a change, the *new way* will be doomed. The person with the new idea needs ‘... to position (themselves) as a liberating agent (focussing) on the differing needs of individual(s) ...’ (Ling, 1998)

When the findings of Balkema and Molleman (1999) are considered, it becomes apparent that intellectual laziness needs to be confronted. Leaders should be constantly looking for ways to stimulate the enthusiasm for intellectual challenges amongst those who are involved in continuous improvement.

2. Ignorance. Whilst laziness is something that a person can influence, their ignorance may or may not be a result of situations beyond their control. For example, some people may not have had opportunities to experience what others have, or perhaps they are intellectually incapable of a necessary level of comprehension and enlightenment.

Crosby (1979) explains that, for a company to benefit from quality requires progression through the Quality Maturity Grid from uncertainty through awakening, enlightenment and wisdom, to certainty. He devotes a chapter to Management Style, in which he exhorts managers to contrive a personal style and flair. That could be viewed crudely as deliberate positioning. Ling (1998) suggests that jousting, resulting in forced positioning of others enables people to adopt new ways, but he warns that, this forcefulness results in the instigator being '... positioned by others as a "barbarian at the gate."'

In urgent situations, such as exiting people from a burning building, forcefulness might be required. It may indeed be an urgent situation, when change agents find themselves '... in the "fi conservative administrators opposing (essential) changes ... and those who support them.' Ling, (1998) In such cases, deliberate positioning of others may be necessary.

Dealing with ignorance, as discussed here seems to be best done by deliberative re-positioning, but with great stealth. Ling (1998) relates to cautious tactics used by forward scouts in battle. Balkema and Molleman (1999) provide evidence that skill deficiencies in people need to be identified and education provided to enable self-organising teams and situations, such as continuous improvement.

3. Poor Leadership. Laziness and ignorance may well be hallmarks of lifestyle in a declining society. (Gibbon, Womersley, 1996) Furthermore, leaders might be both victims and influences on that state. (Pultarch, Warner, 1954) From their study involving Australia's top CEOs, Sarros and Butchatsky (1996) have summarised company weaknesses (p124) and leadership skills and attributes (p266) needed to deal with those weaknesses. Intelligence/training of employees and response to new ideas are two of the weaknesses identified, which seem to be congruent with laziness and ignorance. Sarros and Butchatsky conclude that leaders will counter this laziness and ignorance through setting directions, devising enabling plans, mentoring, challenging, and seeing through to completion. Dealing with the various conflicts that arise when *new ways* are being introduced requires this sort of strong leadership. Slim (1957) makes it is apparent that leadership is not only required from top managers, but those throughout the organisation.

Here is a rhetorical question: how often does a system install into a position of leadership and authority someone whose capabilities do not warrant the conferment? It is likely prudent not to publicise such a contentious statement, but there are certainly plenty of examples that come to mind. Peter (1969) explained that there are cases where people have been promoted beyond their ability to perform.

In discussing positioning, discourse becomes a central factor. Dilenschneider (1992) explains how important it is for a leader to communicate as well as listen. From this, discourse might well be the mechanism for enacting leadership; Harré and von Langenhove (1999) establish that discourse is the means of positioning and positioning leads to power. At all levels in an organisation, there is a continuous exchange and negotiation of positions. People joust with each other to determine informal hierarchy and comparative influence. Those who come out on top are those who get things done their way. Whereas this is a simplistic and common way of looking at discourse, perhaps it is an accurate reflection of what goes on.

It is put forth here that strong leaders engage in good deliberation regarding those issues at hand and position themselves and others as required to accomplish goals.

Balkema and Molleman (1999) point out the need for leaders to behave as facilitators. Ling (1998) provides evidence that those who dealt with change in the most cooperative ways tended to display facilitating and coaching behaviours. However, he also shows how an astute leader can harness situations to create a measure of discomfort and stimulate change. Perhaps there is a need for both types of leaders. Agitators to initiate the change and facilitators to coach through the process of change. Furthermore, once the process or continuous improvement methodology has become habit, perhaps there is no ongoing need for facilitators.

### 3.4 Achieving Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is about *doing it*. (Boxer, 1992) *Doing it* requires a sense of urgency and an intuition that the instigator of change needs to lead the change; dealing with lazy, ignorant and ineffective obstructors. Instigators of change need to be enablers; they have to enable people to do *new ways*.

*Doing it* will result in plenty of jousting; people will position themselves and others, they will be positioned by others, and they and others will likely engage in second order positioning. Eventually things will settle down to a state where positions have been accepted; but positioning is dynamic and evolves.

The effective building of continuous improvement into organisations will be led. The leader will ensure they have positioned themselves and others to best accomplish this construction. The following cases are put forth to demonstrate how continuous improvement may be achieved.

1. Dealing With Forced Positioning. Dealing with the laziness and ignorance opposing *new ways* can be accomplished by being a catalyst, but the hurdle of the leader's vanity is paramount. Bob is a fictitious hybrid vignette of several similar people who do this well. When faced with problems, Bob assembles a team and initiates a discussion, which tends to result in a tentative solution. He then crafts and submits a proposal to his boss, who points out non-compliance with institutional documentation standards. His resilient response to grammatical and technical criticism of his proposal enables his boss to be involved in the process. The resolution is focussed on the compliance with protocol rather than the issues and the proposed changes tend to be accepted. His boss saves face and the solution is implemented.

Forced positioning does not need to be counter positioned. A change agent in some ways needs to be a sort of martyr; acting as a scape-goat for the inadequacies of those simply in roles, rather than having endured and achieved position themselves. Having said that, when it is appropriate good change agents will fight against institutional positioning, by engaging in second order positioning. This is the fine balance of parity and power dealt with by Ling (1998.)

2. Using Forced Positioning. Just as others can oppose *new ways* through forced positioning, the change agent can achieve the status of leader of those who need to be changed. Sue is created to present a second hybrid vignette, to demonstrate how a strong leader can take control and drive changes through.

Sue takes time to understand the problems faced by key people. As such, she is respected and regularly successfully positions herself as authorised to drive through change and positions others as willing participants in the process. As in any leadership position, Sue is careful not to dilute her authority with too much familiarity. However, her relationship enables and enhances her ability to take the upper hand in all discourse and hence position herself and others as appropriate to circumstances. In short, she draws others in and successfully uses deliberative positioning simply through their willing involvement.

On occasion, Sue experiences a lack of discourse reciprocation, which inhibits the positioning process. Revisiting the balance of parity and power reminds Sue that people often are concerned about losing their power, demarcation or other status issue. She avoids anxiety by negotiation of parity and power.

3. Tripping over Minor Issues. Bill exemplifies those who obstruct their own progress towards the *new way* through ineffective positioning. An effective change agent realises that there is an obligation to fall on one's sword from time-to-time. Typically, change agents are out of the line-management and tend to take on staff roles. A line manager habitually positions themselves with authority; challenging that can be simply counterproductive.

Bill sees red and goes for the jugular. When he is confronted by a manager, who engages in forced positioning, to keep the change agent in their place, Bill leaps into second order positioning mode and creates a hostile environment. Enabling others to retain dignity – especially line managers – contributes greatly to the grander scale of the change to a *new way*. Furthermore, a strong manager who is used to the freedom of forced positioning will react negatively to second order positioning and will likely win any joust with a lesser opponent. A clever change agent perhaps should not include opponent in their vocabulary; instead, perhaps the word partner needs to be prominent.

4. Meek and mild Permission Seeking. The fictitious Tony provides a character for this hybrid vignette to demonstrate an ingratiating subservient approach. Through deliberative positioning, Tony involves others whenever crucial issues are considered.

Compliance of departmental managers is negotiated to ensure that they support the idea and that there is authority to deal with their staff. With this, Tony has authority to direct staff and force positioning to implement changes in teaching. Whilst he starts out meek and mild, the conferred authority enables Tony to carry on with certainty that he is in control; his forcefulness makes it clear that second order positioning is not an option.

This may be exemplified through the system of appointed ranks in the military. A sergeant is positioned by virtue of the three stripes on his arm. A recruit is free to attempt second order positioning, but the resulting positioning will be predictable, repeatable and reliable. Until a soldier has been 'given the rank of a sergeant, they carry no formal authority. The instant they are wearing the rank badge they are positioned (forced) as a sergeant and expected to perform in a certain way. However, prior to attaining that rank (apart from merit and qualification) a soldier likely to be subservient; they are engaged in complying with regulations and orders of superiors (this could be seen as meek and mild permission seeking.) The transformation can be quite remarkable, albeit subtle.

One might well ask how this differs from role, which could suggest that appointing someone in a role is forced positioning. However, second order positioning in that case could be perceived as mutiny.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

*New ways* do not just happen. They require leadership and conscious effort to learn something new; facilitation or mediation enables change from the old way to the *new way*.

Consideration of parity and power when planning for change will provide hints as to how to eliminate barriers and enable change. Positioning theory:

- provides a basis to understand parity and power through the discourse that unfolds
- offers a way to understand the difficulties encountered in the change process
- demonstrates that interpersonal shortfalls need to be resolved before people can move to a *new way*.

The introduction of quality into any organisation is often the introduction of a *new way* into a very stoic and staid environment. The positions adopted by people and imposed on others, and the various jousts that take place to alter these adopted and imposed positions can have a strong impact on the success or failure of the introduction and conduct of continuous improvement activities.

The challenge is not so much to build quality into individual roles, but to work with people to best position themselves to lead and work with the *new ways* that are developed. Positioning theory explains the phenomenon and provides answers as to how best to deal with the challenges of implementing a *new way*.

There is clearly an opportunity for some meaningful research to be conducted into how positioning theory can explain successful and unsuccessful change.

In his discussion about change, Deveson (1997) reflects on the disruptive influence women have on paradigms and Harding (1991) puts forth that feminist approaches have contributed to improvement. Sharpe (2000) reports of that several studies have concluded that women '... score higher than their male counterparts on a wide variety of measures – from producing high-quality work to goal-setting to mentoring employees.' That positioning theory has grown out of education and feminist issues may suggest that business needs to consider and be aware of approaches taken by educational and feminist practitioners.

Due to increasing influence of non-government organisations that often follow feminist philosophies, it is anticipated that positioning theory will become a basis to better understand many aspects of business.

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Postscript:

Kane, Crawford and Grant (1999) provide a third study of barriers provides similar results to those in this paper. They identified three barriers to effective HRM as being:

- management attitude (intellectual laziness of management to adopt a better way)
- deficiencies of HRM staff (ignorance of staff)
- difficulties with the current state of HRM (poor leadership to deal with the current state)

They also point out that the effectiveness of HRM has been hampered through:

- The goals of HRM not being achieved (intellectual laziness)
- Inadequacies of a sizeable proportion of HRM staff (ignorance)
- Lack of support from top management (poor leadership)

Kane, B, J Crawford, D Grant. (1999) Barriers to effective HRM, International Journal of Manpower, 20, 8 pp494-515, MCB Press