

# TRADITION, RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

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Our president's call for a return to African values is hampered by the pressing demands of a changing world. Symbolic actions are one thing: slaughtering a cow on one's doorstep might be messy, but it can be done quickly allowing one to proceed with the business of modern living right away. When it comes down to it, traditions are inevitably associated with conservatism and being stuck in the past.

My engagement with various African traditions has led me to believe otherwise. Indigenous traditions of pre-industrial cultures were brimming with technologies for working with the future, as well as with change.

## **Nature is ever-changing**

The reason is simple: these cultures lived close to the land. Humanity emerged from a need to balance with nature's relentless dynamism: a society unable to respond quickly to change was doomed. Jared Diamond calls it 'ecocide' and his recent book *Collapse* lists numerous societies that succumbed to their mistaken assumptions about natural resources.

Industrial technologies obscured our relationship to the land; but our burgeoning population has led us inexorably back there, to the point where our activities are increasingly directed by natural limits. We concern ourselves with conserving traditions to honour the past; I am wondering whether we should be re-examining traditions because they contain technologies of change needed to help us adapt to our future.

## **Change requires energy**

Change requires energy and so we resist it. A brief survey at work will confirm that spare energy these days is in short supply. Some of us manage to trick our adrenals into overdrive by engaging with stimulants or extreme sports, but most of us are exhausted. We barely have enough energy to get kids to school, let alone deal with petulant global climate patterns.

Comfortingly, it seems ancient folk weren't that different to us modern humans. Many of the indigenous technologies used to seek balance comprise methods to accrue personal energy. They may have lacked our particular brand of burn-out, but it is clear they also required a boost to face the relentlessness of natural change.

## **Engaging with resistance**

A crucial difference between pre- and post-industrial cultures appears in our *response* to resistance. We tend to see change happening when resistance to our plans is reduced,

denied or wiped out; African approaches to change appear to engage with resistance itself, allowing something unpredictable to emerge in the process.

I would much rather do yoga, pop a Prozac, kick the dog or switch on Quentin Tarantino's celluloid violence than engage my resistance to change head-on. In other words, I would rather reduce the pressure to keep my dysfunctional system going, than yield to the knowledge that I do not control its outcome.

In contrast, indigenous approaches put resistance increasingly under pressure. This invariably expresses in rising temperatures (which is incidentally how a star is formed). In fact, it is not incidental: change is an alchemical process and resistance contains the seed of our creativity, of something new. As the Chinese proverb says: "When in hot water, take a bath".

### **The challenge of corporate change**

In this regard, our prevailing business model is the "change programme": management hires consultants to identify the right levers to pull to ensure everyone accepts and enacts their plans with minimum resistance and at maximum speed. There are performance indicators and incentives. The more enlightened companies include smiles, bonuses and wellness centres.

Judging by the research, such change initiatives rarely if ever meet expectations. In his analysis of corporate change efforts, Harvard's John Kotter notes that a few have been successful, a few have been utter failures, and most fall somewhere in between with "a distinct tilt towards the lower end of the scale". Whichever way we look at it, finding leverage points for change is extremely challenging.

If we brought forward the knowledge of traditional African communities, how might we approach change differently? Bearing in mind that we don't have time to sit chatting for hours under the morula tree.

### **African change processes**

Turns out, the morula tree is rather important. Change is driven or impeded not only by action, but by *interaction*: the quality of dialogue taking place between people, within the community and beyond it. It emerges from ongoing relationships and collective will. It is fed by energy harnessed both from inspiration and emerging from resistance.

African technologies of change focus on accruing the personal energy needed to surrender control under pressure, without losing integrity. It doesn't mean we give up our plans—it means finding ways to focus and harness energy, rather than wrestling the organisation into submission.

Here are some of the change management tools used in African traditions:

- **Honour the Ancestors.** Listen to the wisdom of the past; make the community (or organisational) context clear. Know what decisions brought the system to where it is. Before you fiddle, understand the forces and structures that help the system run itself.
- **Dance.** Find organisational resonance. Get the beat, sweat; knowledge is an emergent property of the whole body, not just the brain.
- **Communicate.** Clear lines of communication, within and beyond the organisation. Most of what goes wrong is a result of miscommunication, inadequate listening or missing information.
- **Deepen insight.** Learn to integrate information from vastly different sources: sensory, rational, intuitive, imaginative. Listen to what is important, not just to what is quantifiable.
- **Tell the truth.** Expose thoughts, resistance and mental models. Establish a forum that allows things to be heard, honoured and laughed at. Let shadows emerge. Hold the tension; never take your eye off its potential.
- **Medicine.** Learn to track energy in the organisation and direct it to where it is useful. Energy may come from a person, location or any set of interactions. If you are unable to do this for yourself, don't try and do it for your organisation.
- **Trance.** Expand your own time and thought horizons. See yourself and the system from the outside, from a bigger perspective.

### **From resistance to unity**

In harnessing resistance as a force for change, we become aware of the diversity around us. When we find the compassion to celebrate this diversity, our change efforts begin to bear fruit and a magnificent unity emerges. In African communities, this paradox is honoured by dancing and feasting; in business, we tick the box called “transformation”.

If we have the courage to do these things, our embrace of African traditions will go way beyond the realm of symbolism.

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