

Rethinking Commitment to Change

By Jim Selman and Layton Fisher

Introduction

Disappointed with your company's efforts to change? In this article, originally published in the *Journal of Management Inquiry* (September 1992), Layton Fisher interviews Jim on what we need to unlearn and what's missing to have people learn to trust themselves and participate authentically with each other in a world that is inherently uncertain.

LF: Jim, one of the things I'd like to inquire into is the apparent level of frustration among managers in bringing about changes in the way we really operate our businesses. We've observed a succession of concepts such as quality, service, continuous improvement, and excellence introduced into our organizations over the last dozen or 15 years, often accompanied by increasing levels of energy and costs going to "promote" success. And yet, with some exceptions one would have to say that our capacity to bring about the kinds of changes these ideas are intended to produce have not taken place; they don't meet expectations. The costs go up, but the productivity generally doesn't.

JS: Well, I think that you have to acknowledge that there is something going on that we are not seeing having to do with the nature of change and, fundamentally, the structures within which we're trying to accomplish what we say we're trying to accomplish. I can remember back in the 1960s, for instance, an enormous amount of effort went into defining productivity. Accountants, consultants, managers, and academicians worked overtime trying to define terms like effectiveness, making all sorts of distinctions between efficiency and effectiveness. People had lots and lots of fairly clever insights in what was needed to improve productivity. But knowing what we needed didn't somehow produce it!

I became interested in the work I'm doing when I began to observe that very, very committed, intelligent people could formulate reasonable answers and proposals and even design very elegant programs, but somehow when it came to implementation there was always a gap between intent and reality. If you start

from that point of view, you must consider that the problem is not a shortage of answers, programs, good models, or even resources but that there's something fundamentally inadequate in our approach to change that somehow blocks us from implementing the kind of changes we say are needed.

Now I think it's also important here, Layton, to appreciate that all changes are not the same. There are some changes where we simply want to alter existing conditions, like designing a new advertising campaign or buying a new building. That's a different kind of change from the kind of change that most corporations are now calling for; the kind of fundamental change in the way we think and work and behave, the kind of shift in context or paradigm that is demanded if we're going to get the big payoffs from initiatives like total quality or customer service or whatever.

LF: You mentioned the search for agreement on the definition of productivity. If we want to improve productivity, we'd better begin with a common definition of productivity.

JS: And some of that conversation can be useful. I think that the problem, however, is that we do not make a distinction between a definition and what it is that's being defined. So, for example, if we could come up with an elegant, wonderful definition of productivity that everybody could agree to, it's pretty clear that it, in itself, doesn't produce anything. Just like understanding leadership doesn't make a leader. It becomes another explanation or another theory or another story or another book, without having the capacity to generate the phenomenon which is being defined. It's clear, for example, that a better definition of gravity doesn't change gravity.

I want to make a distinction between explanatory principles, principles which define, describe, justify, or explain, and generative principles, which tend to be an opening for and can produce the phenomenon we're talking about. We need to ask, for instance, "What is productivity, or leadership, or empowerment as a phenomenon?" I think many of the major issues in organizations and management can be observed as phenomena when we think critically, reflectively, and rigorously. If we do this well and communicate what we observe powerfully, we potentially give the individual or the group or the organization the capability to

change that which we are talking about. This is critical if we want to impact how people think, their attitudes, the culture, and so forth.

LF: One of the things that has been on my mind for some time is the history of work. If we think back to year zero, as when people began working, nobody knew much. Knowledge accumulated rather slowly over time, and somewhere around the Industrial Revolution, knowledge began to increase much more rapidly. There was an acceleration.

During that period when knowledge was accumulating slowly, a time which one might characterize as a relatively stable informational environment, it seemed to make sense that if you had a need to do something or wanted to accomplish something, you would learn about it first. And because knowledge was accumulating rather slowly, someone was around to teach you what you needed to know and what needed to be done. After you learned, you could decide whether you wanted to use or apply what you learned, and so, you would follow with action. There were generally three steps: learn, decide or commit, and then act.

In today's world where knowledge is expanding/accelerating very rapidly, solutions are often obsolete before they are implemented. In such cases, I suggest that knowledge is a product of action rather than a prerequisite for it. What becomes critical in a world of accelerating change is that we have an approach for dealing with unprecedented situations and new activities. Such an approach requires that we must first decide what kind of a future "reality" we're trying to create as the basis for our actions. And it's those actions which will create the breakdowns which will point us to what we need to do next to fulfill our commitments. So there's a shift here from learn first, then decide, then act, to the possibility of committing first, then acting, and then learning in the process of dealing with breakdowns.

That's a fundamental shift in the way that we experience and approach the world. I find it very difficult for us to commit first, rather than learn first, because we really do want the comfort of knowing from someone who has done it before that it's going to work out all right. And for a lot of important concerns and critical issues, there simply isn't anybody who can give us that comfort.

JS: Let me see if I understand that. Layton, are you saying that with respect to implementing change, what most people want is to "know what to do" and to see the plan of how the change will be effected before they commit to doing it? Rather than, as you say, committing to do it first, and then planning how to make it happen as a fallout of that.

LF: Yes.

JS: Let's pursue what you said about the solutions to many of our problems being already obsolete before we try to implement them. If you look at that in the context of learning, it may be that given the speed with which knowledge is expanding, most of what we are learning is already potentially obsolete, or at least very short-lived. This would reinforce the notion that managers should, in fact, consider seriously a different way of viewing the world. So the question is. What are we committed to accomplishing? And then. What do we need to do to accomplish that? Rather than starting with. What are our concerns? How do we deal with them? And then having that defined, deciding what we're willing to commit to.

LF: Yes.

JS: From there I can see that if I only commit to those things which my feasibility models, my current paradigm, and predictive thinking will permit, then I'll never commit to anything that will produce a future that varies from current trends and known models. I recall Joel Barker's observation in his videotape called "Discovering the Future, the Business of Paradigms". When a paradigm shifts, everything goes back to zero. And, really, today's avalanche of buzzwords, concepts, and models suggests that we are still not at zero, we're still struggling for the right answer, for the right model to tell us how to do it; yet it's only when we're committed to doing it that we're going to be inventing really new and original interpretations and models that are useful for empowering people to generate a different future.

LF: You speak of commitment, and it seems to me there's something very pivotal about the notion of commitment here. Historically, it would be foolish to commit to something that you were not sure you could produce, because of the fear of failure and blame. It seems to me that in today's world we must learn that it

is only by making such a commitment that we can evoke the innovative responses or unprecedented actions necessary to fulfill the commitment: And that it is not a function of knowledge, because it's clear that we don't know how to do much of what needs to be done.

I believe the possibility of doing anything unprecedented is a function of the clarity of our a priori commitment. This commitment, in fact, may allow us to see things that now exist which, absent the commitment, would be invisible to us. For example, for years we assumed cost and quality were positively correlated—more quality required more cost. Once this assumption was challenged and people committed themselves to increasing quality without increasing costs, new methods appeared and now we assume that there is no absolute correlation between quality and cost. What's now obvious was transparent. It's the culturally embedded reluctance to commit to anything we're not certain we can provide that is the block to our capacity to implement real change.

JS: Well, I think that's right on. In fact, I would say that the nature of commitment is one of those things that people have not questioned rigorously. If you say the word commitment, you're likely to get 20 or 30 different ideas about what that means, and usually the responses are pretty personal and pretty much based in people's individual experience. I think that one of the biggest barriers to confronting commitment is that we think that making or keeping commitments is some sort of a moral issue, that it has something to do with people's character, it has something to do with people's sincerity, and something to do with people's legitimacy and authenticity as human beings.

If we view commitment that way, then it's very, very risky to make commitments and we'd probably only make those commitments, as you say, that we perceived as fairly sure things. But by definition, that calls into question whether that is really a commitment. If I only commit to that which is predictable or feasible, I'm pretty well going to have more of the same. There's not a lot of juice in that. If I look at my own experience, the commitments that really had power, the commitments that really made a difference were those commitments where fulfillment was not a sure thing. And yet, somehow, the act of committing, or the action of initially committing made a really profound difference.

LF: One of the things I conclude is that, mostly, in our everyday way of thinking we somehow associate commitment with our reasons for committing or our feelings. And yet, all of us, I think, can reflect on times when we made commitments that were uncertain of outcome, or larger than how we felt. If we are going to climb a mountain, we clearly may not feel like going forward. And yet, because we commit to get to the top, we go forward, anyway. It was not a matter of, "Will I take the next step?" Having the commitment present for us just evokes—calls forth—the kind of action necessary to fulfill the commitment. We are willing to take the risk.

JS: Exactly! And, likewise, our reasons for committing often get confused with our commitment. We have all kinds of reasons why we commit. But once we commit, we are, in fact, committed, regardless of our reasons. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, who once said that reasonable people adapt them selves to the circumstances, and unreasonable people adapt the circumstances to themselves, and progress depends on unreasonable people. So, really, the equation around commitment comes down to. Do we make our commitments and then have our commitment be the basis for action and changing the circumstances? Or, do our circumstances, or our perception of the circumstances, or our reasoning determine what we're committed to? That's really a paradox that I think each and every human being ultimately has to confront. Because if the circumstances (or our perceptions of the circumstances) determine our commitment, then we're all pretty much locked into a business-as-usual relationship to the future.

LF: Eric Trist, about 30 years ago, talked about the notion of the turbulent field; that it is not just the things on the field that are changing, but, in fact, the field itself, on which the actors are acting out whatever game it is, is in the process of change.

JS: Yes, I think that really gets to the heart of our need for a new management paradigm or a new interpretive structure within which to do what we're doing to effect change. I believe that if our commitment is simply to improve in an incremental, linear way, then probably the traditional paradigm of management is not bad, assuming we have time.

By the same token, if what we're attempting to do is deal with something in an unprecedented way, if we're trying to produce something that's beyond business as usual, then the very paradigm that has allowed us to be as productive as we've been in the 20th century now becomes actually counterproductive. And most organizations know this. I mean, that's why they put their most creative people into special departments and "skunk works," to try to keep them out of the mainstream of the everyday kind of conventional thinking that tends to cause this persistence and make the implementation of change so damned difficult. A new paradigm gives new choices—calls forth new and generally unreasonable commitments.

LF: Are you saying that our organizational systems are not working for those things which need to be created and invented in a rather new and different way?

JS: Yes, but be careful. There's a potential problem in stating it that way. We must consider that as soon as we say that the current system is not working, we immediately bring up a mind-set which wants to fix it, which wants to change it, which wants to somehow correct what now exists—which is going to essentially defeat what we're trying to accomplish.

If our attention and action is focused on fixing the current system, then, essentially, what we're doing is reinforcing the existing system in our attempt to change it. Now that's very important, because if we try to change it, then every effort that we make to change something reinforces that which we're attempting to change. It gives it power. It gives it more reality in our everyday thinking, as distinct from, for example, creating a new system in the context of a vision. With this distinction we have the possibility of having the best of our existing system, plus a whole new system in which it's possible to accomplish things that simply were not possible within the old system.

LF: Jim, this is very interesting, because most of our mental models in this culture have it that if something is to be improved, then the improved model requires a discarding of the old. We have a kind of parts replacement strategy for our organizational improvement efforts. So if the work of Tom Peters has been tried and doesn't seem to bring about the result that we're after, we will replace that with some new guru or program. We will try to fix it. And the fact that we

even use words like fix implies that there's something wrong, and if we could only find something that was better to replace it, we would discard the old. We have an either/or, rather than the kind of inclusive strategy that you're pointing to, saying that whatever we do newly needs to include all that we have already done and reinterpret it.

JS: Exactly. There's an old axiom in the sciences, in particular, but I think it's familiar to most people: "No problem can be solved in the context in which it's defined as a problem." To paraphrase Einstein: We have problems we cannot solve thinking the way we thought when we created them. So, for example, one of the major conversations that we often hear in organizations is, "How am I going to balance people needs with organizational needs?" Just the way the problem is posed is an either/or problem. You say it's going to be a trade-off between individual people needs and wants and organizational needs and wants. But we don't see that the problem is in the construction or formulation of the problem.

LF: Yeah. And the notion of the construction of the problem or the place from which we're looking to see the problem, perhaps, brings us back to this notion of paradigm. It is our paradigm, our way of interpreting the world, our structure of interpretation through which we look at our organizations and our world. That's the lens or the framework through which we see our "problems." The nature of paradigms is that when one shifts paradigms to "a new one," the new one always includes everything that was in the old. It isn't a replacement strategy.

JS: That's exactly right. Just as Newton had an interpretation for the physical universe, it was whole and complete, and it works very, very well. Einstein had a different interpretation of the physical universe, and it's whole and complete and works very well, also. The issue isn't, is Einstein right and Newton wrong? Or do we have to throw out Newton if we're going to adopt Einstein? We need to appreciate that the question isn't which paradigm is correct, but which paradigm works and is most powerful, given what we want to accomplish. So in the end, what we're looking for here is not a replacement of the old paradigm. What we're looking for is the invention of a new paradigm in which it's possible to accomplish certain things that are simply not available in the old paradigm.

LF: One of the issues that this raises for me is the question of how we teach leadership in organizations. As long as our models for organization were derived out of our Industrial Revolution experience, we had a rather mechanical, either/or, cause/ effect replacement strategy for new programs intended to improve our organizational effectiveness. It seems that now, dealing with organizations in that mechanical way doesn't get us where we need to go. So how would you describe this phenomenon of paradigm as something that would give leaders and change agents access to a new way of seeing how to improve the effectiveness of our organizations?

JS: Well, that's a very good question. I think that, first of all, I would acknowledge that "paradigm" is a word that is in danger of becoming yet another buzzword, a household term to describe "the big picture." And that's a shame. I think of paradigms as being very much like gravity; that paradigms are a phenomenon of human existence. My understanding, in part, began by appreciating that a paradigm is a linguistic phenomenon. That is, they are constituted by linguistic distinctions. They occur, by virtue of the fact that you and I as human beings possess language. When a new distinction appears, there's a new domain, a new opening for action and assessment. Because we have language, we are able, therefore, to create these frameworks with which we interpret what everything means. Paradigms are typically made up of multiple overlapping distinctions, like Chinese boxes.

The paradoxical nature of paradigms, however, is that they are inherently transparent. They are in the background. They are not what you and I think, but rather the frames within which we think. And so from that point of view, I think the first thing to do is to acknowledge that we need to learn a new way of talking about paradigms which gives us some power to actually interact with them, to begin to generate new frames within which to think, as opposed to simply keep talking about the frame in which we're thinking.

LF: How would one begin? If the leadership of the organization is seriously committed and willing to bring about the kind of changes that would make a major difference, how would they do that?

JS: Well, in two words—committed inquiry. Effective inquiry, however, requires some additional distinctions. For example, there are at least three domains into which we might inquire—the domain of what we know, the domain of what we know we don't know, and the domain of what we don't know we don't know. What we know is rarely questioned. What we know we don't know is really just a subset of what we know, and when we ask questions, we're looking for answers. What we don't know we don't know isn't even in our awareness; it's inherently in our "blind spot."

I say that new paradigms and the kind of change we're talking about comes when people discover or generate for themselves something from the domain of what they don't know they don't know. Inquiry in this domain isn't looking for answers; it's looking for new questions, new possibilities. It's a very creative process.

LF: So if we're to learn how to inquire into or succeed in a new paradigm, we need to approach change and the issues as if we're learning for the first time? We need to learn how to learn when there are no apparent answers. Learning how to learn and working with paradigms weren't included in the curriculum at the business schools or the educational system which produced what we know.

JS: Exactly. I have a notion that I introduce to a lot of my clients, which is the notion of "unlearning." That is, if you're going to learn a new paradigm, you have to unlearn the old one. For example, new typewriter keyboards were invented that were proven to be much more efficient than the standard one we all know how to use. It was a commercial flop because the typists couldn't get past what they knew. To use the new keyboard you had to unlearn typing. For those that did this, the new layout was a breeze and much faster, but unlearning isn't easy. This is not to say that you forget the old one, or that you throw it out; it's simply that you need to be able to consider that learning anything really new in an area in which you've got some expertise may seem threatening or uncomfortable with respect to what you know. The power of inquiry into new paradigms is about discovering what we don't know we don't know, or maybe know but don't know we know.

LF: So the new paradigm gets revealed as we push out the boundaries of what we already know. It's a kind of a pressing on our own personal "envelope."

JS: No, that's going to lock us into the old paradigm. I prefer to say that the new paradigm emerges when we're committed to an outcome that we know we can't accomplish, given the way things have been and the way we've been thinking—when we know that we can't get there from here. That will call for new and fresh questions or old questions asked newly that will begin to open up new possibilities and new ways of thinking beyond where we've been.

LF: That reminds me, do you recall what W. H. Murray, who led a Scottish expedition to the Himalayas, said?

“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.”*

His point was that there is less power in searching for "the right approach" and then making a commitment once you've figured it out, than making the commitment almost despite your knowledge that it's impossible for you to fulfill from where you now are standing.

JS: This kind of commitment requires a certain humanity and a certain amount of courage by ordinary people who are willing to take a stand for their vision, whether people agree or whether it's risky.

I do a lot of work with companies in which the issue of risk is always up in people's faces. To truly commit oneself to the unpredictable, one must confront a certain amount of fear, or generate a certain amount of courage. It takes courage to commit to a future that's not likely. And what's less evident, but equally true, is that there may be even more risk in not taking those stands, and not making those commitments and not taking those actions.

LF: We postulate these things, and it's interesting to note how thoughts about vision and change have been expressed throughout history in music and

literature. I recall a song, I believe from South Pacific, that says you need to have a dream before you can have your dream come true. The 29th chapter of Proverbs [verse 18] says, "Where there is no vision the people perish." In a novel I recently read, the point was made that we often resist change, even though we know that in the long run the resistance will be more painful and costly than the change itself. I was in a workshop—or in a conversation with Alan Lakein one time, who wrote a little book called *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*, in which Lakein said, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing wrong." And that doesn't strike us as something—as one of the rules that our parents gave us as a child. I can recall hearing, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." Lakein said clearly, "No." If it's worth doing, it means that it's difficult, it's important, it requires courage: Nobody knows how to do it, and the outcome is not guaranteed. Hence you're not likely to get it right the first time. So we must learn from the breakdowns that always come with our commitment and action. So, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing wrong" seems to be right on—to say in shorthand what you're saying about the importance of commitment to bringing about a change without certainty that we have at hand a means to fulfill it.

JS: Yes, I think that's right. If I take this back to the original discussion around the implementation of change . . . the implementation of change shifts from being about overcoming the status quo, to a process of fulfilling the vision or the possibility. That is a night-and-day difference between how you relate to the future and how you relate to the present in terms of what's going on. We have to generate a reality in which people are working to fulfill a future, as distinct from trying to deal with what didn't work yesterday. What's determining our action is our commitment and our vision. And that's the core of what it takes to be an effective organization or an effective leader or change agent.

Look at most of the total-quality management efforts that are going on—I read somewhere that there's something like a 70% dissatisfaction index in North America of companies that had committed enormous resources to total quality, and they weren't getting the results that they wanted. In part, I suggest that the reason this is occurring is because people are attempting to use total quality management as a solution to a problem, rather than a vision to be fulfilled. When quality becomes a vision to fulfill, it makes all the difference in the world.

LF: That brings me back to the notion of the rate of change. In that earlier world that was not changing nearly as quickly as it is now, we had the sense—and probably accurately—that if we could correct the problem, that would take us back to a condition where things were relatively satisfactory. Given the rate of change of the circumstances around us now, getting things back to the way they were in no way reintroduces the stability that we think we remember. The world keeps changing. We must produce a future that we desire quite independently from the conditions that have determined our past.

JS: Yes. I think if we can give up this idealistic notion that somehow we are going to return to a stable reality, then we can shift our attention from trying to get things to calm down to beginning to master what Peter Vaill calls the "white water" of constant and accelerating change. We can begin to generate skill and ability to deal with our circumstances . . . to build the future as a function of our vision and commitment, as distinct from trying to cope and/or hope that the future that happens to us won't be too bad. That's the difference, also, I would say, between an entrepreneurial company and a more established enterprise.

LF: So, Jim, let's say this brings us somewhere close to the end of this conversation. For my part, I've learned that the phenomenon of a paradigm is not the same as a concept. This is a very provocative notion, since I'm pretty clear that most people and much of the current discussion doesn't distinguish them as a phenomenon.

JS: And I can now see a lot of value in shifting our appreciation of learning and knowledge from being a prerequisite for action to becoming a product of it.

LF: A final question would be what's the next inquiry—what would make sense, given what we've said today? What would be a new question?

JS: I think the follow-on question becomes. How do people learn to trust themselves and participate authentically with each other in a world that is inherently uncertain? How do we empower people to be successful in the face of uncertainty, rather than continuously trying to convince them about what's going to happen, even when we're fairly certain it isn't likely to happen that way? We must begin to engage people in being successful and powerful when things are uncertain all the way down.

LF: So let's, next time, talk about the phenomenon of empowerment and how it's possible to enrol people in productive action, even in the face of the uncertainty.

JS: Exactly! Thank you.

NOTE

* Editor inserted exact quotation.

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