



## **“Fiat Lux.” Navigating chaos through Sensing Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides an overview of change management strategies described in business science. From the distinctions made, it becomes clear that change is all-pervasive and the result of complex interactions within and between the internal and external environments of organizations and communities. Complexity theory is subsequently considered as a better vantage point from where a response to change may be informed. The leadership style to correspond to this new reading of change needs to be that of “transcending leadership” where sensing and sense-making skills are honed to sense emerging meaning in organizations, in interpersonal relationships and through intrapersonal reflection. Instead of “making” change happen, the new leadership “lets” things happen, sensing the connections between emerging events in the context and creating a level of readiness to find the potential meaning in what may usually have been perceived as mere chaos. The creation narrative and a new reading of chaos as possibility provide Judeo-Christian sources of spirituality in this regard. Other Biblical narratives are cited to show in which way different change management frameworks can be applied to the respective narratives, but also how sensing and sense-making remain the common leadership attributes in successfully navigated change.

### **Key words**

*Change management, transformational leadership, transcendent leadership, complexity theory, Biblical narratives*

## **1. Introduction**

Recognizing contextual change is not new and descriptions of longer and shorter term changes and trends abound. It is recognized, however, that the pace and impact of change has increased. The current experience is that of a “VUCA” world, which is the world of

- *Volatility*, referring to the nature and dynamics of change, and the nature and speed of change forces and change catalysts.
- *Uncertainty*, referring to the lack of predictability, the prospects for surprise, and the need for a sense of awareness and understanding.
- *Complexity*, referring to the multiplex of forces, the confounding of issues, the lack of clear cause-and-effect chains and general confusion surrounding organizations.
- *Ambiguity*, referring to the haziness of reality, the potential for misreads, and the mixed meanings of conditions; cause-and-effect confusion.

Amidst broader societal and global cycles as well as the unpredictable volatility of environmental, organizational and individual change, the need to understand, navigate and influence change processes and systems became a dynamic and interdisciplinary research theme.

Utilizing literature review and theory building, this article emphasizes the value of complexity theory for change management and leadership theory, overcoming the constraints of linear change management and transactional leadership models. The application of a sensing leadership model on Biblical change narratives will illustrate the value of complexity models.

## 2. Change and complexity

### Change types

Taxonomies of change assist in grasping the nature, form and drivers of change. It informs the approach to be taken and predicts the value to be derived from intentional intervention to “manage” the particular change processes in organizations or communities. Combining existing taxonomies, Plowman *et al* (2007:518) discuss four types of change. The types are firstly classified on *pace*, being either continuous or episodic:

- *Continuous* (or evolutionary) change consists of small adaptations and ongoing modifications that emerge from improvisation and learning.
- *Episodic* (or revolutionary) change is usually a response to growing inertia. The urgency to change grows as the inertia of the customary

and comfortable counteracts the stretch to the innovative and widens a chasm, putting the organization under tension. Episodic changes are mostly intentionally introduced to address this tension. It takes the form of a planned replacement whereby a new structure, strategy, or program replaces an old one. The episodic change is a distinct interruption intended to create discontinuity to the previous state of affairs.

Secondly, types of change can be classified according to *scope*. The scope can be convergent or radical:

- *Convergent* change is local. It occurs within the internal environment of the organization in such a way that the foundation and frame of the organization remains intact. Improvement of internal systems and procedures are business examples of such convergent change.
- *Radical* change is system-wide. It “breaks the frame” and shakes the foundations of the organization. The change is deeply rooted, subversive and disruptive. Fundamental changes in business models, diversification of strategy and entering new markets are some examples in business.

The matrix resulting from the two classifiers identifies four change types:

*Change Type 1* would depict change that is *continuous and convergent* – it is slow, evolutionary, and not because of a specific episode or crisis. Minor system instability leads to small adaptations that emerge from local improvisation and learning. These convergent changes take the form of continual updates to work processes and social practices and occur within an existing structure.

*Change Type 2* is *episodic and convergent*, occurring quickly, as the result of a specific episode or mini-crisis. The need to overcome minor inertia drives incremental change that usually takes the form of infrequent, intentional replacements. One process or procedure replaces another.

*Change Type 3* depicts change that is *episodic and radical*, or revolutionary, and that happens quickly as the result of a major specific episode or crisis. Radical change is undertaken to overcome major inertia and takes the form of a dramatic, frame-bending replacement, such as a new strategy, structure, or top management.

*Change Type 4* illustrates change that is *continuous and radical* and that generally occurs because small adaptations accumulate and a frame-bending pattern of organizing emerges. Emergent adaptations occur as individuals or subunits improvise and learn. These emergent adaptations can accumulate, gather momentum, and become transforming when they occur in the midst of major system instability.

### **Linear and spiral models**

The assumption that organizational change follows a linear trajectory has dominated the discourse on organizational design and the management of change processes for decades. Linear change management theory fixates on the way that change processes can be commanded and controlled. Interventions usually originate from bottom-line pressures in organizations and are then initiated in a top-down fashion, expecting pre-conceived results.

It was Lewin in the 1950s that strongly influenced this idea of change being a causal, predictable and manageable process that can be driven from the top of an organization and implemented according to a detailed change plan. His “unfreeze-mobilize-refreeze” framework has influenced the linear paradigm for decades to come. In the “unfreeze” phase the case for change is made and dissatisfaction with the status quo is created. In the “mobilizing” phase resources required for the change are identified and mobilized. In the “refreeze” phase the new ways of working are embedded in the fabric of the organization.

When this three phased framework is compared to later and more sophisticated frameworks, like that of Kotter in the late 1990s, the same linearity and assumptions of top-down influencing can be recognized, even though more collaboration and communication are emphasized. It was the reality of resistance to change that led to additional dimensions being added to the change management processes to ensure co-creation or so-called “on-boarding” in change processes. These dimensions included better communication and feedback loops. Also, those affected by change were carefully sub-segmented, for example as early adopters, influencers, laggards or resisters with tailor-made strategies to harness constructive forces while eliminating destructive forces. Even with these new and improved change strategies, the structure remained an imposed one. The

goals were set, change management was another project to be managed among many others, steps and phases were outlined and progress was constantly monitored. When up to 70% of change strategies fail, it is perplexing in the wake of such meticulous and diligent planning and management efforts.

Linear models have moderate success only when applied to Change Type 2 (episodic and convergent). As complexity in the change process grows into more system-wide impact, the linear models tend to lose relevance rapidly. Higgs and Rowland (2005:123) refer to the important distinction between complicated systems and complex systems. They point out that complicated systems are rich in detail whereas complex systems are rich in structure. Much of the failure in change management efforts is due to managers being trained to solve complicated problems rather than complex ones. Thus managers view change as a problem that can be analysed and then solved in a linear or sequential manner. However, complex problems require managers to cope with dilemmas in the system rather than to arrive at definitive solutions.

Complex systems are governed by having a general direction and a few simple guiding rules. They are self-organizing and can move in harmony without a leader. The outcomes of interaction cannot be predicted but rather patterns emerge. This last point has given name to a 'school' of change based on the principles of evolution and complexity – emergent change. The governing assumptions of this school are that change is a complex process and that it cannot be implemented on a 'top-down' or uniform basis. Interventions from this perspective tend to recognize that change is a 'messy' rather than planned activity (Higgs and Rowland 2005:125).

The main interventions from an emergent perspective tend to be concerned with building relationships and a building a "container" for change rather than prescribing the exact forms of change itself. The surge of literature considering this "emerging perspective" and "complexity or chaos theory" as ways to better support the non-linear character of organizational change and development has altered the landscape of change management theory and provides new perspectives with new language to grasp the dynamic of systemic change, opposing the rigid assumptions of a linear worldview.

To mitigate the insufficiencies of a linear model of organizational change, spiral models have also been suggested. A spiral is defined as revolving motions (amplifying and counteracting) around a centre or axis, contributing to a trajectory of movement through its environment. Rather than linear or cyclic recurrent events, spirals have diverse movements in time and space (Boje *et al* 2017:690). The main problem is that spirals are still typically seen as moving either upward or downward. Not unlike the linear models, this predictable spiral pattern also oversimplifies the dynamic and complex process of organizational development and change and the interaction with the external environment.

A multi-dimensional understanding of space, time, and change is needed which accounts for the complexity and ambiguity of the intricate interplay between internal organizational dynamics and the external environmental landscape. In this regard, Boje *et al* (2017:691) contends that each organization, within itself, contains space, time, and change. In addition, the organization is simultaneously operating within a wider external environment also characterized by space, time and change. It is not enough to conceptualize the space, time, and change of the organization's internal spiral without also noting the three-dimensional space (landscape), time (timescape) and change of the external environment interacting with and impacting on the organizational spiral, resulting in a much more haphazard, "messy" pattern as was previously imagined.

The challenge is for organizations to find their path amidst all these interactions without merely resorting to a reactive "path of the least resistance". By sensing more potential choice points, testing more trajectories and even keeping the cost of discarded trajectories in mind, the engagement within the complex system grows and advantage can be taken of emerging up-or-down surges while the internal spirals interact with the external dimensions of landscape, timescape and change.

### **Incorporating complexity**

In the above-mentioned taxonomy, it is change types 1 and 4 that hint at a better view on the process of change. Both are instances of "continuous" change. Rather than the result of a singular crisis (whether large or small) that spurs on a reactive and intentional intervention, managed as a change project, continuous change presents itself as emergent and almost self-

organizing and self-perpetuating. Emergence and self-organization of interconnected components, acting much more like a biological organism than a mechanical machine, are incidentally two of the basic tenets of complexity theory.

According to Plowman *et al* (2007:519), a complex system is “comprised of numerous interacting agents, each of which acts on the basis of local knowledge or rules. In the case of organizations, people or groups adapt to feedback about the behaviour of others and act in parallel without explicit coordination or central communication. Complex systems are characterized by nonlinearity as their components interact with one another via feedback loops and by emergent self-organization.” Four constructs from complexity theory informs the understanding of emerging, self-organizing change:

- *Initiating conditions.* Complex systems are sensitive to initial conditions. Lorenz’s famous story on how the flap of a butterfly’s wings in one part of the world can eventually cause a storm in the opposite hemisphere illustrates this notion. Small fluctuations in variables can have enormous and unpredictable consequences. Similarly, in organizations, as systems of non-linear interactions, small changes can have large effects.
- *Far-from-equilibrium state.* Non-linear chemical systems change only when they are pushed to a state far from equilibrium. At a certain critical point existing symmetries break up and disorder ensues. In the midst of this chaos, irregular and unpredictable patterns begin to form as the system transitions through chaos from one phase to another. An organization approaches a far-from-equilibrium state when members have enough freedom to experiment with new ways of doing things and when their discoveries then lead to disorder capable of permeating the entire organization (Plowman *et al* 2007:520).
- *Deviation amplification.* As systems reach critical adaptive states, elements that were independent before, become interdependent or more tightly connected. When social systems experience stress, people or groups that were independent become highly interdependent, often as the result of a crisis. In highly interconnected systems, feedback is amplified. Virtuous or vicious circles can arise. Virtuous circles, amplifying deviation and accelerating change in

organizations can for example result from the allocation of resources to the deviation and the use of new language and symbols.

- *Fractal pattern and scalability.* Complexity is organized; the patterns of complexity observable at nested levels of a system are also observable in the whole. Applied to organizations, the concepts of fractal patterns and scalability mean that, as in nature, similar patterns appear at various levels – the individual, group, and organizational (Plowman *et al* 2007:521).

Organizations cannot be understood as the mere sum of its parts. As complex systems more akin to biological organisms organizations need to be sensed as the product of the interaction between all its parts in a multi-layered and simultaneous process. Remaining mindful of initiating conditions, far-from-equilibrium states, deviation amplification and fractal patterns, all at once, while responding to large-scale internal and external change, requires a new form of leadership. This “transcendent leadership” is characterized by a sensing awareness.

### **3. Leadership as Sensing Awareness**

When change is happening within environments where external and internal complexity and uncertainty is high change leadership has to focus on identity formation and relationships. In particular, the way people talk in an organization has to change (Karp and Helgo 2008:85). When subjected to change, people need to hear stories and other forms of communication about the core values and purpose, the real meaning and identity of their organization (Karp and Helgo 2008:92). These emphases were not implemented in earlier models of leadership.

#### **Transactional and Transformational Leadership**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea of leadership was that of the so-called “great man theory” according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of great men (sic), or heroes; highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or political skill used their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. Leadership theory has come a long way since then. Vision and charisma is not enough to sustain large-system change. A fitting model of leadership in a world of



complexity has to go beyond the inspired individual or “great (wo)man”. It has to take into account the complexities of system-wide change in large, diverse, geographically complex organizations (Nadler and Tushman 1990:78).

One of the influential distinctions made since the 1990s was that between transactional and transformational leadership. Bernard Bass (1990, 2003) was instrumental to the delineation of these models.

1. *Transactional leadership* is based on the principles of contingent reward and management by exception (Bass 1990:22).
  - a. The contract (or “transaction”) between leaders and followers is that of an exchange of effort and performance by recognition and reward.
  - b. Furthermore the principle is “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it”. This management by exception style watch out for deviations and only react when standards are not met.
2. *Transformational leadership* (Bass *et al* 2003:208) has been found to be characterized by the following traits:
  - a. Idealized influence. These leaders are respected, and trusted and seen as role models. The leader shares risks with followers, show integrity and consistently attend to followers’ needs above their own.
  - b. Inspirational motivation. Leaders behave in ways that motivate those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers’ work. The leader inspires a future vision and acts in an invitational manner to join the organization in a common aspiration.
  - c. Intellectual stimulation. Leaders stimulate innovation and creativity by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and encouraging experimentation. Individual members’ mistakes are seen as part of the progress in an innovative culture.
  - d. Individualized consideration. Leaders pay attention to each individual’s need for achievement and growth by acting as a mentor. Followers are developed to successively higher levels of potential. New learning opportunities are created along with a supportive climate in which to grow. Individual differences in terms of needs and desires are recognized and diversity is promoted.

Higgs and Rowland (2011:318) has shown in their empirical research that there is a clear distinction in the success rates of change processes when under so-called directive or shaping approaches (change that is driven, controlled, managed, and initiated from the top) and framing approaches (where the complex nature of change is recognized, only a broad sense of direction is set but change can be initiated anywhere in the organization, especially on the “frontlines” where there is high contact with customers). Rather than establishing specific initiatives, the leadership role in framing focuses on helping others in the processes of sense-making and improvisation. It is to this sensing and sense-making leadership approach that we now turn our attention.

### **Transcendent leadership**

Much different from a mechanistic, linear approach, the metaphor of an organization as an organism emphasize the interdependence between agents in the organization, like the way in which organs in a body are interdependent. It would be more accurate, from the complexity vantage point, to emphasize “flux and transformation” as characteristic of contemporary organizations. This would align better to the characteristics of complex systems like the emerging of order from chaos, the natural capacity to self-renew, the absence of linear cause-and-effect correlations, the way in which key tensions are important in order for new trajectories to emerge and the way in which formal hierarchy are but one of many dimensions or organizational life influencing choices and trajectories (Green 2007:16).

Change through emergence is about creating the conditions for change to occur without specifying the exact nature of the changes. The task of leadership evolves accordingly into creating an enabling environment (the previously mentioned “container”), making sense of what is happening, with the keen ability to distinguish where the organizational energy is and knowing intuitively which actions may remove hindrances and obstacles. This approach would necessarily be based around the belief that systems will self-organize and, even in the midst of chaos, order and evolution will occur (Green 2007:19).

The kind of leadership to be lived in complex systems does not only operate on an organizational level, but also on an interpersonal and an intrapersonal level.

1. *Organizational sensing* is the application of sensing awareness to the “non-human” elements of an organization, for example strategy, structure, drivers in the external environment (e.g. political, economic, social, and technological), industry forces and resources and constraints in the internal environment.
2. *Interpersonal sensing* is the application of sensing awareness to the “human” elements of an organization, for example through interpersonal intelligence, a caring connection, mentoring and developing, collaboration and fostering team play. It is the ability to sense individual strengths and contributions, as well as envisioning the possible configurations of these contributions in teams where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.
3. *Intrapersonal sensing* is self-leadership, the often neglected but crucial source of interpersonal and organizational sensing. It is both the ability and the willingness to become aware of your own emotional state, keeping the necessary composure with self-regulation and self-discipline and having a learning attitude. This all adds up to a level of integrity and openness that constitutes an inviting style of leadership.

Leadership capacities are to be applied on all three levels, inter-connected in the core competency to be honed by leaders in complex organizational systems, namely “sensing awareness”. It all comes down to letting the future emerge, an approach that Hermans (2012:239) calls “possibilizing the future”. Discovering the possibility that is “hidden” in the reality asks for new and creative ways of seeing and experiencing that can bring the possible future into emergence and existence. In order to respond adequately to emerging change in complex systems leaders need to develop others sets of skills than those that were sufficient for transactional and even transformational leadership. The skills to be developed are the skills of sensing and sense-making.

Scharmer (2009:42–43) alerts us to the blind spots that may prevent growth in this regard, namely the voices of *judgment* (preventing an open *mind* by clinging to old thought patterns), *cynicism* (preventing an open *heart* by arrogance and emotional distancing) and *fear* (preventing an open *will* by the reluctance to leave the familiar). Only by learning to suspend these voices, will leadership evolve to what Scharmer calls “presencing”

(Scharmer 2009:8) which is a blending of the words “presence” and “sensing.” It means to “sense, tune in, and act from one’s highest future potential—the future that depends on us to bring it into being”. Scharmer’s “Theory U” (2009:38–39) proposes a different kind of change management process that attunes to emerging change in complex systems. He suggests the downward “letting go” track where the current environment is being scanned in a non-judgmental way, the sideways “presencing” track (combining “presence” and “sensing”) where connection to deeper sources occurs, and the upward “letting come” track of envisioning the new and prototyping microcosms to explore the emerging future. The kind of leadership that is able to go through this process of “letting go” and “letting come”, constitutes leaders that are listening deeply and are fully present to the possibilities emerging from the process of departing from rigorously held preconceptions and assumptions (Senge *et al* 2004:7). The skill to be acquired is the detecting and labelling of patterns forming around small emergent adaptations. In this way, leaders serve as “sense-givers,” giving meaning to changes unfolding rather than creating and directing the changes (Plowman *et al* 2007:538). These kinds of leaders are not “taken by surprise” but are open to the invitation in surprise to find new meaning, new language and new symbols for the emerging new.

### **Leadership as the activity of prophets, priests and kings**

After the departure from the “great man” or “charismatic leader” positional kind of leadership, it became clear that leadership should ideally be diffused throughout an organization or community, rather than operating solely from its centre (Blair *et al* 2012:127). Rather than a position in a social structure or a personal set of leadership skills, leadership may more pertinently be defined as a particular set of activities. Several authors have suggested that the triad of the prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament, may together constitute the sensing leadership needed in contemporary, complex contexts of change:

1. *Kings* are positioned at or near the centre of a community to implement the transformational change that emerges. It may be said that their primary energies are directed toward ordering. The king takes charge, shapes strategy and aligns people. The king defines the rules of the game and how the organization will operate; removes

obstacles to change and obstacles to failure; coordinates and turns changes into “this is how we do it around here”. The king also facilitates the use of the organization’s varied resources to accomplish the strategy (Blair *et al* 2012:140).

2. *Prophets* are positioned at the margins of a community and speak into it on behalf of transformative change. It may be said that their primary energies are directed toward disordering. Their functions are critiquing and energizing through the conveyance of a sense of urgency. A consciousness towards an alternative to the dominant culture is to be awoken by the work of the prophets. They bring to public expression the hopes that have been suppressed and speak metaphorically but also concretely about the real newness that comes to us and redefines our situation (cf. Brueggemann in Blair *et al* 2012:133). The prophets are the translator-interpreters, sensing the emerging meaning in the context and, with some measure of irreverence, even to the point of ridicule, showcasing this emerging meaning over and against the status quo.
3. *Priests* are positioned between the margins and the centre to care for those affected by the change dynamics. It may be said that their primary energies are directed toward reordering. The priest’s primary focus is the well-being of his people. The priest stands among the people as their advocate, and, at times, stands between the people on the one hand and the kings or prophets on the other. The priestly leader seeks to understand and communicate the needs of the people, championing the allocation of resources to meet those needs and helping them to construct relevant meaning systems, while also empowering the people for the needed transformation. The priestly leader must consider how to move everyone in the same direction without masking or minimizing individuality (Blair *et al* 2012:136).

A community functions most effectively when all three these roles are explicitly embraced. Tension may arise between king and priest when there is a conflict between process and people. The king may be more concerned about the processes and systems of the organization and the priest with protecting and caring for the people. Between king and prophet tension may arise with the king calling for order, and the prophet challenging

the status quo. Channelling these tensions constructively, is critical in navigating complex change environments

#### 4. Non-linear Biblical change narratives

##### God and future possibility

Hermans (2012:257) refers to the theological concept formulated by Cusanus already in the 1400s that God is infinite possibility (“Posse” itself). As humans we are able to creatively participate in possibility (or to “possibilize the future”) as we grow towards moral and spiritual fullness by actualizing the possible in our lives.

This connects with the core theological undertaking of Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann sees reality as realized possibility, and therefore contends that possibility supersedes reality, ontologically speaking. He emphasizes further that an ever-changing and complex reality corresponds not with an “unchangeable” God, but with the emerging future of God. Eschatological thinking in this sense is not thinking about the “end”, but rather about the “beginning” of the new creation (Moltmann 2016:12). This beginning of the new is the radical and discontinuous end of the old.

“By the power of hope we are crossing the limits of the present into the future, without anxiety. Transcending means crossing the limits of reality into the sphere of the possible. The firm land of reality is always surrounded by an ocean of possibilities. The realized possibilities are only a small part of the possible realities. ... Eschatological thinking draws God’s future into the human present and opens the human present for God’s coming. ... In this way Christian theology becomes a truly *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the wandering people of God” (Moltmann, 2016, pp. 12–13).

He sees the future as the wide space of God and the theological task therefore as a “conversion to the future”. Against the voices of judgment, cynicism and fear (Scharmer 2009), the Christian hope is not only a hope for eternity but for today, therefore hoping towards an immanent transcendence: “We seek freedom and salvation in the coming dangers and take our chances. This messianic hope is a healing power against the cynicism of the powerful and against the apathy of the powerless” (Moltmann 2016:11).

### Creation as emergence

“Tohu wa bohu” is the Hebrew phrase in Gen 1:2 that describes the condition in which God found the earth in the creation story. “Waste and void,” “formless and empty,” or “chaos and desolation” are some of the translations. In this formless void God spoke: “Let there be light” (“Fiat Lux” in the Latin translation). Harle (2012:103) points out that the creation narrative is usually interpreted to conceive of a deity harnessing chaos to create order. Chaos is principally to be countered through the desire for control, underpinned by a Newtonian worldview of cause and effect. “We find echoes in today’s organizations, which prefer the order of a prairie to the chaos of a rainforest,” remarks Harle (2012:103). In his approach, Harle would like to promote a shared understanding between theological and organizational perspectives from the vantage point of the complexity theory we denoted above. He opts for a view of leadership which, “rather than having a remote godlike figure directing affairs, invites creativity and shared discovery” (Harle 2012:104).

The question would be whether the basic tenets of complexity theory are reconcilable with the Judeo-Christian worldview, especially as it is portrayed in the creation narrative. Is the desert waste of the Hebrew *tohu wabohu* (*chaos* in Greek or *chao* in Latin) then to be embraced? Is not the work of creation aimed at the outcome of an orderly world where everything is put in its proper place? Creation is thus seen as “tidying up” – putting everything where it belongs and separating things that do not belong together. Isn’t this how meaningless chaos is turned into an ordered universe?

An alternate reading of the creation narrative focuses firstly on the permissive use of “let” in God’s “let there be light” and secondly on the meaning of the Hebrew *bara’* (“to create”).

The traditional doctrine of “*creatio ex nihilo*” (creating from nothing) does not take the full meaning of “*tohu wabohu*” into account. There was chaos, but this does not mean there was nothing (we should speak more appropriately of “*creatio ex chao*”). In the permissive use of “let” there are no details of mechanism, and no transitive verbs. Harle quotes Keller: “When we ignore most of the first chapter of Genesis (bored or blinded by its familiarity), we allow the linear reduction to divine fiat. If Elohim does

not, contrary to most readings, unilaterally order a world into existence, Elohim ‘lets be’” (Harle 2012:109).

Secondly, following Cotter, Harle draws attention to the meaning of the Hebrew word *bara*’ (“create”)

“It means to expend no energy, to make something without any effort, without any work involved. Noting that only God is the subject of the verb in the biblical record, Cotter notes how it seems to capture some part of God’s own character. When God makes he [sic] does it completely freely and effortlessly. God is an uncreated, genderless, powerful God creating without any energy at all. Might this suggest a deity who could be described as co-creating through participative self-organization? As we saw, a feature of self-organization is the spontaneous emergence of order: the creator is not outside creation, but participating in it. And each agent has a part to play, no longer passively being moved as a piece on the chess board, but actively engaging in the creative process” (Harle 2012:110).

The implications for a new understanding of both contemporary and Biblical change narratives thus becomes clearer:

Firstly, “managing change” may be some of an oxymoron. The “management myth” needs to be discarded. We cannot direct a living system; we can only disturb it (Maturana in Harle 2012:111). Creation is no longer the direction of and complete control over affairs. It is the participation in affairs and following the inherent potential of affairs. Because organizational leadership was used to *making* things happen, the shift to *letting* things happen, may prove to be unbearably difficult. Being open to the surprise of emergence may ask more courage than most can muster.

Secondly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition “change and decay” have been lumped together all too often, and then contrasted with the divine equilibrium of the unchangeable God. Life requires change. Equilibrium is death. Change provides space for the exploration of new possibilities. Discomfort is healthy and that is why the concept of continued conversion is so central to what the Bible sees as the road taken by a flourishing human being.



Thirdly, if leadership starts to see its function differently, the task is no longer to take over the responsibility on behalf of followers to “create order in chaos”. It now becomes the task to interact with all members and stakeholders of an organization and help others embrace uncertainty and chaos creatively. Instead of being the “movers and shakers” leadership are now the co-moved and the co-shaken. In the context of the Bible, leadership then becomes the mission to create an environment in which the people of God in a particular location may flourish. Relying on the principle of self-organization, leadership is now seen as “distributed”. Resources reside in every unit of an organization and this formidable potential needs to be connected and tapped. This is how opportunities are discovered and taken.

As “let it happen” starts to replace “make it happen” as the core function of leadership, the creation narrative may provide a surprising framework for this view of change.

### **Job’s second kingdom**

Maybe change leadership is about reframing. Retelling the old story in a way which opens up vistas of possibility not previously envisaged. Departing from the “how-to”, linearly phased approach to change management, the road of telling the emerging story is no smooth road to enlightenment. How disconcerting and painful this road can be is often ignored in change literature. In this regard the Job change narrative is illustrative of how the change process is most often also a grieving process and that the “crucible of testing” (Smith and Elmes 2002:449) is what often brings a deeper sense of the emerging “new”.

In the Job narrative we are invited to look deeper than the usual depiction of an ancient seeker who went through a period of doubt in his faith. With courageous authenticity Job may be the “first great dissident, the individual that finally got up and complained about the way things were” (Smith and Elmes 2002:449). Amidst chaos (a period of intense change and disruption) Job portrays the attributes needed to finally break away from a rigid and deterministic worldview and transform while embracing change, including its painful sides.

Job’s story describes the painful process of letting go of one’s preconceived picture of reality in favour of one that is more comprehensive and open to

possibilities. Day and night, order and chaos, creation and destruction can only co-exist in a non-judgmental space where uncertainty is welcomed and anything can happen.

To recap the story of Job: He is a great leader and runs a very well-organized enterprise as a farmer and merchant with all his resources wisely invested and his assets “sweating”. He has lots of servants that depend upon him for their wellbeing. Job is a hard worker, a responsible man, someone who feels called to create order and being productive. He is used to command and control his environment. Job follows to the letter what he thinks is God’s rules for an orderly world.

When calamities set in, Job initially shows resilience, rebuilding what he can. But as illness also starts to take him down, despair grows swiftly. His (well paid) counsellors try their utmost to tell Job that he did nothing wrong and that his misfortunes are strokes of bad luck or natural cycles that he should just wait out. The wheel will turn. Job senses his counsellors’ ignorance. As right as they might have been in the past with their interpretations, they are not equipped to lead him in his present and future. Something is discontinuous here, the old rules do not apply anymore and Job is left to his own devices to sense the newness in the chaos. A surprising encounter comes in the form of Job’s youngest advisor, Elihu, who admits to being silent out of respect for the age and knowledge of the elders, but now comes with the fresh perspective that things are changing, will always be changing and that Job should pay attention to his inner drives and motives, put away any pride and seek the emergence of the new.

Job continues complaining and comes up against God who addresses him with the creation narrative, giving him a glimpse of the whole. Job is to understand that the divine does not fit neatly in human projections and understanding and that both light and shadow are sides to God (Smith and Elmes 2002:452). Job suspends his voices of judgment, cynicism and fear and starts to sacrifice not goods and property, but primarily the drive to have things on his own terms, rather than in accordance to the overall harmony of the divine. The period of chaos brought a clean sweep of Job’s kingdom. “Removed was anything sclerosed, stale and lifeless. Life’s renewal demanded change, and finally, by opening to the chaotic conditions and completely letting go of all the order that he had come

to expect, Job came to know more of his true nature” (Smith and Elmes 2002:453).

Job comes to be present to the meaning emerging from the chaos. In the new season his concern is much more the welfare of creation, particularly the people in his life. His wealth increases anew, but goodwill prevails. It is remarkable that Job distributes his new wealth among his sons and daughters, breaking with the tradition of giving all to his sons. Restored to wholeness, Job also regains his health. In another break with previous views Job also turns towards his daughters for counsel. According to Smith and Elmes (2002:453), looking from a Jungian perspective, Job is opening up to the feminine, realizing that his daughters can see and understand (“sense” and “make sense”) patterns or vaster dimensions of the ever-changing, sometimes chaotic world that Job faces. Their role is pivotal in restoring the vibrancy of the kingdom.

Job’s initial reaction to the chaos setting in around him was not to look within for an explanation, but to blame God. He has followed the rules, therefore in this linear cause-and-effect world there had to be another reason for the detrimental state of affairs. It was only when Job came to face his fears, desires and hatreds (his “shadow”) that he opened up to a broader perspective. His vulnerability opened him up to listening without judgment, to be receptive to help and to respond to emerging meaning. “Without the depth of vulnerability, the individual cannot possibly have as keen an awareness of what a situation demands, what people need and require to be successful” (Smith and Elmes, 2002:455). Liberated from his rigid, patriarchal view of the world, from which Job excluded so much life, while keeping everything in its place and under control, life re-emerged after Job’s ego was defeated and the inner voices attended to. Job’s second kingdom is one of extraordinary aliveness, music, the counsel of his daughters and respect for nature and humankind.

A fresh reading of the Job narrative in the context of complexity theory, leads to the awareness of order “emerging” from the events of life, after a deep engagement with own fears and desires. Living and embracing mystery and uncertainty as a source of newness is part of this journey. For those willing to go through a state of unknowing and paradox, a greater wholeness and connection with life may be discerned.

## Sensing Awareness and the Faithful Fiat

### *The limited value of the application of linear change frameworks*

Linear change frameworks are not without value, but it remains inadequate to guide continuous, radical change and it surely limits the awareness of the possible choice trajectories that may emerge in the circumstances. As a description, mostly after a completed change process, it provides good insight and alludes to important prerequisites that are part of a well-established change process. Two examples suffice to indicate how the previously mentioned frameworks of Lewin and Kotter can be applied to Biblical change narratives.

1. *The Exodus*. For the Israelites slaving under the Pharaoh there may have come times where they accepted the status quo – it has become the new normal and the comfort of the known set in where the resignation to their fate froze their expectations of the possible and framed them as victims of a situation they have no control over. It took the courageous audacity of Moses to prophetically challenge the Pharaoh and to challenge the assumptions of the Israelites that no possibilities can emerge from this constrained life. Creating a sense of urgency (Kotter’s first phase of change management) was done by fanning the fire of discontent among the people. The experience became one of “We cannot and should not live like this anymore. We are more than this; we are the People of God”. In the desert Moses acknowledged the importance of the separation or unfreeze period in which people felt the pain of leaving the old and familiar world behind; there was hurting, anger, the move to blame others for their misery: “To Moses they said: ‘Was it for lack of graves in Egypt, that you had to lead us out to die in the desert? What was the point of bringing us out of Egypt?’” (Ex 14:11–12) (Arbuckle 1996:191). Moses perceptively understood the importance of permitting the people to experience the chaos. The old cannot be let go of and the new cannot take its place without the pain of chaos. Moses constantly kept before the people, especially at times when the chaos profoundly affected them, the vision of the new world to come, “a fine country, a land of streams and springs, of waters that well up from the deep valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley” (Ex 8:7–8). Here he appropriated a more priestly leadership function, understanding and representing

his people. He also mediated Yahweh's saving interventions — for example, the gifts of manna and quails — which foreshadowed in concrete ways the fulfilment of the promise in Canaan (Exod 16). Moses also modelled collaborative action. He sought the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, who instructed him to group the people into manageable administrative units, under the direction of “capable and God-fearing men, men who are trustworthy and incorruptible” (Ex 18:21). Moses was also bluntly reminded by Jethro that he needed time to think and pray in order to discover the vision and plans required by Yahweh for the people to enter into a new land (Ex 18:19–20).

2. *The Prodigal Son*. Although a parable, the process of conversion as an adoption of emerging change can be applied to the narrative of the Prodigal Son. The chosen trajectory of the younger son leads to a downward spiral landing him among the swine. It is in this chaos that new possibilities are born. A sense of urgency is established where the son realizes that change is to be embraced and to be enacted. The tension between what could be and what really was became clear (“My father has ... and here I am”). The opportunity cost of discarded trajectories (for example the one the older brother took by staying with the father) became clear. A vision is born and is enacted upon: “I will go back to my father.” The homecoming is a feast (the short-term win is celebrated) and the new approach is institutionalized. An interesting twist to this story is the older brother's grievances with his own discarded trajectories (“I have stayed, and what has it brought me?”).

### *Sensing and sense-making*

Even in the above-mentioned two examples the seemingly structured change process has its foundation in the sensing and sense-making attributes of collective leadership.

1. *Moses in the Exodus*. Moses' intra-personal sense-making process was his attempt to understand his own narrative from his growing up in the house of the Pharaoh, his self-imposed exile after killing an Egyptian and his calling gained from the theophany in the burning bush. “Coming to his senses” Moses becomes attuned to broader strokes of meaning in the canvas of his environment and history. Resisting vehemently at times, but open to the possible, Moses

eventually agrees to become a change agent and was on his way to the Pharaoh with the message: “Let my people go!” In this sense he would act as prophet-leader, putting words to the change that was emerging as possibility in the context of the Israelites.

2. *The exile.* During the exilic period the prophet Jeremiah would take a similar position as change leader. In addition to making sense of what is happening, what it relates to, what the possibilities are and what the choice points and the opportunity costs of discarded trajectories would be, Jeremiah also acts as grief counsellor (which leans to the priestly function of leadership). Grieving for change, the People of God once again come to their senses and find their identity after facing the brutality of their losses and what they have become in the process. Jeremiah described the scene as the return to the formless chaos before creation. “I looked to the earth – it was a formless waste; to the heavens, their light had gone ...I looked – the fruitful land was a desert, all its towns in ruins before Yahweh (Jer 4:23, 26). Jeremiah was calling his listeners to reflect on the lesson of primeval chaos in the opening verses of the book of Genesis. Once again, chaos is not seen as “dead matter” or “sterile nothingness”. It is described in terms of confusion, darkness, emptiness, nothingness, but it carries with it the notion of indeterminacy and potentiality. The primary motif, or symbol, in the mythological use of chaos is that through God’s creative power, his mercy and human co-operation, radically new and vigorous life can spring up. Jeremiah is saying that the chaos surrounding him is pure potentiality (and the future should therefore be “possibilized”). An experience of chaos – that is, the radical breakdown of the personally or culturally predictable – contains potential for immense creativity. Chaos is a freeing or subversive experience for it breaks the crust of custom or habit, allowing the imagination to dream of alternative or radically different ways of doing things (Arbuckle 1996:92).
3. *The Father of the Prodigal Son.* The real change leadership in the parable of the Prodigal Son lies with the father. Letting things happen instead of making things happen, he senses the journey of his youngest and let him go. Always expecting new possibilities to emerge from the loss of a child, he stands up and run towards his son on his

return. Sensing that the behaviour is not to be punished but that the conversion of the youngest is rather to be affirmed, he takes on the priestly role and marks it with exuberant celebration. Meanwhile, a new sensing and sense-making process is emerging in his dealings with the resentments of his oldest son, where he takes on a more prophetic role.

4. *Maria and the Fiat*. “Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum” (“Let it be done to me according to your word”) is the response Mary gave when she received the message that she was to conceive and bear a son to be called Jesus. Creation’s “let there be light” aligns to the “let it be done” of Mary. Both are sensing and sense-making dispositions towards chaos before creation and of confusion (“How could it be?”) before new life.
5. *Jesus in Gethsemane*. Far from managing a neat, orderly change management process, the recount of Jesus’ struggle is one of undetermined outcome, of intense confusion and fear and finally his acquiescence, but defiantly so, knowing that the trajectory he chooses opens up possibilities that at this stage cannot be wholly preconceived. Following the emerging pattern, Jesus, being awake to possibility, proceeds to wake up his disciples (who have resigned to being stuck), to take them along on a treacherous but promising journey.
6. *Emmaus*. The disciples on the Road to Emmaus are eventually accompanied by Jesus who becomes their mentor in sense-making. They have resigned to their fate. What they hoped for was lost. Jesus was crucified. The drudgery of life must go on, thus their return to Emmaus. Instead of making a change management process happen, Jesus “lets it happen”. As their prophet-leader He carefully invites them to retell their story, an important part of sense-making. It is in an intimate relational setting later that night, when breaking bread together, where the meeting of hearts opens them up to see the hope emerging. For the first time they recognize Jesus in their midst (although nothing has changed, except their own sensing and sense-making). Jesus the priest-leader surrenders the change process to the disciples at that moment (he vanishes from their sight), as they are now ready to not only make sense of changing circumstances, but also

they are ready to respond in creative ways to the emerging meaning. In their case, it becomes an immediate turnaround and the road now leads back to Jerusalem where their role as change agents will be performed – they can now become the prophets, priests and kings themselves, letting change happen where it emerges.

## 5. Conclusion

In a world of non-linear change, the navigation of chaos in organizations and societies can no longer be adequately approached with linear methods. The management myth is that change can be controlled and directed at will with the right amount of resources allocated and with a well-executed project plan. The failure rate of change management efforts attests to this being a myth. The alternative is more challenging and requires more involvement and engagement, but the results are more sustainable and the process certainly more fulfilling in the long run to all stakeholders. In our application on Biblical change narratives it became clear that leadership functioning in contexts of complex change need to be leaders that are willing to sacrifice their own preconceived assumptions about their context. Even more, they need to be willing to partake in a journey of reflection and discovery of their voices of judgment, cynicism and fear, before they will be able to sense emerging patterns evolving in the chaos of change. To make sense of and skilfully interpret environmental signals and above all to translate those meanings to those that are co-affected by the changing environment, requires a focus on relationships and on identity which is only possible once a leader becomes comfortable with his or her own vulnerability and uncertainty and starts to see surprise as an invitation and chaos as potential. Investigating the extent to which a non-linear and narrative African theology can relate to and constructively inform the concepts of sensing leadership and emerging change is recommended as areas for future study.

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