

'FROM EGYPT TO CANAAN'

Some Biblical Principles of Organisational Change

Reflections from Rick James¹

The Exodus Story is an extremely good example of major organisational change. Some of the principles of change that we read in the story of how the Israelites escaped from Egypt, spent time in the Wilderness and eventually entered the Promised Land, have profound relevance and application to OD in churches today. You may find these notes useful:

The Process of Change:

Letting Go:

Change and transition is an uncomfortable process. Initially in order to induce change there is a need for a significant dissatisfaction with the status quo. To some degree there must be pain and suffering to induce people to move. They had been in Egypt a long time 430 years - [Exodus 1:11 'so they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour'](#)
[Exodus 1:14 'they made their lives bitter with hard labour'](#)
[Exodus 1:22 'Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile"](#)

There is also a need for a sense of urgency and with the Israelites it was surprisingly the Egyptians in fact that forced them to go [Exodus 12:33 'The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise", they said "we will all die".'](#)

The starting point for transition is not the outcome, but the ending that you will have to make in order to leave the old situation behind. There is a need to let go before you can grab hold of anything else and according to Bridges it is, 'the failure to identify and be ready for endings and losses that change produces is the largest single problems that organisations in transitions encounter'². One important way to address this issue is to consciously mark the endings as God told the Israelites to do by celebrating the Passover, [Exodus 12: 14 'This is a day you are to commemorate ... - a lasting ordinance'](#)

Neutral Zone:

However, once the old way is gone there is an important period before the promised land can be reached - a neutral zone. This is not meaningless time, but important time for reorientation. With the Israelites we shall see that it took them a very short time to get out of Egypt, but a very long time for 'Egypt' to get out of their attitudes. This neutral zone, exemplified by their time in the Wilderness, was an important time for bringing about a change in mindset.

¹ With inspiration and ideas from William Ogara at CORAT

² Bridges, W., Managing Transitions

Yet it is a profoundly uncomfortable time as the old way is gone and the new ways are only gradually being established. It is characterised by people having fears about the future with all its uncertainties. [Numbers 13:27&31-32](#) 'We went to see the land to which you sent us and it does flow with milk and honey! But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large'... 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are ...All the people we saw there are of a great size.. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we looked the same to them'

It is also an opportunity to develop the principles of new ways of working. During their time in the Wilderness the Israelites were given a number of new guidelines for their moral and religious behaviour such as the 'Ten Commandments' in Exodus 20 and all the laws and feasts described in Exodus 21-31 and all of Leviticus.

New Beginnings

According to Bridges, the third stage of change are the new beginnings which need to be nurtured like a plant. These new beginnings must be underpinned by a strong vision for the future which gives meanings and motivation to the people. This motivation is vital as any change involves risk. Change is a gamble and there is always the possibility it will not work.

With the Israelites it is clear from Exodus 33:3 and Numbers 13:27 that the vision of a land flowing with milk and honey provided a strong inspirational force.

The Nature of Change:

The exodus story also provides us with an example of the four key dimensions of any change process.

Spiritual Dimension of Change

Not surprisingly in secular management literature the importance of the spiritual dimension of change has been downplayed. Recently, however, key change practitioners such as Roger Harrison (*The Consultant's Journey*) are reflecting that 40 years of a purely humanistic approach to change have shown the limitations of an a-spiritual understanding of change. Such shifts are also reflected in institutions as seemingly secular as the World Bank who hosted a conference in 1996, entitled "Ethics and Spiritual Values: Promoting Environmentally Sustainable Development" which recognised "*the urgent need to incorporate beliefs and values that respect and value the centrality of people (their spiritual needs) and their physical environment in development*" (Bartley, 1997, p14).

The Exodus example shows us how critical it is to understand the spiritual dimension of change. In this experience the whole change process was not merely blessed by God, but initiated and directed by Him. Without God there would have been no Exodus or Promised Land.

God spoke to Moses of His plans first, not the other way round.

[Exodus 3:7-8](#) 'The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering. So I

have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

It is clear that change should be initiated by God - it is His work and we are merely cooperating.

God then continued to lead the change process. ‘So God led the people around the desert road towards the Red Sea’ ... ‘By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night on a pillar of fire to give them light’ Exodus 13:18 and 21

God also empowered the change process too. Indeed the central importance of God’s power in change should not be underestimated: Exodus 3:19-20 ‘But I know that the King of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them’. God sent ‘supernatural’ plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, firstborn (Exodus 7-11). Then clearly God’s power was displayed in the parting of the Red Sea: Exodus 14:21 ‘Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land’ and 27 and 28 ‘The Egyptians were fleeing towards it, and the Lord swept them into the sea.. Not one of them survived’.

This power continued to strengthen the change through the provision of manna in Exodus 16:4 ‘Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you”.

Importance of Culture and Mindset - Wilderness

The Exodus story also shows the importance of culture and mindset in any change. Despite God’s power, it was very difficult for the enslaved Israelites to let go. In Exodus 6:9 it says ‘Moses reported this (the promise of God’s deliverance) to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage’.

Indeed after the miraculous escape from Egypt there was still great resistance and complaining with a keen desire to return to old ways:

Exodus 14:11-12 ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?.. Didn’t we say to you leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert’

Exodus 16:2-3 ‘In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’

Exodus 17:3 ‘But the people were thirsty for water there and they grumbled against Moses’

Numbers 11:1 ‘Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord’

Numbers 14:1-4 ‘That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”’

If this is how the Israelites reacted even with such a demonstration of God's power, it is no wonder that we experience resistance to change in our organisations.

The old mindset was slow to change despite all the miracles and Moses leadership. In fact as early as the second year after leaving Egypt the Israelites had the opportunity to enter the promised land. Because they turned it down they waited another 38 years as a result - [Deuteronomy 2:14](#) '38 years passed from the time we left Kadesh Barnea until we crossed the Zered Valley. The old ways of doing things were so engrained in the Israelites who left Egypt that it took a whole new generation to accept the change. [Numbers 14:30-31](#) 'Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb and Joshua. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected'. Casualties are often inevitable in a change process- [Exodus 32:28](#)

There is a positive aspect to mindset too - one person enthusiastic about the change can be a potent force in getting there in the end.

[Numbers 14:24](#) 'But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly I will bring him into the land he went to and his descendants will inherit it'

Political Importance of Leadership

The Exodus example also illustrates the importance of political leadership in driving through change. At times the leadership was attacked - [Numbers 14:10](#) 'But the whole assembly talked of stoning them' but Moses remained firm as he knew that this change was God's will. 'Moses answered the people "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still' In [Exodus 14:13](#)

The power of Moses' leadership in the change was helped by his humility - 'Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone one else on the face of the earth' [Numbers 12:3](#)

And yet it was also apparent that without a critical mass of support it is impossible to drive through change as it is an intensely political process. In [Numbers 13:30](#) only Caleb said 'we should go and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it' and as a result the people refused.

Technical Change: Structures and Decision-making

Change also has a technical element. It requires some nuts and bolts expertise around issues such as structure and decision-making. Moses own leadership was very centralised with him taking all major decisions of judgement prompting his father-in-law Jethro to advise: [Exodus 18 :17-18](#) 'What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you alone. You cannot handle it'

Jethro instead recommended a more participatory management style and structure - [Exodus 18:25-26](#) 'He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times'

This example shows how change processes can also often be helped by good quality outside consultancy support. Jethro as perhaps the first Organisational Change consultant was:

Was respected (father-in-law) - Exodus 18:1 'Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses'.

Had good consulting skills of observation and questioning - Exodus 18:14 'When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for his people, he said, What is it that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all the people stand round you from morning till evening?'

He was able to identify the problem and the consequence - Exodus 18:17-18 'What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you alone. You cannot handle it'.

Was also able to suggest a way forward - Exodus 18:19 'Listen to me now and I will give you some advice and may God be with you ...21 Select capable men from all the people, men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens'.