

Different worldviews hamper organisational change



By [Kevin Liebenberg](#)

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Business leaders have a never-ending mandate to drive positive change in the organisations they lead. However, they are often daunted by the task of effecting change amongst their people. This is understandable. Everyone reacts to change differently, which makes it very difficult to tackle change management. There is plenty of evidence that shows that most efforts to initiate change within organisations fail.

So what do differing worldviews have to do with this?

The starting point is to understand the challenge. People all have different structures of interpretation that causes them to see things differently from one another - and therefore to respond to requests for change differently.

The philosopher and psychologist Will McWhinney says that any change effort triggers conflict, and that the conflict, in most cases, eventually destroys the change effort. The effort ultimately leaves the situation more messy and complex than it was before.

According to McWhinney, this happens because people differ from one another on a far deeper level than just race, culture, language, and gender. In order to simplify this exploration, he used a Jungian construct to hypothesise that people tend to look at life from four dominant positions he labelled:

- Unitary;
- Sensory;
- Social or
- Mythic

The 'unitary' worldview is supported by people who see the world in terms of rules, adherence, and policies. To capture the emotions of these people one must use models, policies, and 'laws'. They know the 'truth' and expect others to live by it.

Seeing is believing

The 'sensory' worldview is the world of "seeing is believing". This worldview is dominated by the senses, science, and commerce. You must show these people in an 'objective' data-based way what the benefits of the change will be.

The 'social' worldview is a humanistic perspective. These people are concerned by the feelings and values of others. Fairness is a core component, and moral and ethical questions are paramount.

The 'mythic' worldview is one of story, symbol, and myth. These people need their imaginations extended beyond the limits of what currently exists. They thrive on inspiration to support the dream of a better world.

The position that people adopt is mostly determined by how they view change and by what they would like to see happening after the change. For example, some people believe that change is to a large extent caused by external factors such as economies, other people, or even God. McWhinney labelled these thinkers "determinists."

Two groups

With regard to the preferred outcome of change, McWhinney identified two groups of people: those who want the change effort to produce different actions and behaviour (termed "pluralists"); and those who expect the change effort to produce more sameness, integration, cooperation, shared vision and values. He called this group the "monists."

McWhinney then combined all these distinctions to establish four core perspectives or worldviews: deterministic-monistic (unitary); deterministic-pluralistic (sensory); freedom-monistic (mythic) and freedom-pluralistic (social). He posited that all people have a preference for one of these worldviews, and this has powerful implications for how people approach conflict, how they handle relationships and what data one should include in the communication elements around the change in order to influence them.

This is critical to understand when communicating change effort, bearing in mind that any successful change management strategy should accommodate as many of these perspectives/worldviews as possible.

As a leader, the challenge is to find a way to accommodate all of these worldviews and incorporate them into one's strategy. If conflict arises, it helps to be aware of one's own preferred way of looking at things, as this will provide insight into any clash of worldviews.

ABOUT KEVIN LIEBENBERG

Kevin Liebenberg is the Managing Director of Actuate; a position he has held for the past 4 years. Before his arrival at Actuate, Kevin spent 9 years with Nedbank in various positions including strategic marketing, client value propositions, sales management, CRM, organisational development, change management and leadership development. He spent much of his time in the corporate world straddling the disciplines of marketing and HR.

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