

Anticipating Headwinds

Using “Narrative Tacking” to Build an Inclusive Future

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This paper proposes a framework for addressing entrenched resistance to change. It borrows a metaphor from sailing to suggest that the best way through unwanted transformations is by “narrative tacking.” Drawing a parallel to how sailors navigate through headwinds by “tacking,” I argue that “tacking” through the narrative of change calms the resistance and enables forward motion. Specifically, it requires shifting the locus of attention from behaviors or the future state to the values and intentions of the actors. In attending to intentional states, we create space and flexibility in the narrative of change that enables the “wiggle room” needed for forward movement. I demonstrate the process through two case studies of complex, high-stakes transformation efforts that succeeded above and beyond what anyone expected. I suggest how these maneuvers provide a template for other kinds of change projects as well. In the end, by anticipating and harnessing resistance, we can craft change processes that are more inclusive.

Keywords: Change management; narrative; inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

*“Waves are not measured in feet or inches; they are measured in increments of fear.”
—Buzzy Trent, pioneer of big wave surfing*

For many people, change is hard. In fact, it is a terrifying, unwelcome, rage-inducing experience. This is especially true when the change is not internally initiated, but triggered by people or circumstances outside our control. The magnitude of the requested change may seem minor to those who pose it, but to the receiver, it can feel like a tidal wave swamping their world. It is of little surprise that resistance is a common response to a perceived impending disaster. In fact, it’s the appropriate response. We should protect and defend.

For those of us whose job it is to lead change, the question becomes: what now? How should we handle resistance? The conundrum lies in the fact that those leading change rarely see disaster ahead. We see better futures – our “good” lies forward. Change efforts typically stem from a recognition of problems in the present that will lead to bigger problems in the future unless we alter what we’re doing now. And yet for those resisting change, “good” – in a multitude of forms – tends to reside in the now. Hence the problem.

As ethnographers working in industry, we are often the architects and artists of those happier imagined futures. We play a critical role in building alternative worlds through our lives as service designers, product designers, experience designers, data designers, communications designers, organization change leaders, and a multitude of other catalytic roles (Lovejoy & Lucas 2020). Through these roles, we occupy a privileged space that enables us to reframe the dynamics of change resistance in order to create a more harmonious and inclusive transformation experience. We have the power to not only create a better future, but to ease the path toward it.

This paper posits a framework built from social theory – and sailing – that enables us to design a better transformation *process* by anticipating resistance to that work. Drawing a parallel to how sailors navigate through headwinds by “tacking,” I argue that “tacking”

through the narrative of change calms the resistance and enables forward motion. Specifically, it requires shifting the locus of attention from behaviors or the future state to the values and intentions of the actors. In attending to intentional states, we create space and flexibility in the narrative of change that enables the “wobble room” needed for forward movement. I demonstrate the process through two case studies of complex, high-stakes transformation efforts that succeeded above and beyond what anyone expected. I suggest how these maneuvers provide a template for other kinds of change projects as well.

NAVIGATING THE TRADITIONAL WAY

A ship in the harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.
—William Shedd

The literature on how to manage change is certainly plentiful, but deceptively unhelpful when it comes to addressing sustained resistance to change. It largely falls into three buckets: how to nudge specific behaviors; how to sell the vision of the future; and how to deal with ongoing defiance and opposition.

At a basic level, behavioral science work on change acknowledges that change can be difficult, and recommends making it “fun.” The gamification movement is clearly one example of this. There are examples of gamified change in everything from weight loss (Trent 2015) to financial goals (Walden & Foreman 2021) to learning new languages (TPR), to corporate initiatives (Forbes Tech Council 2019). Gamification incorporates rewards, competition, challenges and other similar dynamics to compel people to make needed and desired change.

Another approach is to embrace the “spoonful of sugar” model and “bundle” the hard parts of change with the rewards that people want (see Milkman 2021). For example, if you struggle to get to the gym after work because you look forward to binge-watching TV, then watch TV while working out at the gym. The core idea of “bundling” is to wrap the good with the hard so that the work is the reward.

Alternatively, “commitment devices” extend the concept of the promise through the creation of penalties for breaking them (Rogers, Milkman & Volpp 2014). These tactics inspire people to hold to commitments by imposing costs or accountability (social, financial, physical) for lapses. This can be a “buddy system” involving another person, or a device that “locks” you out before/after a certain event, or an app that triggers something when certain conditions are present. The point is to make breaking the promise painful and/or costly.

All of these nudge tactics work, but not in all cases, and often not for the long-haul (see Milkman 2021). The reason many of them fail in the long run centers on what behavioral scientists refer to as “present bias” – the tendency we have to give greater weight to a more immediate moment over the indeterminacy of a future state (see O’Donoghue & Rabin 1999). From this perspective, it is also a failure to properly read the problems of the present and the potential of the future state – it is “settling” for what is comfortable over what is arguably a more optimal state.

When present bias kicks in and stirs up resistance to change, the research suggests focusing on the future state. First, solicit input from those who resist change (Porter 2016). Hear their concerns and listen, even if their comments ultimately don’t change the direction of the plan. This might also include providing options to those who are resisting change

(Lewis & Russ 2011). Then, enhance the story of what comes next. Tversky & Kahneman's work on the certainty effect (1986) and prospect theory (1979) indicate that people can be moved past present bias by emphasizing the promise of gains: "Once you get people to see the gains as equal to or exceeding the 100% better threshold, they will be able to see the future opportunity as worth participating in, even over the reliable and proven state" (Nobl 2021). In short, tell a better and more enticing story about the future, and people will join you.

When all of these approaches fail, the research suggests that we typically turn to ignoring the naysayers, and if needed, forcing them out (see Lewis & Russ 2011; Hayashi 2017). While not affording resistors too much power, the evidence suggests that those requesting change typically move forward, and believe that the resistors will either come along eventually, or simply drop out and move elsewhere when the transformation becomes too uncomfortable. When they don't leave voluntarily, then the standard course of action is dismissal. Framed as dangerous to the whole effort, resistance is portrayed as a kind of virus that, if left untouched, might spread through the ranks and foment serious problems. While benign neglect is certainly less aggressive than active dismissals, it runs a similar risk of stoking conflict by positioning those leading change as unresponsive and unconcerned with the perspectives of those affected by it.

There are two core challenges with these general approaches to managing change. At one level, they are tightly focused on individual behavior. There is little attention to the social motivations and relationships that shape and drive actions on behalf of a wider community – to what Lawrence (1969) referred to as the "change in their human relationships that generally accompanies technical change." Additionally, each one of these tactics begins with the assumption that the future is a better state, and therein denigrates the present without regard to a person's status within that present. As Kanter (2012) noted, "When change involves a big shift of strategic direction, the people responsible for the previous direction dread the perception that they must have been wrong." Crafting a future that will engage the full community necessitates understanding their experience of the now, and how stories function, and so we turn to that challenge now.

STORIES AS NAVIGATIONAL DEVICES

"I'll teach you how to jump on the wind's back and then away we go"
—JM Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Theorists who study narrative posit that stories function as navigational devices within cultures. On the one hand, they serve as reminders of what is expected and serve to keep people from going too far astray from cultural norms (see Basso 1990; Holland & Quinn 1987). This is particularly true of things like folktales, "just-so" stories, fairy tales, and a range of literature for young people which teaches standards and expectation. For example, Quinn (1987) articulates the ways in which movies and books create a convergent model of marriage and romance in America, providing a template for young women as they navigate their own relationships. These become "cultural scripts" or "schemas" that channel behavior toward a socially desired, standard outcome. Importantly, these narratives are often "fuzzy," lacking in specificity that enables members of the culture to apply the story to fit their own experiences.

On the other hand, we also tell stories when something has gone “off course,” and requires an explanation. We use narratives to justify a deviation from the standard or expected path within our culture (see D’Andrade & Strauss 1992; Shore 1996; Comaroff 1981). Shore’s (1996) recounting of Samoan adoption narratives is a poignant case study of the ways in which cultures deploy core values to enhance the socially positive aspects of a personally difficult experience, and create a valued role for those who experience this event. In fact, the whole premise of the “Manchester School” approach to anthropology was to find those moments where cultures “break,” and to lean into the explanations people offer as a way to understand the assumptions about how we behave within a cultural context (see Colson 2008; Elvers & Handleman 2006).

How this happens is an important related question – one explored in depth by Jerome Bruner in his work on how events and actions become meaningful within a cultural context (1990). Bruner argues that a narrative forges links:

“between the exceptional and the ordinary. ... It focuses upon the expectable and/or the usual in the human condition. It endows these with legitimacy... Yet it has powerful means that are purpose-built for rendering the exceptional and the unusual into comprehensible form. ... *The function of a story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern.*” (emphasis mine)

In short, stories deploy deeply held shared beliefs about “why we do what we do” in order to weave a compelling and sensible arc that connects two or more events and renders a portrayal of the person as a member of the culture. Whereas the standard cultural script may have a person go from Point A to Point C, narratives can also weave a justifiable explanation as to why we landed at Point F, when needed, by framing motivation and intention in particular ways that enable the person to remain a member of society.

This is largely why members external to a community can see inconsistencies between a person’s actions and their stated values, when those inside the group do not perceive (or give credence to) the discrepancy. As Graeber noted, value “is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves” (2001:45). Given that these are shaped within and evaluated through cultural contexts, we can extend Graeber’s position to parallel Kluckhohn’s (1951) inclusion of the group – namely, value is the way we represent ourselves to those who matter in our social worlds. What is critical to note is that – within each community – people read their actions as consistent with deeply held beliefs and values, and thus hold motivations and intentions that facilitate the expression of those values. In short, we try to act as good people within our cultural and social world.

Bruner’s focus on intentional states and motivations is a key corrective to the recent work linking change efforts to the behavioral sciences. If we follow the logic of his argument, the flexibility of a story lies not in the actions per se, but in the underlying values and theories about intentional states. **If we identify the culturally-appropriate intentional state, then any action or behavior can be woven into a coherent narrative that has value within the social context.** Hence the opportunity space in managing resistance to change is not addressing behaviors, nor in articulating a brighter picture of the future state, but in **understanding the intentional state and motives of the person in the present, and then using that as the connective thread for the actions that will get us to that**

anticipated future state. In this move, we enable people to hold on to a sense of a valued social self while facilitating change in how that self is expressed and engaged through actions.

NARRATIVE TACKING: UNDERSTANDING PORT AND STARBOARD

The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.
—Vincent Van Gogh

Too often in our effort to detail a better future, we denigrate and dismiss the “now” as broken, old-fashioned, obsolete, out-of-touch, and a host of other descriptors. It is the failure of change management efforts to properly excavate and embrace the “good” within the present that is the generative force of headwinds. This is often the advice from behavioral scientists – make the future infinitely preferable to the present.

In trying to understand how to manage resistance, I turned to other fields to explore the concept as managed in radically other contexts. This brought me to sailing. In sailing, boats cannot sail directly into the wind. Rather, they move through headwinds in a repeating dance with opposites. It is referred to as tacking: by shifting the direction of the bow between port (left) and starboard (right), the boat moves forward in a series of diagonal maneuvers by catching the wind as it alternates from one side to the other (ASA 2021). The sails harness the wind by glancing along its course.

If we are to extend this metaphor, then we need to consider how to harness the resistance to the stories we tell about change. Narratives contain five central elements: Characters, Setting, Plot, Motivation (Conflict), and Tone (Theme). **In narrative tacking, the challenge for the change agent is to connect the existing intentional state to new features across each of these elements.** For example, if the old narrative was set at home, how might it be set elsewhere? If the old narrative was motivated by exclusivity, how might it become a story of transparency? The change agent must “tack” through each element to weave together a story that is both perfectly familiar – in that it retains the intentional state of the person – and at the same time, entirely new – in that it entails a shift in all the elements of the story itself.

While this may sound complicated, cultures (and stories) are purpose-built for precisely this kind of old-yet-new dynamic. Indeed, one of the more fascinating dynamics of cultures is their ability to be both enduringly static and ever-dynamic. To appear unchanged over centuries, with the essence of a culture traceable across decades of food, fashion, institutions, languages, and so on. And yet, in parallel, we can similarly map differences both subtle and profound. Taussig (1993) referred to this as the dance between mimesis and alterity: sameness and difference. The energy that powers this sameness-while-different comes from dialectics: oppositions held in constant dialogue such that their inability to fully resolve the debate is the generative force of cultural patterns (Turner 1995, Nuckolls 1998, Mintz 1985).

Every culture has dialectics. Indeed, every core concept has a dialectical opposite: home and away; in and out; rich and poor; old and new; stasis and change; individual and collective; self and other; and so on (Bellah 1986, Riesman 1963, Putman 2001, Hsu 1983). When held as dialectics, they create the flexibility that is central to Bruner’s theory about the role of narrative: if stories enable people to explicate a divergent path in a culturally-

appropriate way, then the intentional states create the necessary space for opposites to become included in the master narrative – for the divergent to become the expected.

The chart below offers a concise rendition of the framework we used for “narrative tacking”:

Story element	Identifying the Dialectic
Character	Thinking about the present as narrated by those resisting change, how do they convey a valued sense of self? How do they portray others? Who do they trust? Who connects them to the moment?
Setting	Thinking about the background of the story, what meaningful elements of the present could be brought forward into the future state in a changed way? How can you facilitate their control over aspects of the setting? What settings do they fear?
Plot	What matters most is their perception of being valued and valuable. How can you facilitate their ability to be good?
Tone (Theme)	Given their portrayal of the present, what is the appropriate tone for who they perceive themselves to be in relation to the change-agents?
Motivation (Conflict)	What matters to the people who don’t want to come along? Where is their present legitimately better than the future? How can we preserve this? How can you lean into those values?

The following case studies detail the way “narrative tacking” can be used to diffuse resistance to change. The first example details how tacking enables personal change, while the second presents an example of organizational change.

CASE EXAMPLE 1: NAVIGATING DIFFICULT LIVES

If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.
—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

In the course of our existence, it happens all too often that we are derailed in pursuit of the future we envisioned for ourselves. “Things happen” – so they say. Such simple words, and yet so personally devastating at an experiential level. “Things” like the death of loved ones, the loss of meaning-filled activity and employment, the loss of a home, the loss of friends, a “no” when we really wanted a “yes.” While the clinical literature calmly refers to them as “adverse life events,” they are experienced as massive tumult – to follow our sailing metaphor, one could call them waves that can and do capsize ships.

For all their destructive power, the damage may not always be similarly assessed by all people. While some may see a boat that is completely destroyed, others will cling to a piece of wood and feel they are just fine as they float through the wreckage.

A classic example of this happens in the case of alcohol abuse disorder: while people may look at the drinking patterns of another as highly problematic and see the ruin caused

by such quantities of consumption, the person themselves may not agree with the assessment and see their alcohol use and life as perfectly fine. The statistics bear this out: it is estimated that roughly 14.5 million Americans have Alcohol Use Disorder, and 92% of people who meet the clinical diagnostic guidelines for AUD will refuse treatment because they personally disagree with the diagnosis (NIAAA 2021).

While we could simply say “to each their own,” the reality is not so simple. The estimated costs to the US economy of this refusal of treatment ranges from \$249 billion to \$1.45 trillion annually (see Sacks et al, 2010; RCA 2016). Getting more people into healthier patterns with alcohol has significant ramifications for everyone.

The standard cultural narrative of alcohol abuse posits that interventions will not work until the person “hits bottom” and has lost something of such value that they finally seek treatment – this is akin to Tversky & Kahneman’s point that the future must be so much better than the present to inspire change. If needed, we provide treatment through in-patient programs that remove the individual from their life and cultural context. We offer a core “12-step” program of supportive strangers who’ve walked a similar path and can affirm the emotional wounds of the addict while providing guidance on next steps. The narratives positions individuals as powerless in the face of alcohol and only able achieve a healthy life through abstinence.

So how do we convince nearly 14 million people that this is their story? That they have a problem with alcohol? We don’t. Clearly, that creates headwinds and they refuse. When asked why they refuse, people state things like:

- “I’m not that kind of addict.”
- “I don’t need to change.”
- “I can stop any time.”

It is important to note that most of these people hold jobs, they have houses and apartments that are home to them. They talk at length about friends and loved ones and children. They are involved and active in their communities. They go out. They are, by many measures, very typical members of our society. They also happen to have very complicated relationships with alcohol, often consuming upwards of 30 drinks within a week.

When confronted about their drinking in the past, they reported entrenching in their resistance. Returning to Tversky & Kahneman, the more others built an idyllic sober world, the more they dismissed it. In short, the more people pushed, the harder they pushed back, often to the point of cutting out relationships with people who wanted them to change. Because in their narrative, their present is “good,” and they are “good,” albeit imperfect people.

Yet each refusal generates an opportunity for an alternative type of intervention premised in dialectics: one that is not tied to the concept of “hitting bottom” first; one that endows the person with a sense of agency and control and respect; one that shifts the focus from a behavioral and mental model to something else; and one that shifts the location of treatment from “away” to “home.” Such a program might have a chance at engaging some portion of those 92% of deniers.

This is precisely what a team of researchers did (see Watkins et al., 2017). The interdisciplinary group included people with deep, ongoing contact with the 92% who refused treatment. Leveraging their decades of diverse experience, they collaboratively

developed a program for treating Alcohol and Substance Use Disorder that anticipated headwinds, and countered them by shifting the narrative at each stage. Their novel intervention took on each component of the cultural script about addiction and created an alternative path to a more sober and healthy life:

- **Characters:** For a range of reasons, trust is challenging for people in the midst of AUD, which is largely why they mistrust the motives of those who try to help them, and are suspect of the motives and relevance of strangers in a 12-step program. The team foresaw this challenge, and looked for consistent individuals within the social networks of people with AUD who had nothing to gain or lose from the person's state of sobriety. In the end, they built upon established positive relationships with personal physicians – which also tied to behaviors that signaled a responsible person attending to their health.
- **Motivation:** The team had seen all too many cases of “hitting bottom” result in death, and wanted an intervention that – in essence – created a “bottom” for people. Moreover, their experiences signaled that engaging people in discussion about AUD from the perspective of emotions and mental health typically put people on the defensive and limited the efficacy of efforts. Having identified primary care physicians as a positive and reliable relationship for this cohort, they shifted the motivation for action from mental well-being to physical well-being. Specifically, they did not talk about “addiction” or “abuse,” but focused on health and biomarkers (e.g., “your liver enzymes are elevated,” or “you’ve put on a lot of weight recently”).
- **Tone:** The standard script for addiction posits the individual as “helpless” in the face of alcohol, which runs counter to cultural narratives of adults as agentive and responsible. To counter this, the team focused on reduction, not elimination, thereby evidencing respect for the person as capable and in control of their choices.
- **Setting:** In contrast to the standard script which sets treatment “outside” the lives and relationships of people with AUD, the team referred people to individualized cognitive-based therapist within the clinic to develop health plans tailored around their lives and goals. In normalizing the context, it reduced the potential shame and stigma attending to behavior that is so abnormal that it requires sequestration from the community.
- **Plot:** The standard script is a demand for a life-long change, often premised on a conflictual “intervention.” In lieu of this, the team leveraged ongoing dialogue with trusted individuals, and gave people multiple opportunities to try the program at any time, and to leave the program at any time. The idea was to find tailored shifts that worked for the person, and to partner the person with someone who reflected back their sense of self as a competent, responsible person.

In short, the team changed critical elements of the story by leaning into the dialectical oppositions identified through the refusals, all while preserving the original intentional state of “responsible, good” person. For each point of resistance, they changed the dynamic, removed the block, and enabled the story to move forward.

Within the first year, 60% of patients who were invited to enroll did, and 35% completed the full 6-month intervention. They dramatically reduced their alcohol intake and improved their physical (and consequently financial) well-being. All remained in this healthier state a year out when I interviewed them. While there are others who declined during the study period, it is possible they joined after our tracking ceased. Either way, it was a significant improvement over established change efforts and holds promise for additional settings and extensions.

The situation of individual resistance to change creates opportunities for tailoring stories to each person, but this is more challenging in collective transformation programs, such as are common in business and other organizations. Yet there are indications that this “tacking” approach of addressing difficult change may yet succeed.

CASE STUDY 2: BUILDING A BIG ENOUGH SHIP

"Headwinds are sore vexations and the more passengers the sorer."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

It is often a thankless job to be the person who leads change in organizations. There is absolutely no way to do so without kicking up resistance, simply because there are so many interpretations of the present state. And so many more characters, motivations, plot twists, and so forth that must be navigated in these efforts.

Even so, there is power within this approach. Consider the challenge of building robust plans for addressing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEI&B) within an organization. On the heels of the racial strife that rocked the US in 2020, many companies pledged to address racial issues within their organizations, including increasing diversity, addressing pay equity, and building a culture where differences are welcomed and embraced.

As might be expected, this has met with varying degrees of success across organizations. While the sentiment for supporting DEI&B is often strong, there are cases of resistance to adopting practices and behaviors that appear to conflict with organizational mission and values. This is particularly salient in organizations that purport to hire “the best and brightest,” or that lean into values such as objectivity, rigor, best-in-class, world-class, and so forth.

In one example from my work, the organization launched a new effort in July 2020 on the heels of the racial strife. For certain members of the organization, this was a most welcomed initiative. Many of these individuals had tried to make a case for DEI&B among senior leadership for nearly a decade, yet felt their efforts resulted in minimal change or token change (e.g., food sharing events to entertain the employees). For others, the initiative was a fundamental threat to the organization’s foundational values – values that they perceived to be the cornerstone of the organization’s storied history. From them, the cry of resistance from within the ranks took an interesting form: “culture eats strategy for breakfast, so there’s really not much we can do.” Meaning, there’s no strategy for making our organization more diverse because the existing culture will quash it. Clearly, addressing DEI&B directly was meeting significant headwinds, as it had for the better part of the previous decade.

In a trial effort at “narrative tacking,” I collaborated with a team designated by leadership to devise a DEI&B strategy that sought to achieve those goals while leaning

heavily into the organization's core tenets: objectivity, rigor and effectiveness. On the surface, this was not an obviously DEI&B program or proposal – it was a proposal to strengthen the organization as a whole. And yet, if it worked, it would drive the DEI&B metrics as a result.

Collectively, the program “tacked” through a narrative of change in the following way:

- **Character:** The organization was highly selective in terms of people afforded respect. In particular, there was little regard for consultants and business transformation “experts.” They would not, in short, consider data from the “business world” as relevant to their organization. The best voices would be the voices of the internal teams, and those from a small cadre of esteemed peer institutions. To that end, we paid careful attention to who was included in the effort, and what external organizations became models of “possible” future states.
- **Motivation:** Above all else, the organization prided itself on its objectivity. Yet this had long been defined as an individual act of being “above political concerns.” Drawing upon published research from neurosciences (in collaboration with some internal research teams), we put forth data that debunked the idea of individual objectivity in favor of objectivity as a by-product of highly diverse groups. This became the leverage point for the transformation effort overall. Leaning into the thing that most defined the organization, we held them to account for and be objective in the most science-backed way possible.
- **Plot:** The work of the organization was driven largely by a rubric of “effectiveness.” While long framed as implementing policy, we shifted the focus by expanding the set of stakeholders. This enabled more specific questions regarding for whom interventions worked (for the researcher? For the government? For the people in the community?), under what contexts, why, and how they could be scaled appropriately. This was in contrast to the broad, heavy-hammered perspective of legislation, and by default, forced the organization to consider diversity in its accountability framework.
- **Tone:** There was a deeply felt need across the organization to serve as agents of positive change in the world and to do ground-breaking innovative work. At the same time, the senior leadership was highly risk-averse and staunchly “neutral” in its communications. They needed to see the path forward to be those agents of change. Combining research on tactical strategies for building diverse teams, with ideas solicited from the internal teams themselves, and tactics solicited from esteemed peer institutions, we crafted specific plans for how to build DEI&B into processes under the auspices of ensuring objective and effective research.
- **Setting:** The teams had long focused on equity and opportunity in their work for external partners – with research dating back to the 1950s. They were masterful at assessing opportunity and discrimination in external settings. Helping them turn that same eye toward the internal organization was the shift they needed here, and they tagged several of their most lauded researchers to replicate their work on behalf of the organization itself. For example, providing teams with data on staffing and pay enabled them to look at those challenges with the same critical eye they would turn to an external partner. This allowed them to also see the organization as part of the

wider world in which they existed, in spite of their often aloof and distanced stance in relation to the public.

What was interesting in this collaboration is that the ideas themselves typically came from the teams and individuals within the organization. What I provided was the framework for how to organize and activate those ideas. The concept of “narrative tacking” provided them with a platform for how to examine each element of the problem, and consider how to shift it based on the evidence that would be compelling to those who resisted change. This matters because it speaks to critical power dynamics that are often ignored in transformation efforts. In saying this, my intention is to signal that many worthy and effective ideas for how to navigate change likely exist – in communities and organizations alike – but their authors lack the perceived expertise or power to enact them. As change agents, understanding this framework can help you not only think about the narratives we tell, but to identify the people who may have the better story from the start, and to elevate their voices as needed.

As to the outcomes of the proposal, I cannot speak in full because it is still unfolding and evolving. What I can attest to is that this proposal was blessed by senior leadership who, for more than a decade, had argued that the organization did not need a special initiative on DEI&B. By leaning into what was treasured and valued about the organization, and then carrying forward that intentional state, the team tasked with this challenge was able to make progress because the new felt very familiar. They were not asking the organization to be anything other than what it was – but they pointed out that to hold that cherished identity, it would entail different actions. This felt inspiring to the teams, and fed their desire to be innovative and leading-edge.

CONCLUSION

The goal is not to sail the boat, but rather to help the boat sail herself.

—John Rousmaniere, pioneering author of technical handbooks on sailing amid storms

Navigating change will likely never be easy. As May (1996 [1950]) notes, “in every experience of creativity something in the past is killed that something new in the present may be born.” Those deaths are often meaning-filled things that people hold dear – our sense of connections, our accomplishments, our very sense of self and personhood. When we attack the present in our enthusiasm for the future, we often dismiss the ways in which the present supports and validates certain members of the community. This is not to say that change should not happen – too often those who benefit from the present do so at the expense of others, and those inequities and inequalities are both dangerous and problematic. However, going at those tensions directly fosters divisiveness, resistance, and rage – and ultimately stalls the very change that needs to occur.

The past few years (decades?) of societal turmoil are evidence of this. As a world, people and organizations and societies are destroying themselves trying to bring about or resist change. I genuinely felt there had to be a better way. While leapfrogs and moonshots work for some things, they are far more difficult to manifest when it comes to building inclusive and accepting human relationships.

I write this as someone who is often terribly impatient with the present, and who revels in the possibility of a future that is more equitable, and facilitates belonging. But I also write this as someone who has learned that telling people their “good” is “not good” rarely

inspires them to join the effort. In contrast, seeking a deep understanding of their intentions and motivations – as people trying to hold on to something good – and engaging them to co-design new ways-of-being that more fully express those intentions and motivations. has proven a powerful way to gain allies toward change – especially in cases where people do not agree with the need to change.

These case studies are not perfect, but they signal a possible way forward when change must happen, and it is not an agreed-upon path by all who will be impacted. Neither succeeded in convincing everyone within the time we tracked responses, but both made significant progress in moving people who staunchly resisted previous efforts. And in part, this should be expected. Focusing on the “why” as opposed to the “what” or “how” has been a known path to success in changing hearts and minds for some time (Sinek 2009). That said, focusing on “why” seemed too abstract to me in terms of next steps of change management. What I hope this paper has provided is a preliminary actionable framework for how to proceed with complex transformations once you understand the cause of headwinds – dance with those forces, harness them, and help people to new worlds in ways that feel all too familiar.

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