Advanced Change Theory Revisited:
An Article Critique

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Abstract: The complexity of life in 21st century society requires new models for leading and managing change. With that in mind, this paper revisits the model for Advanced Change Theory (ACT) as presented by Quinn, Spreitzer, and Brown in their article, "Changing Others Through Changing Ourselves: The Transformation of Human Systems" (2000). The authors present ACT as a potential model for facilitating change in complex organizations. This paper presents a critique of the article and summarizes opportunities for further exploring the model in the light of current trends in developmental and integral theory.

Introduction

Developing models for sustainable organizational change has been a challenging task for organizational scholars. In the article, "Changing Others Through Changing Ourselves" (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000), the authors note that most change efforts in organizations fail, and conclude that this failure is due to incomplete theories of change. They assert that successful change requires change to the human system. In order for such change to occur, the people involved must often endure hardship by letting go of what is familiar in order to permit a new order to emerge within the system. They note that, "This process usually requires the surrender of personal control, the toleration of uncertainty, and the development of a new culture at the collective level and a new self at the individual level. In adaptive change, traditional change strategies are "not likely to be effective" (p. 147). The authors respond to this challenge by laying out a model they call Advanced Change Theory (ACT). At the core of this theory is the principle that "changing others requires changing ourselves first" (p 148). In the article, the authors contrast ACT to traditional theories of change, define the ten basic principles of the ACT model, provide examples of the application of ACT principles to facilitate change in five scenarios of increasing complexity, and conclude by rebutting some possible criticisms to the model.

The Need for a New Change Model

Their article begins with an overview of three traditional categorizations of change strategies: empirical-rational strategy, power-coercive strategy, and normative-reeducative strategy. The empirical-rational strategy presupposes that people are essentially guided by reason, and that people will respond by explaining the logic and benefits for change. The authors criticize this strategy for its failure to embrace the affective and normative aspects of human systems, noting

that while people may understand the reasons for change, they may not be willing to go through the emotional pain necessary to adopt them.

The power-coercive strategy emphasizes the authority structures within an organization that can require change on threat of sanctions (e.g., loss of job) for non-compliance. This approach essentially forces compliance on the employees within the organization; however, that compliance often falls short of true change. The authors note that in adaptive change, "people must commit themselves to the collective purpose. The power-coercive strategy usually evokes anger, resistance, and damage to the fundamental relationships of those involved…" (p.149).

The normative-reeducative strategy assumes people are rationally minded and need to be engaged in the process of change. This process involves honest communication and dialog between leaders and followers, where leaders work to build consensus and resolve conflicts. The authors note that of the three traditional views, the latter is the most likely to achieve adaptive change as it engages participants in working toward win-win solutions. However, the focus of this model remains centered on changing the behavior of the followers, and the authors do not view it as comprehensive as the ACT strategy, which can embrace aspects of the traditional models while profoundly changing the way leaders initiate the change process – by changing themselves.

Overview of Advanced Change Theory (ACT)

To explain the ten principles of ACT, the authors draw on the lives of Gandhi, Jesus, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as examples of leaders who embodied these principles in their lives and teachings. These principles are based on two underlying assumptions: (a) change requires making painful adjustments to one's behavior; and (b) change requires placing oneself in jeopardy – taking risks that put the common good above self-preservation. So, to paraphrase Gandhi and Jesus, the practitioner of ACT seeks to "be the change you want to see in the world" by "dying to self." Table 1 provides an overview of the ten ACT principles, core questions I composed that a practitioner might ask to evaluate alignment with the principle, and my summary of the purpose of the principle.

In this exposition of the ten principles, the ACT model itself is holistic insofar as each principle builds upon the others. The first six principles focus on the internal states and mindset of the leader – how the ACT practitioner aligns with a future vision. The last four principles focus on the internal states and attitudes of the leader in relationship to others. The ACT principles expand on the core belief that the leader is able to facilitate change by choosing to change his or her own behavior. By doing so, the leader establishes credibility and models the way for others to follow.

Having laid out the principles, the authors acknowledge that using the examples of Jesus, Gandhi, and King as models of ACT could raise concerns that such models are too removed from the challenges of daily life. The authors proceed to provide five real life examples where the principles were applied in increasing levels of organizational complexity (from individual to small group, to corporate department and division, and finally the enterprise). A summary of

Table 1. Principles of Advanced Change Theory (ACT)

	Principle	Core Question	Practitioner Summary of Focus
1.	Seeks to create an emergent system	Am I aware of the realities of emergent system?	Focus on creating a new social reality; builds community of inclusion while minimizing hierarchy; enrolls participants in making painful behavior changes away from self interest.
2.	Recognizes hypocrisy and patterns of self-deception	What are my patterns of self-deception?	Seek to align works and actions, focusing on common good over self interest. Continuously seeks to improve integrity; honest self-assessment, open to feedback; personal discipline to change behaviors that are not aligned.
3.	Personal change to value clarification and alignment of behaviors	Are my values and behaviors aligned?	Develops confidence in willingness and ability to "discard inaccurate assumptions in the midst of ongoing action" (p. 151).
4.	Frees oneself from the system of external sanctions	Am I free from external sanctions?	Is willing to put oneself in jeopardy of hardship for the sake of doing the right thing. Does not operate from a position of fear.
5.	Develops a vision for the common good	Do I have a vision of the common good?	Engages a compelling vision of the future; is open to consider possibilities that are emerging that would best serve the common good
6.	Take action to the edge of chaos	Do I operate at the edge of chaos?	"Operating on the edge of chaos means leaving the well-structured world of known cause and effect and enacting a new order" (p.153). A willingness to stretch "by faith" beyond the bounds of what is familiar.
7.	Maintains reverence for the others involved in change	Do I maintain reverence for others?	Respects the freedom and dignity of others. Has the faith that others will embrace the moral goodness of the change to the level they are able.
8.	Inspires others to enact their best selves	Do I inspire others to enact their best self?	Holds others to a high standard; models the way in behavior. Attracts others by focusing on their highest potential self.
9.	Models counterintuitive, paradoxical behavior	Am I engaging in unconventional or paradoxical ways?	Appreciates complexity of change; willing to engage in behavior that reframe meaning.
10.	Changes self and system	Have I changed myself as a model for the system to change?	Seeks to change personal attitudes and behavior as a means to challenge the system and enact change.

these cases is presented in Table 2. In each situation, a participant within the group experienced an inner change and in bringing that change to the group was able to facilitate transformation in the group as a whole. What is significant in this model is that the individual in question may not have been in an "official" position of authority/leadership when he or she facilitated the change. In fact, the situation required the "change agents" to confront a personal crisis, and in doing so to make conscious decisions to change their personal behavior. It was their willingness to change and share that change with the group that enabled the transformation. The authors review the

cases from the vantage point of the ten principles, positing the questions that the practitioners wrestled with in each scenario (see Table 1).

Finally, the article concludes with a rebuttal to possible criticisms to the ACT model, which may be summarized as follows.

1. ACT will fail as it is not equipped to deal with real world treachery.
2. Gandhi, Jesus, and King were flawed and not appropriate models.
3. Gandhi, Jesus, and King were heroes and difficult to emulate.
4. ACT has only limited application.

In addressing these criticisms the authors observe that each criticism focuses on the traditional transactional approach to leading change. By contrast, the ACT model is focused on co-creating an emergent reality. In this regard, it is a more dynamic and relational approach to leading change.

Observations & Opportunities

The authors presented Advanced Change Theory as a new way to approach the process of leading change. While their case was well researched and documented, both by reference to other academic studies and examples drawn from the lives of Jesus, Gandhi, and King, their article was not intended to be a review of qualitative or quantitative test results. The authors note that, "these notions are speculative, not definitive, and our intention is to provoke ideas and thinking regarding the process of effecting change in human systems" (p.148).

While their presentation may be speculative, there is corroborating support for this approach across a spectrum of recognized thought leaders on leadership. In his book, *Good to Great* (2001), Jim Collins describes Level 5 leadership as an individual not of strong charismatic personality, but one who holds that sense of purpose to serve the common good above personal gain. Kouzes and Posner (1993) likewise note that the credibility of a leader is built upon his or her character: a willingness to define and live personal values, and strive for a higher purpose that appreciates the diversity and role of constituents in shaping the future. ACT also draws heavily on the recent trend to apply complexity theory to the task of leadership and change. The authors note that failure to change is often due to the lack of appreciation for the complexity of human systems. Current literature supports the need to address the complexity of contemporary systems, emphasizing the role of leadership in creating the environment for emergent realities to unfold (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007; Scharmer, 2007).

What I find of particular interest in ACT is its implications for developmental and integral theory. Considering the developmental work of Kegan (1982, 1998), the ten principles of ACT suggest that the ACT practitioner is an individual operating at a high level of cognitive development. Similarly in Torbert's (2004) model of action-logics, the ACT practitioner would operate at the Strategist or Alchemist stages based on the ability to be self-reflexively aware and the willingness to put self in jeopardy for the sake of the greater good. Likewise, Putz and Raynor (2004, as cited in Reams, 2005) note the integral leader as being more adaptive to change without threat to personal identity, a clear description of the ACT practitioner. ACT thus

Table 2. Summary of Case Studies

Level	Situation	Personal Change
Mother-Daughter Relationship	Mother assisting daughter with homework realizes that she is outwardly encouraging her daughter and yet inwardly distrustful. Mother stops micro-managing the relationship, encouraging daughter to come for help when needed. Daughter feels more trusted, school performance improves and a more loving relationship develops between mother and daughter.	Awareness of mixed messages leads to decision to change attitude and behavior towards daughter.
Changing a class	A student who had been quiet and unassertive in class takes a risk by sharing his personal experience. His behavior leads others to feel safe to share from their own experience, and transforms the classroom environment. A new openness emerged and the students and teacher engaged in dialogue that moved away from traditional teaching methods to a co-created learning experience.	Taking risk to be open and vulnerable set the frame for others to do the same.
Changing a business unit	After an employee committed suicide during a downsizing effort, a middle-manager came to a wrenching personal decision to stop playing office politics and tell employees the complete truth. Surprised that he was not fired for his commitment, the manager went on to see a dramatic transformation in his business unit as his change in attitude kindled trust and willingness of his employees to embrace change.	A crisis led to the decision to be completely truthful with associates. The response to his behavior was increased trust and openness within the business unit.
Changing a division	A senior executive of a division of a large company was fearful of losing his job after the company engaged in three downsizings. After months of anguish, he "concluded that he had an identity separate from the organization… and stopped worrying about the dangers of change…He began to ask himself what was needed in the present" (p.157). The executive met with other key employees and invited them to reenvision the future of the division.	Confronting his personal fears about job loss permitted the executive to shift his focus to the betterment of the organization, and invite others to do the same.
Changing a corporation	After 5 years, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company realized that the complexity of the organization made it impossible to mandate change. "As we became more complex and the environment more intense, it became impossible to get things done through the force of leadership…I realized I had to get everyone engaged and committed" (p.158). The CEO invited 3 financial analysts to present honest criticism of the company to the top 120 executives. Widespread conflict arose among the participants and the CEO gave the executive team 2 days to discuss the tensions. What emerged was a new "meaning system" and renewed sense of commitment.	Realization of his lack of personal power in the face of organizational complexity, the CEO chose to confront that complexity and engage his executive team to do the same even in the face of conflict.

paints a vivid picture of some profound characteristics of the high functioning, post-postmodern leader. This is an individual who chooses to act from an internal space of increasing integrity to his own values and beliefs, while being able to suspend those beliefs and engage the current context with an openness to evaluate new and emerging patterns, an individual who can then construct new meaning for the context, and be self-directed to change her own behavior to lead others to embrace the emerging future, setting aside personal interest for the benefit of the common good.

The ACT practitioner's willingness to choose a course of action that may require personal sacrifice also draws on an important distinction in integral theory, namely that stages of personal development occur across multiple lines of human nature. From this vantage point, human beings develop at different rates along such lines as intellectual, emotional, moral, ethical, relational, and spiritual development. With this in mind, ACT suggests that the practitioner may need to achieve advanced stages along multiple lines of development to be effective, particularly in terms of cognitive and moral/ethical development. In fact, the ten principles of ACT appear to merge the cognitive, relational and moral/spiritual lines of development into an integrated stream of consciousness that is both aware of self and others, and committed to act according to a higher purpose.

Taking in the implications of adult development could lead one to dismiss ACT as impossible to implement, given the general knowledge in that field of study that there are very few individuals operating at advanced developmental stages. However, a quick review of the case studies suggests a different spin on the notion of adult development that serves as a personal attractor to the model as both viable and timely. In each case, the ACT practitioner confronted a personal crisis and overcame it by making a decision that resulted in a shift in their behavior *in a specific context*. There is no claim here that the individuals *always* operate at a higher developmental level in *every* context; only, that the crisis-decision process resulted in behavior that could be described as being at a higher developmental stage in the context in which it occurred. I believe that ACT provides a model by which individuals are engaged to confront a contextualized aspect of their personal development and by so doing, are able to produce generative impacts on those around them. In this, ACT may represent a stepped model of adult development, whereby the individual encounters crises that require resolution of a subject-object conflict.[1] Each resolution expands the individual's internal map of the world in which they operate.

From the perspective of contextualized personal development, the implications of ACT can be quite profound. Every crisis I encounter can be an opportunity for self discovery and personal growth, requiring honest reflection and a commitment to personal integrity. Further, the ACT model suggests that my decision for personal growth does not simply impact *me*. Choosing to act in a more developmentally mature, resourceful and integrative way—as a better version of my self—will ultimately impact and self-organize the behavior of the system (i.e., context) of which I am a part.

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[1] This crisis-decision-behavior change process may in fact be an archetype of developmental change implicitly modeled in literature and the arts. How many stories reflect this very conflict and the outcome – for better or worse – of the protagonist's success or failure in overcoming the crisis?

While the article provides a working overview of ACT and how it might be applied in everyday contexts, there are two issues that could be addressed more thoroughly. First, the authors describe the ACT practitioner as being open to embrace paradoxical or counterintuitive behavior (case in point, King refusing to engage a security guard after a threat on his life, choosing to live his value of non-violence at the risk of his personal safety). There could have been further explication of the role of paradox in the ACT model and human systems. This topic is in fact explored further in more recent work by the principal author (Quinn, 2004) and is noted by Reams (2005) as an aspect of integral theory, particularly as it relates to the transpersonal dimensions of consciousness. Second, the authors chose not to address the implications of spirituality to ACT. They note that, "rather than focusing on the specific religious focus of these leaders, we instead focus on the philosophy and actions commonly demonstrated in their attempts to embrace adaptive change" (p. 150). Spirituality as a basis for personal values and understanding of emergent (non-material) realities could provide further insights into the actions of the leaders they selected to exemplify the ACT approach. Likewise, it is consistent with contemporary applications of integral theory to the study of leadership, which seeks to take a holistic view of human systems (Reams, 2005; Putz, 2006).

As a model for change, ACT is compelling and humbling, intensifying the importance of personal responsibility and commitment required for achieving change. ACT also presents a dynamic model for context-specific adult developmental change. To embrace the model is to throw out excuses about existing power structures and external influences that would hinder action. ACT practitioners are driven by a sense of fulfilling a higher purpose and are willing to make sacrifices (and often the ultimate sacrifice as was the case for Jesus, Gandhi, and King) in the context in which they seek to accomplish their objectives. To embrace ACT requires willingness to confront one's personal conflicts, resolve one's own lack of integrity and choose to live a life of personal development and growth.

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