Learning to approach change differently requires a fundamental rethink. My predominant experience of change in the health service is that we continue to privilege the more traditional approaches to managing change. So much so, that managing change becomes an organisational ritual, which paradoxically maintains the status quo.

So, what do I actually mean by “an organisational ritual that paradoxically maintains the status quo”? Pause to consider the number of nursing practice issues that are repetitively raised. For example:
- Pressure area care;
- Nutrition;
- Falls;
- Healthcare associated infections;
- Communication.

And what happens when an important issue is raised in a trust? Typically, a scandal, a complaint or a report from a regulator triggers a hype of activity in order to resolve the problem as quickly as possible. This in turn leads to a short term improvement and then, within weeks or months, the patterns of behaviour that led to the original issues reappear.

The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, carry out a diagnosis, and find a solution. The focus is on what is wrong or broken; when we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasise and amplify them across the organisation.

I ask myself why this happens and a review of traditional approaches to managing change highlights some important themes that may help to explain this pattern:
- The use of tools tends to predominate – innumerable “fix it” mentality tool kits have been developed, all of which imply a mechanistic approach to change as if you were fixing a car;
- Attention is focused on the tool itself rather than on the social interactions – I have spent much time listening to discussions in which people have lost sight of why they are meeting and so end up discussing the tool they are using to help them resolve the change (for example the plan, do, study, act cycle);
- The approach is linear and predictable and underpinned by a desire for the leader to be in control of what is happening;
- There are traditional expectations for the leader to be a hero, fixer or fortune teller;
- Based predominantly on systems thinking, there is an assumption that you have control over the system as if it were central heating, and as a result there is a failure to pay attention to the human side of change;
- The approach is solution focused rather than inquiry focused.

Appreciative inquiry is less deficit based compared with traditional approaches. It asks questions about what works in an organisation, rather than what isn’t working, thereby amplifying good practice.

This approach to change is highly engaging and motivating for members of staff. The results of the engaging and inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organisation wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been when things have worked well. Owing to the fact that the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success and change becomes more sustainable.

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