

## CHANGE PLEASE, PLEASE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

By

Dr. Hwa A. Lim, Ph.D., MBA

CEO, Ivy Holding Group

USA

“Marco Polo (1254-1324), he traveled the world, embraced other cultures, and fostered international trade.

Sounds like a graduate from an MBA program?”

- A Web advertisement.

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.”

- U.S. President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), Frankfurt, Germany, June 25, 1963,

five months before he was assassinated.

### Change Please

“Change please,” a voice came from behind HAL<sup>2</sup> while he was walking along Pier 39 in San Francisco, California some time ago. When he turned around, a stranger accosted him. Half taken by surprise, several thoughts crossed his mind. He could not have been doing so poorly in his career that someone would actually approach him and ask that he change.

The innocent-looking one-and-a-half four-letter word, “change,” according to the college edition of Oxford American Dictionary,<sup>3</sup> as a verb, can mean

1. to make or become different, 2. to pass from one form or phase into another, 3. to take or use another instead of, 4. to put fresh clothes or covering, etc, on, 5. to go from one to another, 6. to exchange,

and the corresponding nouns.

“Change” may be used in various ways:

- change is a constant in life these days (a noun universal);
- there is a drastic change in the dot.com business environment (a noun particular);
- please change the education plan (a verb transitive);
- we shall not change and be doomed for demise (a verb intransitive);
- where should we change the education plan to succeed (a verb metaphorical);
- the education policy-maker is an excellent change agent (an adjective);
- please count your change (a noun metaphorical),

and other examples.

## **The Change Constant**

If change is a river, we are sitting at the confluence of many of its tributaries and are made aware of all the factors funneling into the moment.<sup>4</sup> History is nothing but the history of change: the history of a few communities of excellence that changed the world (for example, the cradle of civilization between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Iraq in 5000 BC), the history of change in trading (for example, spice trade during the Malaccan Sultanate of the 1400s and 1500s), the history of turbulence (for example, the Second World War, 1941-1945), the history of few companies that changed the way we live (for example, Visa Card, 1951), the history of challenges and appropriate responses (for example, the Malaysian Independence, 1957), the history of a few revolutions that changed the world (Eight Days that Change the World, Russia, August 19, 1991), the history of dangers and opportunities (for example, the dot.com hype, 1997-1999), the scandals that changed corporate governance (for example, Enron and other telecommunications companies bookkeeping gimmickry to hide losses of 1999-2001), and the event that changed warfare (for example, the September 11, 2001 event in which civilian communal airplanes were turned into missiles to attack the World Trade Center towers). No one has straightened change out and no one has resolved this humankind's dilemma yet. And fortunately for humankind, no one has used up the opportunities, and no one ever will. The mandate of history is clear: capitalize on the opportunities of change.

Wall Street and stock exchanges exist because we live in a rapidly changing world that is not predictable – a world that is at its very best, questionably probable or improbable, depending on which side one is arguing from. Many new businesses come into being because of change, and many more thrive on rapid changes. And yet we constantly complain about rapid changes.

For most people, status quo is a comfortable no change because the past is the guide to the future. Frequently we hear employees complain, “I wish management would tell me what they want me to do and then get out of my way and let me do it.” Unpredictability and change may be the very reason employees still have jobs. If management could determine exactly what it was employees were supposed to do, management could automate the process and replace employees with a computer! So if we want to remain in our jobs, we had better expect change to occur and look forward to challenging change.

For those in charge, continuity is comfort, and predictability ensures that they continue to be in control. Instinctively, therefore, they prefer to believe that things will continue to go on as they have been.

Circumstances do, however, combine occasionally to discomfort the advocates of the status quo. Wars, of course, are the greatest discomforters – a case in point is World War II, which led to many social upheavals. So does technology, when it takes one of its great leaps forward as it did in the Industrial Revolution, or recently, in the Information Revolution. So does demography, when it throws up baby boomers or busters, or when it consists of unique racial mix like that in Malaysia. So does a changing set

of values, like the rising cost of living and the rising level of literacy in Malaysia. And so do economies, like the recent dot.com hypes of 1996-1999 and subsequent demise.com of 2000.

In the dynamics – turbulent change – we cannot engineer. We have to reinvent or recreate. Bureaucracy and administration are for the basics – times of no or slow change. Creativity and leadership are for the dynamics. Bureaucracy must support the leadership and leadership must guide the bureaucracy, but never the other way round. Malaysia has come a long way since its independence in 1957.<sup>5</sup> When Malaysia attained its independence, many people predicted that the country, with its unique racial mix, could never be stable nor prosper economically. Forty years after the independence, Malaysia became one of the tiger economies of Southeast Asia, made enviable economic progress, and achieved racial harmony, thus confounding earlier skeptics. This Malaysian transformation would not have been possible without the leadership of the country's fourth prime minister, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

### **Shaped Into The Vicious Rat Circle**

The world has changed, but advice has not. Such is the situation with the social fabric and the education system.

The life of an average educated, hardworking family has remained almost unchanged, even as time has changed: the child is born, the child goes to kindergarten and then the child goes to school. To give the child an education edge, the parents shower the child with educational playthings, as if guilty of not being able to spend more time with their child because of their long work hours. When the parents spend, they spend extravagantly.

The proud parents are excited because the child excels, gets fair to good grades, and is accepted into a tertiary institution. The child enrolls in a discipline with the help of the parents – a discipline that will lead to a profession that will make a lot of money in the future. May be medical schools, may be law schools, or may be business schools.

Formal training is inelastic and it takes time. The child graduates a few years later and may go on to graduate school and then does exactly as programmed – looks for a safe, secure job or career. The problem is by the time the child graduates the job market may have changed. It is likely that there will be an oversupply of that line of professionals for most parents would have thought the same for their children. Accelerating pace of technological advances plays an important role too: Healthcare becomes managed healthcare; doctors become information brokers because of the avalanche of genetic data; attorneys become legal document certifiers because legal advice is accessible online and all documents are now available online...

If the child is lucky, the child finds that job, may be as a doctor or a lawyer, or switch line to join the army or work for the government. Generally, the child begins to make money, credit cards begin to arrive in mass, and shopping begins, if the spending habit has not already started during tertiary education years.

Having “disposable” income he or she has never had during the student days, the child goes to places where other young people just like him or her hang out. These young people meet, they date, and sometimes they get intimate and get married. Life is wonderful now, because today, both men and women work. Two incomes are a norm and bliss. They feel successful. Their future is bright, and they decide to buy a house, a luxury car, a HD television, a home theatre equipped with karaoke DVD players; take cruises, and romantic vacations. They have to keep up with the Joneses, and spend a lot of money just to buy newest gizmos and own stocks just to stay with the trendy crowd.

They follow their biological destiny. The happy bundle arrives. The demand for cash is enormous. The happy couple decides that their careers are vitally important and begin to work harder, seeking promotions and raises. The raises come, so does another child and the need for a bigger house. They work harder, become better employees, and even more dedicated. They go back to school to get more specialized skills so that they can earn more money. Maybe they take a second job. In fact, they despise the job but, masochistically, they bear the dislike of the job like most other workers. In these days of downsizing, rightsizing and leftsizing, if they are lucky, their incomes go up, so do the tax bracket they are in and the real estate on their new large home, and their social security taxes, and all the other taxes. They get their large paycheck and wonder how the money is depleted even before they have time to bank the pay cheque.

They buy some mutual funds, retirement funds and buy groceries with their credit cards. The children grow, the need to save for children’s tertiary education as well as to save for their own retirement becomes a reality.

In a workplace climate where employers tend to favor younger employees who are willing to put in longer hours, the couple may be looking for new jobs. If they do not, the couple, born some three or four decades ago, is now trapped in a rat race for the rest of their working days. They work for the owner of their company, or for the government paying taxes, and for the bank paying off mortgages and credit cards.<sup>6</sup>

Then they advise their children to study hard, get good grades, and find a secure job or stable career. The hardworking cycle repeats, in a different generation.

We thus see the causality relationship between training or education and an excellent job has changed. In days past, a good education was a passport for a good occupation and a job was for life. In modern days of rapid changes, we need more than an education.

### **Reinventing Education**

The world has changed, but education – both at home and at schools – has not kept pace with the change. To get out of the vicious circle, some changes have to be made. Education is still important. But instead of playing it safe, it should be playing it smart.

Alfred North Whitehead, one of America's great philosophers, gave a definition of education, "Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge." Notice that it is NOT "the acquisition of knowledge."

### *Learning Institutions*

Pressured by the changing world around them, education institutions are being dragged screaming into reinventing themselves. They are reluctantly struggling to attract top-notch achievers to nudge themselves into entrepreneurial learning institutions.

If education institutions are to cater to the changing work environment, no longer can yesterday's tired education systems be used to deal with the quite different problems of today and tomorrow. A longer life expectancy (demographic change) will mean a different learning and working life. "Older students" will be learning as well. And all students, old and young, will be learning, but with new technologies.

There are differences between the workplace and learning institution. Mixed ability in the workplace means a group of people with different abilities of the same level; in schools mixed ability means people with the same ability at different levels. In schools, collaboration is cheating; in work it is essential. In work, 75 percent is not good enough; in schools, it is excellent. In work, people see results of their labors weekly, daily or hourly; in schools, success is rationed and rationing examinations are given at the end of the semesters. In work, the output is useful or beneficial to someone somewhere; in schools, it is only useful to oneself. Work, most of the time, can be interesting and fun; school, for a lot of people, is neither.<sup>7</sup>

A reinvented learning institution, sometimes called an upside-down institution, can be more like work. It is based on real problems to be solved or real tasks to be done, in groups of mixed ages and different types of ability, of different ethnic groups, all of them useful. Not only will people learn more in such a learning institution because they can see the point and purpose of what they are doing, but also it would give them a better idea of the world they will be entering into.

Defined this way, the learning institution is itself a learning organization. It is a learning organization because it does two things: it learns to cope with changes, and it encourages learning in its people. The learning institution is now a facilitative learning institution.

As the name stipulates, in facilitative instruction, the instructor is the facilitator. In contrast, the traditional instructor is the source of learning. Thus a key difference between facilitative instruction and traditional instruction is that one encourages active learning as the "guide on the side," while the other encourages passive learning by feeding the students with information.

So an effective education system is one that can equip individuals with the breadth of knowledge and the tools with which to think so that graduates can successfully maneuver through the whitewater of

change. The object is not to take the white out of whitewater of change, but to put a master to steer the whitewater raft to maneuver in changing conditions.

### *Capable Specialist Copable Generalist*

Education is still an essential investment that one can make in one's own destiny, whether as a passport to a core job or as a route to acquiring a scalable skill. To ration it is absurd. It is equally absurd to try to shove it all in at the beginning of life, or to think that it all can happen in the classrooms, or to ration it later on to those who are cleverest at a maturing age, or to think that brain skills are the only skills that matter.

Students tend to always put the burden of educating on the learning institutions. In fact, they have a critical to play.

To be successful, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need smart people. A smart person is a generalist with a specialty. Being a consummate generalist the smart person knows how to connect islets of information from many diverse areas and apply in the field for which he or she is a specialist. And specialists need to know that the required specialty will change every so many years, as technology changes. In the new world, workers must constantly become a transformed specialist, standing solidly upon generalized knowledge that comes from a real education in its broadest sense.

Thus, education means, above all, mastery as a generalist. Both the specialist and the generalist – the narrow span and wide spans of tolerance – are valuable. Only humans can change from moment to moment. It is time to realize that no how-to nor training programme is going to “do it” for us. The programme is there only to support the individual, not the other way round. Neither how-to or get-rich-quick books, currently very popular at bookstores, nor similar how-to schemes on paid TV programmes, is going to do it for students. Imagine if many people read the same how-to or get-rich-quick methodology and do as instructed, then these people will just be like everyone else. They will have no special salable or scalable skills.

E.M. Forster calls people who have only one dimension to their lives “flat people.” He prefers round people. In modern days, round people are better called portfolio people. A portfolio is a collection of items, a collection with a theme. The whole is greater than the parts. Thus, flat people are specialists; portfolio people are generalists, each with a specialty.

### **Ignorant Stupidity**

If maturity can be defined as seeing the world through eyes other than your own, creativity might be defined as seeing the world through sufficiently new eyes so that new solutions appear. In fact, creativity can take two forms: invention – in which we create totally new things, for example, the invention of the computer, and innovation – in which we do old things in new ways, for example, manufacture the computer cheaply so that it is affordable.

Ignorance means we do not have the necessary information; stupidity means we have all the necessary information and then misuse it or fail to use it. With information providing us with a tremendous quantity and quality of knowledge, we have little excuse to be ignorant or to remain ignorant. However, it seems we have regressed in our ability to overcome stupidity – sloppy thinking and sloppy solutions.

The acquisition of information requires us to become, more and more, specialist. Although we are in an information age, we seem not to be in the thinking age. We may well be along the path to overcoming ignorance, but we have hardly moved one step forward in overcoming stupidity. We have more information than ever, but we are still primitive in our ability to order and organize by thinking critically about the information we have.

Today's trends is to replace critical thinking – an active verb – with predefined formulas, rules, regulations, policies, and procedures – all passive nouns – where everything is done by the book and quality is tediously quantified. As we become more and more dependent upon formulas, mechanical models, policies, and procedures, and as we do what we are told, become more risk-averse, and plunge into methodological work, we think less and common sense becomes more rare. People who would otherwise use common sense fade away.

In the rapidly changing world, often times there is no way to collect the full set of pertinent data to arrive at a meaningful conclusion in the time necessary to reach the solution. The details are simply not there to give one the answers one needs when one needs them. To deal effectively and intelligently within a dynamic world, the individual must carefully assess the context of the problem without fixing on the incomplete set of semi-related details. The Oxford dictionary defines context as “to weave together, to connect the coherence between the parts, and the idea that this connection of parts determines the meaning or the significance, the total environment in which any event or product occurs.”

Specialists without a generalist background cannot know the context even of their own specialty. Specialists will ensure the quality of the basics, however, only generalists can handle the turbulent change that whirls and spins about.<sup>8</sup>

No matter how comprehensive our set of information, if we fail to use it or misuse it and inappropriately organize it, we will only incur error that may be costly to rectify. Therefore, we must do two things:

- q We must seek hard to educate the mind to overcome ignorance, either through the traditional methods of acquiring facts and information or through new methods of information systems.
- q We must seek to develop our intelligence, learning new ways to use our knowledge.

Here we have to differentiate between automating and informing, two concepts that are unfortunately used interchangeably to mean the same thing. Automating tends to concentrate on the smart machine and to cut out or reduce people; informing uses smart machines in interaction with smart people. In the short

term automating pays off, but informing wins in the long run because the organization's thinking and intellectual capacity increases with time.

In this sense, the definition of true intelligence has also changed. Instead of judging people by their ability to memorize, to think sequentially and to write good prose, intelligence will be gauged as the ability to connect the different isolated islets of information and to put the whole thing in proper perspective. Reinvented learning institutions will have to graduate intelligent or smart students, NOT just students.

It is also in this sense that every member in an organization – from the highest to the lowest, from the most senior to the most junior, from the oldest to the youngest – should constantly be educating himself or herself. Education is a life-long process. Otherwise changing conditions will soon leave one behind; otherwise one would just become a cog in the great social machine of conformity and adherence.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Malaysian Challenge**

Malaysia has been developing by leaps and bounds in the past two decades. The government has implemented various initiatives to transform Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020.

In these years, Malaysia, like other countries in the world, has learned that nothing is immune to change; even change itself is not immune to change for change is accelerating! The past decade witnessed many changes. The decade started with a sluggish global economy, then the rise of the Asian Pacific Rim countries followed quickly by the Asian economic tempest of 1997. Reality bites:

- .. Now Southeast Asia has just recovered from its recent Asian Crisis of 1997. How the region will reinvent itself to face the new millennium?<sup>9</sup>
- .. The world has shrunk to a global village; international travel has become routine, and the world has become very connected electronically.<sup>1,10</sup>
- .. The landscape of global strategic partnerships and global competition is changing daily. The trade fever has seized most of Asia, with most of foreign investments that could have flowed to Southeast Asia going to China and marketing strategy has changed accordingly.<sup>1,11</sup>
- .. Competition from regional free trade zone, for example, AFTA (Asean Free Trade Area). Malaysian companies must be able to compete on the basis of quality, cost, and speedy delivery of goods and services.<sup>12</sup>
- .. Technologies are also advancing at a much greater pace; biotechnology and nanotechnology are now hailed as the technology for the new millennium.<sup>13</sup>
- .. Uneven state of developments leads to the business of disequilibriums; developing countries will have to adopt the proper strategy to catch up.<sup>1</sup>
- .. Changes in technologies lead to changes in the legal systems.<sup>1</sup>
- .. Education has also changed. The strategy now is to train people with a wider background, to be more adaptable to rapid changes.<sup>1,8</sup>



- .. Corporate governance leaves much to be desired. Investment banker CLSA in its annual report *Corporate Governance in Emerging Markets* warns that Asian companies risk collapsing prices and even total failure if executives and directors do not run the companies properly.<sup>1</sup>
- .. Regional instability also has a strong bearing on the economy. The U.S. is waging a war against bioterrorism; and the U.S. and Allies have been to war with Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to rapidly fluctuating markets.
- .. The rampage of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) during the first half of 2003 has affected the economies of many neighbors: China, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

There are immediate needs in certain areas to be addressed:

- .. Need to find a replacement for loss of manufacturing businesses to cheaper-labor China;
- .. Need for new technologies suitable for Malaysia;
- .. Need for managerial level and above professionals;
- .. Need for director level and above experts;
- .. Need for legal professionals;
- .. Need for training of new scientists, engineers, and technologists, and business entrepreneurs, legal professionals for a continuous supply of trained personnel in the future.

The government has implemented many measures to meet some of the needs. For example, the Ministry of Education introduced in 1996 the Smart School Flagship to produce knowledge workers to man the nation's high-tech industries and to produce a thinking workforce able to perform in a global work environment and use the tools available in the information age. Another laudable initiative is the BioValley Project, under the helmsmanship of Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr. Mohamed Mahathir and Minister of Science Dato Seri Law Hieng Ding. BioValley was launched in May 2003 out of the government's desire to accelerate the development of biotechnology, to help integrate and leverage Malaysia's research and development capabilities in biotechnology as well as coordinate the commercialization of R&D activities in the different states through the hub and spoke approach.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Effectiveness, Smartness and Responsibility*

The next initiative is very likely to be a nanotechnology initiative. These initiatives having been launched, it is now for the different sectors to act effectively, intelligently and responsibly to achieve the goals. Reinvented education being one of the most important sectors.

The effectiveness criterion is the pragmatic element of any endeavor and the first criterion that must be met. Effectiveness may pay off in the short term, but it will take intelligence to ensure that you are effective in the long term. Doing things better is not the same as doing better things. And to do better things better is better still.

Although sheer effectiveness is not enough, that does not diminish its importance. In fact, if we are not effective, we need not concern with being intelligent or responsible. If a nation implements an initiative and the initiative fails, it simply fails – who are irresponsible or unintelligent no longer matters. If an entrepreneur enters a business to make money and the entrepreneur does not make a profit, it does not matter much if he or she is intelligent or responsible. If an instructor teaches in a public school and the students graduate from the class uneducated, the instructor has failed. If a father does not provide good family upbringing, it does not matter if he or she is president of the most powerful nation on the globe.

Smart organization begins in focusing on one thing at a time. By building a community of people who are effective, intelligent, and capable of the focus of their full capacities, they will create an environment for smart work. The smarter the people work, the more likely they will create a synchrony of effective process and intelligent design. They must learn to use human resources humanely and appropriately, just as they must learn to use technological tools effectively and appropriately.

In anything we do, if we are also responsible, the effectiveness will be reinforced beyond measure. In fact, we are not truly effective until we are responsible. Businesspeople are responsible for the way their products affect customers. They are responsible for the effect of the pricing of products on the economies of the communities where they conduct business. Governments are responsible for the effects their administration have on the people who live in their countries and who depend upon their laws; teachers are responsible for their students; parents are responsible for their children; employers are responsible for their employees; employees are responsible for their job performances; students are responsible for learning in the courses they take...

If all leaders in every corporation, government, or organization would begin with the sincere belief that they alone are responsible for the success or failure of an undertaking, and everyone else on their teams or within their groups were to join with those leaders in the sincere belief that the success and failure of the undertaking depend on them, then failure would have a small chance indeed. For each person would have accepted his or her responsibility and made a solid commitment to the undertaking.

Success is the synergy of the whole, including leaders, members, undertakings, and those stakeholders who will benefit from the undertakings. The same applies to governments as well as to businesses. Only responsibility can build the confidence and trust that are so essential for leadership and mastery.

So education has to be reinvented with a mandate to educate all stakeholders: government policy makers, the people, the businesspeople, the employers, the employees, and the consumers.

### **The Antimetabole – Change Please, Please Change**

We now return to the opening paragraph of “Change please.” Upon closer inspection, the person accosting HAL from behind was haggardly attired. He thrust a Styrofoam cup forward and asked HAL for loose change. Realizing that the economy has not been too kind to many who have not changed and that

this could be a former CEO of a dot.com company, HAL reached for his pant pocket to retrieve every penny in the pocket and gave to the stranger. HAL knew that the change would not do much, but he did wish the stranger the best of luck. The stranger's destiny is in his own hand if he can still change. In response to his request "Change please," HAL could not resist but to offer the stranger an antimetabolic advice, "Please change."

## References

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2. HAL is the name of the supercomputer HAL 9000 in the flick *Odyssey 2001*. HAL are also the initials of the author. HAL is a well sought-after speaker and is a respected scholar, technologist and entrepreneur. He is Chairman of Board of three companies in U.S.A.: D'Trends, Inc. (Santa Clara, California), AbMetrix, Inc. (Union City, California), GeneGo, Inc. (New Buffalo, Michigan), and Founding Director of NanoBiotech Sdn Bhd. (Kuala Lumpur, 425296-M). He prides himself in establishing and shaping bioinformatics, and has served as bioinformatics expert for the United Nations, as review panelist for U.S. federal agencies, as advisor for departments of various governments, and as consultant for prominent biotech companies. He is Kingstone Best Seller co-author and is author of some fourteen biotech books in English.
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To contact the author: Dr. Hwa A. Lim, Chairperson, D'Trends, Inc., 3521 Ryder Street, Santa Clara, California 95051, USA. [hal@d-trends.com](mailto:hal@d-trends.com).