

**LEADING  
FOR  
ORGANISATIONAL**

**CHANGE**

Building Purpose,  
Motivation and Belonging

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**WILEY**

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# INTRODUCTION

*I dwell in possibility*

Emily Dickinson

## Why You Need This Book

When I was fourteen, I got my first Saturday job in a little shop in Edinburgh that sold furnishing fabric. This job taught me how to match a coloured chintz lining to a floral, how to count in 64cm pattern repeats, and how to make a mean bacon roll. It gave me biceps to die for from lugging around big bales of fabric. It also taught me that people do not like change. The shop was owned by a brilliant female entrepreneur. She opened one shop, she opened another. She moved to bigger premises. She branched out from dress fabric into curtain fabric. She experimented with telephone ordering (there was no internet then). Every single time she tried anything new, one of the other women who worked there, or a customer, would suck their teeth, say how much they'd preferred things the old way and darkly predict the imminent demise of the business. That was in 1991. The business is still going strong.

Since then, throughout my entire career, I have been around businesses that are about to change, are changing, or have just changed. And yet the whole rhetoric around change implies that it is an aberration. The very language we use pathologises change and implies it is something to be feared, dodged, and if not dodged then minimised and managed. If this is true, then it is bad news indeed, because we read everywhere that we live in VUCA times – that is to say, the world is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Change, we are told, is the new constant.

This book presents a bold alternative view of change. It argues that, done well, change can be a positive thing. That it is not change *per se* that presents a problem for organisations and destroys value, but rather some common underlying assumptions about what change means, and a resulting tendency on the part of those leading change projects to put undue emphasis on some things, and to skate over others. That it is possible for organisations and the individuals within them not just to survive periods of change but actively to thrive throughout, and to emerge stronger as a result.

I am a person who loves to read and learn. The sort of person who, when faced with any new situation, would prefer to sink £100 on Amazon before taking a single practical step. Every time I have been faced with a new challenge around change – a reorganisation, a rebrand, or, perhaps most notably, a merger or acquisition or disposal of some kind – I have hungrily foraged for all the wisdom that is out there in books, journals, podcasts and TED talks. Over the years, as my own experience has widened and my understanding of what ‘good’ change looks like has deepened, I have become increasingly intrigued and discouraged by the paucity and the dryness of the material out there on the challenges and opportunities that change can bring. There is plenty about the technical and financial aspects of managing mergers or reorganisations, plenty about systems and processes and project management, but nothing which really speaks to the messy human reality of what organisations are grappling with when leading hundreds, perhaps thousands, of human beings through a period of profound change. I am always deeply grateful when I do encounter something relevant and engaging, but I have found I have had to dig hard for it – drawing from psychology, neurology, sociology, and then extrapolating from there. It is a struggle and not one I have had endless time for, and so my reading over the years, though wide, has tended towards the utilitarian and somewhat superficial.<sup>1</sup> I have long been itching both to re-explore some of the terrain I have been dashing through, and to fill the gap I have perceived in the literature.

In the end, though, I was ultimately inspired to write this book by virtue of having had the opportunity to participate in a period of profound organisational change that more closely exemplified best practice in this area than anything I have seen or been involved with previously. In early 2016, I was asked to get involved in the team that would put together and then implement from a people and cultural perspective what became the three-way merger of CMS, Nabarro and Olswang to create a new top five global law firm.

Now. Report after report will tell you, almost irrespective of when you are reading this, that right now, no, right NOW, we have hit an all-time high for M&A activity across the globe.<sup>2</sup> And yet study after study will also tell you that the failure rate for mergers is anywhere between 70% and 90%.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, something is going drastically wrong. M&A is one of the riskiest investments for organisations of their time, money and reputations – and yet organisations worldwide press ahead with this strategy for growth, convinced that they will be the ones to buck the trend.

Commentators are increasingly identifying an underestimation of, and a lack of investment in, the people and cultural aspects of an M&A process as one of the main reasons for failure.

It is those people and cultural aspects that this book is all about.

Almost my entire career has been spent in and around professional services firms – first as a corporate lawyer, and then as a coach, strategist and leader. Professional services organisations are generally ‘expert’ cultures – full of highly intelligent people with a deep interest in, and commitment to, their particular vocation or field of expertise – lawyers, accountants, surveyors, architects, engineers – people for whom deep specialism is critical. Professional services organisations also tend to be reasonably flat in terms of hierarchy and to operate primarily by consensus and collaboration rather than command and control. This is often also

reflected in their ownership structures – such organisations are often structured as partnerships, or shared ownership models. It is perhaps so obvious as to go without saying, but the other striking feature of professional services organisations is that their ‘product’ is their people. This means that professional services firms are only as good as their capacity to attract talent and then engage and equip that talent to work, individually and collectively, to solve the problems, create the products and deliver the services that the market wants to buy from them.

I have come to understand that, precisely because of these particular features, experience of change gained in the particular context of professional services is particularly rich in learning. If people are your product, if your entire business model depends on their being engaged, resourceful and creative, then it is surely vital to ensure that any change process works in such a way as to, at the very least, create minimal adverse impact for them, and ideally in such a way as to actively enable them to flourish and grow. If you are operating within a flat hierarchy, with highly intelligent people, many of whom are also owners of the business, then an inclusive, nuanced and iterative approach to change is an imperative.

There is also a point about scale. Global law firms in particular, while enormous in terms of their reach and influence, are smaller in headcount terms than the global clients they serve. This makes it possible for a team involved in a change process in a law firm to both wrestle with complicated details and still zoom out far enough to get their arms around the entire big picture. This brings a unique perspective on the human aspects of merger.

All of this meant that the chance to get involved in the CMS-Nabarro-Olswang merger felt like the opportunity of a lifetime in change terms. Addressing the people and cultural issues – precisely the issues which are so consistently and gravely overlooked in a larger corporate context and so poorly addressed in the current literature – was an absolute imperative

in this case, and the leadership teams across all three firms understood that intimately right from the outset.

The opportunity of a lifetime it proved to be. The new firm created by the merger is a product almost entirely of its own creation, put together under the strategic leadership and guidance of its senior management team, and integrated operationally by its own people. The leadership team understood that it was important that this process itself should become part of the story of the new firm, and that it would be by virtue of going through the process together that people would best be able to understand one another's existing stories, cultures and values and weave them into something new. The team delivered a co-located, single firm, operating as one team, on one set of systems, and delivering a fully integrated service to clients right from Day 1 – an unprecedented and astonishing achievement. In its first year, the new firm achieved a 19% increase in profits, exceptional client feedback and extensive industry recognition, flying in the face of the M&A trends. The central focus and emphasis that the leadership placed on people and culture was one of the most – perhaps *the* most – critical factors in the new firm's success.

The CMS merger epitomises much of what I have come to believe is the very best approach to leading organisational change. For this reason, as well as being the final inspiring nudge for me to write this book, it has also become the featured 'case study' or exemplar, and I will return to the story of the CMS merger and the learning and inspiration to be drawn from it throughout the book. I do so with the support of the CMS leadership team, but the observations and learnings that follow are my own. This is not 'the official story' of the CMS merger; that is for others, or history, to write.

The central thesis of this book, in a nutshell, is that an absolute focus on people and culture, complete clarity on purpose and an approach rooted in storytelling can enable businesses to navigate periods of profound



change, including merger, in such a way as to actively generate value and enable organisations and individuals to flourish. There is a quiet revolution in this message. The widely accepted, and entirely understandable, response in times of uncertainty and change is to take control – to impose more structure, more systems, more rules, policies and reporting, to minimise risk and ambiguity and close down doubt. This book advocates for a different approach, one which is subtler and requires patience, and which focuses on changing behaviour by changing minds and hearts. It requires letting go when you want to hold on; opening up when you want to close down. It allows space for ambiguity and for mistakes. It is about planting seeds and letting them grow.

This feels to me an important and timely thesis. I believe there to be a profound and fascinating societal shift underway which makes it important for organisations to begin broadening their perspective, putting their people and culture at the heart of everything, and grappling with questions around what value really means, the nature of their underlying purpose, and the basis upon which they engage with their stakeholders. As the patriarchal power structures of the industrial age are buckling, approaches to leadership and management that depend on command and control and ‘holding on’ are being replaced by approaches which depend upon empowering people and building consensus. This book begins to explore some of that and hopefully adds to the ‘business book’ canon a more pragmatic, human and holistic voice than is perhaps the norm.

Not enough is written about our working lives generally. I guess I am thinking about office work in particular, but I think the same is true across the board.<sup>4</sup> But perhaps that is because we don’t even talk with one another much about our work. For something that takes up so much of our lives, the places we go each day, the things we fill our time with, the people we sit alongside – are oddly missing from the stories we tell. Distilled down to trite little ‘Dilbert’ narratives, or drinks down the pub at Christmas. Whether because we are oddly coy about it, or possessive,

or cynical, or beset by the suspicion that this, of all experiences, is not one that is universal and capable of being shared or understood by anyone who is not there, we downplay our work lives, overlooking or ignoring the fact that this, too, is part of our story. Here, too, is the ground we stand on, the difference we make. This is where we win and lose, help and hinder, learn and teach. Where we try new things, sometimes fail, witness close up the lives, loves and losses of other people who we are in community with. This is where we live in sight and sound of each other. This is where we are church and community. This is where we do life.

We are living in times where constant change is the new normal. If we want our organisations to thrive, if we want to build systems and structures that enable us to do business, to exchange ideas and goods, to create new things, to tackle challenges and hardships and inequalities, then we need a people-centred approach to our organisations. We need to focus on our purpose, our culture and values, and the stories we tell.

## **How to Use This Book**

This book is in four parts.

Part One of this book introduces some ideas and theories. There are some thoughts around the role of storytelling, and quite a lot of theory around the definition and importance of purpose, culture and values. Then there is some theory around how change happens, individually and corporately, and finally there is some neuroscience and behavioural science about what is actually happening to us personally when change is happening around us.

Then, in Part Two, I share a little of the story of the CMS merger. This serves three purposes – it provides a bridge between the theory in Part One and the practical application in Part Three, giving context and

background; it sets out in one place those parts of the CMS merger experience which best illustrate the approach to change in that case, and its impact; and it exemplifies the power of storytelling – a central tenet of the book. If you are all over the theory, not interested, or plan to loop back later, you could just dive straight in here. This second part of the book is devoted to simply telling a story – again, this is *my* story or version of events, not *the* official CMS story. I hope it is interesting enough that you will forgive its vanities and elisions. This is the story of one aspect in particular (people and culture) of one merger in particular, told by one person in particular, and so it is as subjective, biased and full of holes as you might expect. So are all the other stories that you will find in this book. They are eyewitness accounts, anecdotes and survivors' tales. Individually and collectively, these stories contain experiences and ideas that can inspire and instruct.

Part Three gets practical. It draws out some of the key learnings and themes around the people aspects of organisational change, drawing on both the CMS merger story and some different stories from different circumstances in different industries. This part explores how, in practice, an approach to change which is centred on purpose and values, and relies heavily on the creation and telling of stories, can help organisations to rise to some of the biggest challenges and opportunities that periods of profound change present. If you are wrestling with challenges and want a fast track to some ideas on how to tackle them, you might start with this third part and work backwards.

Finally, Part Four of the book contains some reflections and ideas about the context within which the ideas posited in this book exist – the wider systemic and societal factors. It considers the implications for leadership if the ideas contained in this book are to be sustainable beyond the particular context in which they are presented. What do leaders need to do and be in order to foster this purpose-driven, story-rich approach in their organisations and teams?

This is not a 'how to' book in the sense that it does not have checklists and tick-box exercises. The whole point of the book, really, is that how one organisation manages change will be unique to that organisation, and not susceptible of being distilled into a list and re-used, parrot fashion, elsewhere. We can also, I think, take technical competence in this area as a given. The people responsible for making change happen in organisations generally know how to manage a project, transact a deal, allocate and manage risks, plan logistics, etc. This book is intended to speak into the gap I perceived in the literature – namely, how to grapple with the human aspects and to better equip everyone in organisations to be able to thrive during periods of change.

So, not a 'how to' book – but hopefully a 'helpful' book – blending the best theory from a broad range of sources, with deep and recent practical experience, and presenting a framework within which individuals can think through change in their own organisations. This book will be helpful if you are involved in transforming businesses, and are interested in making the new business a success. This book will resonate if you are alive to the impact of change and disruption on the wellbeing and performance of individuals and teams. You will be interested in this book if, more generally, you are casting around for a more purposeful and emergent approach to leadership, and if you are interested in all the talk around 'purpose' but want to understand more about how it drives value.

It is also intended to be a deeply honest book – I wanted to show the learning in real-time and to think aloud and in an accessible way about how the theory works in practice. Many of the books I love best in this field have been written by academics – by people whose job it is to think clever thoughts, do research to test those thoughts, read other people's clever thoughts and then commit the whole lot to paper. Tucked away in the acknowledgements section at the back of these books, there is often a sentence which says something like, 'This book has been ten years in the making.'

I am so grateful for, and inspired by, the profound work and thinking in these books. But this approach is unfeasible for practitioners. It perhaps goes without saying that the book you are now holding in your hands was *not* ten years in the making. If we want to hear practitioners' voices tell us about real, lived experiences from the thick of the action, we have to be relaxed about that. This is one perspective, honestly delivered, while the memories are still fresh, and the lessons still real.

*This* book was around six months in the making, squeezed around a full-time, full-on senior role and four small children. It has been written in long and short snatches – in early mornings with coffee and late nights with wine, in airport lounges, on packed commuter trains, outside ballet classes and on the touchline during an under-12s football tour in Denmark in blistering heat.

I listened recently to a podcast in which Professor Adam Grant, a leading organisational psychologist, was discussing the huge rise in popularity of accessible writing on social science, which perhaps started with the widespread interest in Malcolm Gladwell's work. Grant observed that this has led to an increase in the number of compelling and accessible books in the fields of sociology, social psychology, behavioural economics, and speculated that perhaps soon, finally, an evidence-based, academically rigorous approach would also come to prevail in the popular writing on organisational dynamics, a field which is currently dominated by practitioners speaking from the echo chamber of their own experience. Ah well, I'm either the last of a dying breed or a bridge between old and new. As G.K. Chesterton reputedly said, 'If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly.'

If I do not, in the end, believe this to be a book 'done badly', that is because it is standing on the shoulders of giants. It is founded in some rigorous reading and for the most part tries to substantiate any assertions it makes with some sort of reference or evidence. It is also founded in two

decades of personal experience and on-the-job learning from the countless incredible leaders, mentors and peers whom I have been blessed work alongside.

One final observation. I have struggled throughout the writing of this book with a bad case of imposter syndrome. I found as I embarked on writing that I did not want to ‘assert’, I wanted to discuss. This meant, though, that early drafts read like a first-year university essay.

I studied the pile of books around my desk to see how others have tackled this. Some people just assert right from the off. You can be eighty pages deep in some astonishing new theory before even thinking to check whether any of it is remotely based in experience or research. Others are closer to the discursive essay end of the spectrum. The vast majority of the latter group are women. This is interesting.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, I have tried to strike a middle ground. Where I have an opinion, I want to share it. Unapologetically. I will occasionally ‘assert’. But I also want to bring you the nuance and breadth of the thinking that is out there and leave space for you to reflect and draw your own conclusions.

Writing this book has brought me great joy and rich learnings of its own. I offer it lightly, and in the hope that it adds to the sum of knowledge.

**Jennifer Emery,**  
London, July 2018

## Notes

1. The bibliography for this book is full of rich resources and all have something to offer, but for my money my ‘Hall of Fame’ of books that I have gleaned most from and relied most heavily about reads as follows:  
*Fast/Forward* by Julian Birkinshaw and Jonas Ridderstrale  
*Positive Professionals* by Anne Brafford

*Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown

*Alive at Work* by Dan Cable

*The Sweet Spot* by Christine Carter

*Be More Pirate* by Sam Coniff Allende

*Beyond Measure* by Margaret Heffernan

*Reinventing Organisations* by Frederic Laloux

*The Story Factor* by Annette Simmons

*How to Have a Good Day* by Caroline Webb

2. ADP, *Achieving M&A Success*, at <https://www.adp.co.uk/assets/vfs/Family-32/adp-files/Insights-Resources/Whitepapers/Docs/adp-unleashing-m-and-a-success-fy17.pdf>
3. Christensen et al, The Big Idea: The New M&A Playbook, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2011
4. Though I have read *Intuition* by Allegra Goodman (Atlantic Books, 2010) about life in a laboratory. It's brilliant!
5. Because it is surely as important to be able to find role models in the world of business books as in the world of business itself, I have particularly tried to draw on and quote as many other women as I can – practitioners, academics and authors – in this course of this book. It has proven to be more difficult than it should be to find many female voices to choose from.

# Chapter 1

Once Upon A Time



Winter 2006. Early in the new year. The days short, grey and bitterly cold. And I was besotted. The first few months of my first son's life were a staggering love story. I couldn't get enough of his beautiful face, which changed every day and yet was constantly, uniquely and brilliantly him. Everything he did was fascinating. I would spend hours marvelling at all the potential condensed into his intense little body, and imagining a thousand bright futures for him. It was the most immense privilege to have played my part in his coming into the world, and I was both humbled and energised – I felt I could leap mountains for him.

The first few months of my first son's life were also a bracing roller coaster ride. Who was this demanding, noisy and irrational stranger? What had happened to my previously friendly body? Everything hurt or leaked. The house was a shambles and I was late for everything. None of the books talked about this. What was I doing wrong? There was also the teeth-grinding tedium of the routine. Eat, poo, sleep, repeat. My conversation shrivelled to repeating anecdotes from Radio 4's Women's Hour. My husband, family and friends were mysteriously replaced by irritating idiots.

Every day I would look at the clock convinced the day must be nearly over only to find it was barely lunchtime. I was sure a baby had felt like a good idea a year previously, but could not for the life of me remember why. I was very, very tired. I took a lot of baths and drank a lot of wine.

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**W**hy am I telling you this story? To make you smile. To paint a picture. To elicit empathy. To welcome you. To ignite your curiosity. To make you want to stay and read on.

Also, to set up a memorable metaphor . . .

Early summer 2017. The days warming, lengthening and loosening. And I was besotted. The first few months of our newly merged firm's life were a staggering love story . . .

There are lots of fun parallels between life in the eye of a major organisational change project and life in the eye of the ultimate life-change project that is the arrival of a baby, and we all love a good story. Staying up too late watching a box set (*just one more . . .*), reading by torchlight under the covers when our parents have switched the light off . . . we are echoing our ancestors around the campfire – listening, imagining, falling in love, slaying dragons, scaring ourselves silly, hanging off cliffs.

We are twenty-two times more likely to remember a story than a set of facts.

For a long time, psychologists thought that our proclivity for storytelling may be no more than what Steven Pinker<sup>1</sup> calls evolutionary 'cheesecake' – a fun, but ultimately useless, titillation for the restless machine that is our cognition. But a brilliant new study on hunter-gatherer societies proposes<sup>2</sup> that telling stories may in fact be an important mechanism by which knowledge is shared – the sort of 'who knows what about what' type of meta-knowledge that society needs us to have in order to function.

Stories are about the 'rules of the game' and the consequences of breaking them, just as gods with thunderbolts are for those of a more religious bent. And in much the same way, they help to promote cooperation and to encourage groups to bond. These findings chime with the theory of journalist and author Christopher Booker, who argues in *The Seven Basic Plots*<sup>3</sup> that we tell stories in order to pass a model for life down the generations.<sup>4</sup>

The central tenet of this book is that organisations need stories during periods of profound change. When things are volatile, or uncertain, or

otherwise changing – *pretty much all the time, then!* – people need to make sense of the world around them. Groups of people need something to hold them together and help them move forward in a loosely coordinated way. Visions and strategy statements lose their power a little when volatility, uncertainty, conflict and ambiguity make it hard to discern the path ahead. Stories are less linear and can function at a different level. They can clarify and galvanise even when the times are uncertain and scary.

Not any old story will do, though. Not all stories are created equal. The best stories – the ones that give you goosebumps, or make you cry, or prompt you to go home and sell everything you have and pack a bag – those are the stories that speak straight to the heart of what it means to be us: who we are, why we're here, what matters, why we do what we do and how we do it. In other words, stories about our purpose and values.

So, the central tenet of this book, really, is that businesses need a purpose. And shared values. And stories – for the business as a whole, and for every business unit, team, office and human being within it – that speak into that purpose and those values and bring them to life; all shadows dancing around the same campfire of one single, bright common purpose. Those organisations – and their leaders – who are clear about why they are here and doing what they're doing . . . those businesses and leaders who can craft and tell stories that communicate those things well, individually and corporately . . . those are the businesses and leaders who are better able to drive long-term value by tackling the big challenges and grabbing hold of the big opportunities that periods of profound change present.

## Defining Terms

In this book we are going to talk a lot about stories, culture, values and purpose. They are all connected ideas, but distinct. Each concept is

unpacked in more detail a little later, but here, for now, is an attempt at a working definition of each of the various terms:

- **Purpose** – this is what an organisation is here to do. Why are these particular people, with these particular skills, experiences, relationships and assets, configured together into some sort of organisation? If an organisation vanished tomorrow, what would be missing in the world? This is purpose. Purpose is an organisation’s North Star.
- **Values** – these are the guiding principles of an organisation. As the guys at Netflix say, ‘Values are what we value.’ They may be spoken or unspoken, but they are the non-negotiable things – the bright lines.
- **Stories** – these are a primary means by which purpose and values are articulated and explained, usually with some other things – strategy, successes, common experiences, artefacts – thrown in. They also, in turn inform purpose and values.
- **Culture** – this is the whole lot, and everything else. It is the air an organisation breathes; the soil it grows in. Culture is shaped by purpose and values, and by stories – but also by strategy, systems, history, the times we live in, where we are physically located, and the people leading us.

## Notes

1. Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*, Penguin, 1999.
2. Smith, Schlaepfer, Major, Dyble, Page, Thompson, Salali, Mace, Astete, Chaudhary, Ngales, Vinicuis & Migliano. ‘Cooperation and the Evolution of Hunter-Gatherer Storytelling’ *Nature Communications* 8: 1853, 5 December 2017.
3. Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we Tell Stories*, Continuum, 2005.
4. Wait, what? Seven basic plots? Yes. The central tenet of Booker’s book is that the vast majority of all of our stories follow one of seven basic structures: overcoming a monster (Beowulf) . . . rags to riches (Cinderella) . . . the quest

(The Odyssey) . . . voyage and return (Watership Down) . . . comedy (Twelfth Night) . . . tragedy (Anna Karenina) . . . and rebirth (A Christmas Carol). It's a delicious and distracting theory. And while you are running through the flip book of your life story so far, trying to work out which best fits, we can get even more reductionist. A quote variously attributed to John Gardner and Leo Tolstoy says that in fact there are only two stories in the world – 'a man goes on a journey', and 'a stranger comes to town'. And even then, the difference between these two stories is only really a matter of perspective . . .