

**Classic Theories – Contemporary Applications:  
A comparative study of the implementation of innovation  
in Canadian and Chinese Public Sector environments**

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**Abstract**

In a classic article reviewing the field of planned change, Chin and Benne (1984) outlined three meta-approaches to the implementation of change in social and organizational contexts. These meta-theories of change – rational empirical, normative-reeducative, and power coercive – summarized the field of then-existing knowledge related to innovation at a systems level. Chin and Benne’s resulting framework summarized much of the practice in change management carried out to date and provided a framework for planning of change to be implemented over the next several decades. Research with a Public Sector focus carried out more recently (Popovich, 1998; Pozner and Rothstein, 1994) confirms that the theoretical orientations outlined in 1984 continue to be applied to the practice of innovation among modern public sector managers.

This study focuses on the relative popularity of each of the three meta-strategies within public sector environments across cultural boundaries. Research interviews and literature indicate that there has been a relative shift in the preponderance of one form of change practice relative to the other two, even when considered across culture. Earlier practice tended to focus on application of power-coercive and rational-empirical strategies. This was implemented through control of means of the communication of information – the “consistent message” strategy – and through power vested in hierarchical structure.

Study interviews carried out both in Canada and in China indicate a movement, in some cases at the level of intent but increasingly in practice, toward change strategies reflective of normative-reeducative thinking. Innovative attempts to increase employee and stakeholder participation in change strategy development are key in this trend. In Canada, social expectations related to corporate responsibilities and governance processes strongly support innovation organized to maximize stakeholder input. In contrast, Chinese innovators indicate that attempts at broad-based efforts at normative-reeducative change are generally effective to the extent that they are introduced and driven by power figures. A research implication is that in China, a power-coercive base is a necessary prerequisite to beginning and reinforcing the deeper changes that result from a normative-reeducative orientation. The article explores the implication of this seeming contradiction

in approach for the introduction of innovation in any public sector environment where personal and organizational power is a critical organizational element.

### **An Overview of Strategies for Planned Change in Human Systems**

The problem with any discussion of change, regardless of the sector in which it is applied, is that change occurs in many forms. The multiple and varied approaches that managers take to change implementation make comparison of change processes complex. The complexity of the change process increases when considerations of context (public vs. private), type (planned vs. unplanned) and exigency (short term survival vs. long-term development) are included.

For purposes of this article, the focus of analysis in the area of “type” will be limited to planned change (Argyris, 1970; Bennis, Benne, and Chin, 1985). In such initiatives, the motivation to bring about the change is conscious and deliberate, at least by those directing the change process itself, as opposed to reactive. Planned change also distinguishes itself by its focus on the development of *broad systemic plans* to address the dynamics of the change initiative. Other forms of change tend to focus on individual *elements of the system* while ignoring the connection between those elements across the change system. This article focuses on planned change in contrast to more opportunistic change processes since the assumptions and intrinsic thinking of the leaders of such efforts can more easily be identified and studied. It is the identification and analysis of patterns in the thinking of such leaders that is the focus of this article.

In terms of context, the principles and approaches examined are drawn from experience with change process in both public and private sectors. The cases cited in the study relative to the Canadian environment, however, and the stories gathered in the Chinese environment focus almost exclusively on a public sector environment. The characteristics of this context, both in China and in Canada, include the presence and influence of multiple stakeholders, a bureaucratic hierarchical culture in which power accrues to those with seniority in the organization<sup>1</sup>, and a frequent focus on short-term multi-level political goals rather than longer-term organizational outputs<sup>2</sup>. Such contextual variables have traditionally impacted the strategic choices of management in the planning of change. An interest in understanding current and evolving practice within this public service context was one of the key motivating factors for the authors in pursuing this study.

In China, relationship is everything. Given this reality, the authors felt it would be important to clarify the relationships that facilitated their access to the research data forming the basis to this article. Original data related to the major Canadian case analyzed (the Canadian Transportation Agency) was gained through an employee relationship with the agency by one of the authors (Arun Thangeraj) who had worked there for several years prior to the writing of this article. The other cases analyzed were

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, part III, chap. 6, pp. 650-78

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Rawski, "Reforming China's Economy: What have we learned?" *China Journal Online* 41 (January 1999) [<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ccc/journal.htm>] October 1, 2000.

drawn primarily from Canadian journals of public sector administration (such as *Optimum* and *Public Sector Management*) and reviews of change management cases by the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD). The China based data was generated by ongoing research over a period of 4 years by the other three authors (Michael Miles, Wang Dawei, and Ma Huiqin). Data gathering was carried out at the China National Petroleum Corporation's Beijing Petroleum Managers Training Institute and through several management and executive training events sponsored by the Institute. In the opinion of the authors, analysis of the data generated by these multiple sources provides compelling and thoughtful comparative insights into the evolving practice of change management in a public sector environment.

### ***General Strategies of Change***

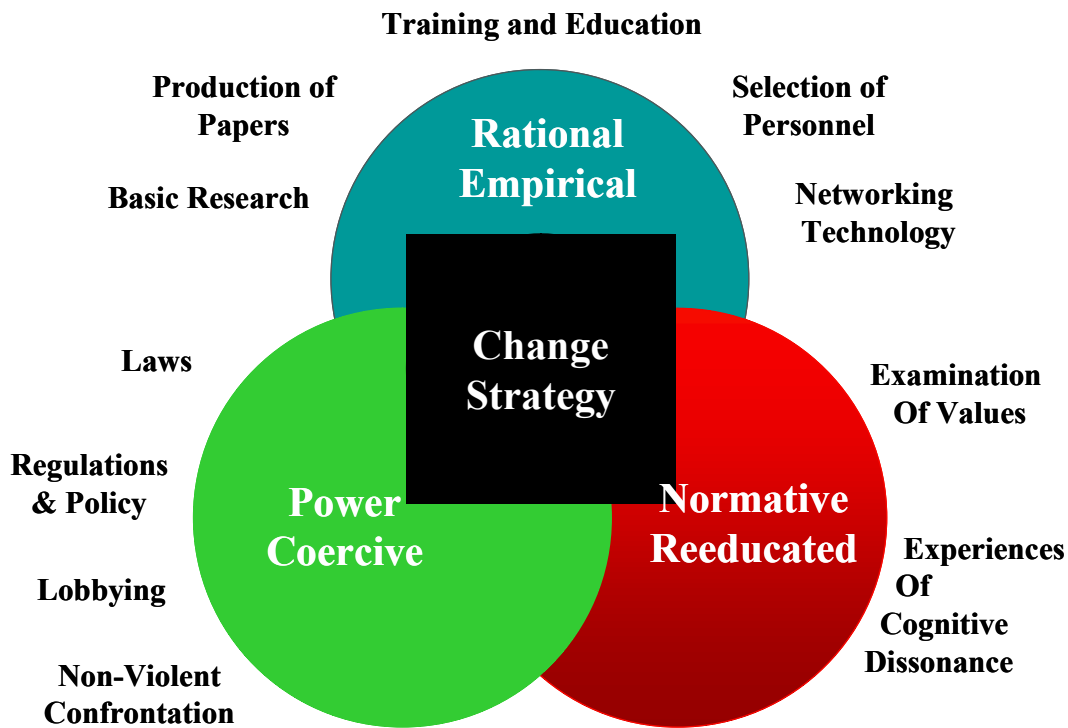
Change as an organizational process has been studied within a behavioral science context for well over 50 years. Some of the early Western researchers in this area (including Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippitt, Warren Bennis, Kenneth Benne, and Robert Chin) focused their early research on identifying the range of approaches used to guide and frame change efforts. In 1984, Chin and Benne authored an article summarizing what they saw as an overall framework cataloguing the then-utilized approaches to change management. The framework has remained an often cited guide to change practice and a useful tool for analysis of potential approaches to change strategy development.

Within the Chin and Benne framework, the broad area of change management is divided into three "general strategies" (hereafter referred to as "meta-strategies") of change: 1) empirical-rational; 2) normative-reeducative; and 3) power-coercive. Each of these meta-strategies approaches the planning and implementation of change from different philosophical and practice-based sets of assumptions. The basic and underlying approaches to change assumed by each of the three strategies is summarized in Table 1.

#### ***Empirical-Rational Strategy***

The initial underpinnings of an approach to change are based on the assumptions of the initiator concerning the nature of the individuals or system to be changed. Chin and Benne's first meta-strategy builds on the fundamental assumption that people are rational. The implication is that, once presented with information that demonstrates that a particular change is in their self-interests, they will accept the change as a means of achieving that interest. In its implementation, this strategy works as follows: a change is put forward by an individual or group who believes that what they are proposing is desirable and in keeping with the self interests of the group that will have to change. In the process of putting forward the change proposal, the proposer(s) rationally justify the change, pointing out those elements linking it to the interests of the group and showing how both the group and the individuals will benefit from the change. The underlying assumption of this approach is that if the arguments and the rational data are presented in an effective manner, the group will support the change because rationally it supports their self-interests.

**Table 1  
Meta-Theories of Change**



The key component of the rational-empirical approach to change is information. Especially in the Western world, progress has been largely measured by the movement, through the development of a strong and universal educational system, from a state of “ignorance” among the population to one where logic, information, and knowledge are prized as key underlying contributors to decision-making. In such an environment, basic research, the development of strategy based on the results of data gathering and analysis, and the promotion on change based on fact-based knowledge is highly valued and promoted as a “normal” approach to rationalizing change directions. In a rational-empirical environment, the perceived value of the information-base to change strategy is so strong in some cases that, without the support of overwhelming data supporting the case for change, many intuitively obvious change needs cannot be effectively promoted. The “case” supporting them is not sufficiently strong.

Within a Canadian public sector environment, traditional high visibility avenues of change consistent with this approach involve such forms of data gathering and analysis as White Papers, Commissions, Reports (Auditor General), and Fact Finding Missions. The general purpose of such initiatives is to document sufficient data (either factual or social) to support changes in policy, practice, and philosophy of public sector initiatives. Information generated through such initiatives is used to influence public opinion (or that of political leaders) and to initiate change programs in specific directions as supported by

the empirical data. The recent study by the Committee of Drugs of the Canadian Government Senate<sup>3</sup> represents an excellent example of the use of rigorous data gathering and analysis with public dissemination of information as a strategy to change official policy related to the decriminalization and legalization of the use of marijuana in Canada. The Committee's 650-page report, the most recent of a series of publicly funded research activities in this area including the Le Dain commission's four-year study<sup>4</sup>, has raised public awareness of the dilemmas involved in the legalization issue but has had limited impact to date. Similar information-based initiatives in a Canadian PS environment (for example the La Releve program focusing of rejuvenation of the Public Service management cadre) represent a strong tradition of using information gathering and dissemination as a key element of change programs.

Although the rational-empirical approach to change focuses on the use of information as

<b>Common Assumptions of a Rational-Empirical Approach to Change</b>
1. People are rational and driven primarily by self interest.
2. If the right information is put forward in an engaging and convincing manner, people will see the wisdom of the change and act in support of the proposal.
3. Information should be gathered by "expert" professionals, to ensure that it is accurate and reflects modern methodological protocols.
4. Transfer of information, once gathered, is primarily a one-way process. Senior representatives of the system (or their expert representatives) communicate "the facts" and help recipients understand.
5. Dialogue is in service of "understanding", not redefining or changing the facts as discovered and promoted by the experts.

a primary change motivator, the overall methodology uses a variety of sub-strategies to move change forward. Included in those originally identified by Chin and Benne were basic research and the dissemination of knowledge (through such mechanisms as academic and popular journals and presentations), selection and promotion of personnel based on a consistent knowledge base, and the use of systems analysts as generators of information about organizational dynamics. A more recently documented strategy (Burdus and Miles: 2000) focuses on the use of technology (Internet and IT networks) as

information generators and transmission strategies. The increased ability of managers to ensure that members of their organizations have access to new information as it becomes available provides a new and immediate mechanism supporting change. These technological mechanisms support the basic tenet of the rational-empirical approach to change that, with sufficient information, system members will support changes that are logical in nature.

<sup>3</sup> Special Committee on Illegal Drugs, Canadian Senate (September, 2002). *Cannabis: Our Position for a Canadian Public Policy: Report of the Special Senate Committee on Illegal Drugs*. Ottawa: Queens Printers.

<sup>4</sup> Le Dain, (1972). *Canadian Government Commission of Inquiry he Non-Medical Use of Drugs*. Ottawa: Information Canada.

### *Normative-Reeducative Strategy*

A second meta-strategy focuses on *normative-reeducative* approaches to change. This typology differs markedly from the rational-empirical approach outlined above. It is based on the premise that individuals (and human systems) are necessarily *active* in their search for need satisfaction and self-fulfillment and that change is largely values-based as opposed to rational in nature. Change is motivated, according to this approach, when the individuals identify some level of dissatisfaction with the *status quo* based on fundamental value clashes. The key task of those who follow this approach to change is not to find the right information to guide a rational change process but to find a proper and effective relationship between the values of the system (and its members) and the values of the organizational environment. The search is guided by active experimentation and the direct involvement of as many members of the system as possible as a primary methodology to the development of the change strategy.

A primary assumption of this approach is that intelligence is “social” rather than rational. Protagonists hold that only through intense interaction between the players in the system can the optimal change strategy be discovered, developed, and adopted with commitment. Successful change strategy must take into consideration the surrounding culture of the environment. Such considerations include attention to the broader system, including socially determined meanings and norms and the personal where internalized meanings, habits, and values of the members dominate.

Such elements frequently conflict with the rational data generated by fact-based research. Change as defined by this approach, therefore, extends beyond the development of common understandings that people have at a rational level to include the deeper personal meanings that each carries with them at the level of habits and values. At the organizational level, changes driven by the normative-reeducative approach focus on alterations in how organizations define the normative or “right” way to structure relationships, roles, and the personal meanings that individuals accept about human systems and their missions in the world. Typical focuses of change include improving

#### **Common Assumptions of a Normative-Reeducative Approach to Change**

1. Involvement of the members of the change system in working out programs of change under their own direction.
2. Definition of the change problem includes the probability that shifts in attitudes, values, norms, and relationships between players in the system and between the system and its external environment may be required.
3. Relationship of management and the members of the system is one of mutual collaborators in the development of the final strategy and not one of power dominance by any one segment of the system.
4. Deeper level assumptions and dynamics of the system (power, privilege, and personality) are examined as part of the change process.
5. A sub-goal of the change process is to improve the overall skills of the system to direct its own change processes in the future.

overall organizational problem-solving, personal growth and development of system members, either as individuals or as part of cadres within the system (such as executive or middle management groups), and more recently, redesign or restructuring of organizational systems to maximize member participation and involvement as noted in Weisbord (1991) and Emery (1999).

The Canadian Public Service initiative in support of rejuvenation of the management cadre of the Federal Government and cited above in our discussion of Rational-Empirical change strategy (La Releve) also represents elements of the Normative-Reeducative approach. In support of the initiation of the overall strategy driving La Releve, consultation sessions were initiated across Canada at which discussion of values, beliefs, and personal visions for the future were held with current managers and executives. The engagement of this core group of future executives proved to be one of the most powerful drivers of the program over the succeeding three years of planning and implementation. Support and commitment to the project's initiatives was largely generated through the involvement of this large target audience at the initial stages, particularly through the process of values discussion and clarification. Although the project ultimately proved less successful than anticipated, many managers hopes were inspired by its process. (Hubbard, 2001)

In the world of normative-reeducative change, arrival at common definitions of organizational values and norms is generally the preliminary step to change efforts. The process is driven by intense and usually personal exploration on the part of organizational members of deeper level assumptions and beliefs, resulting in personal and organizational clarification of organizational norms through active discussion, interaction, and exploration. This contrasts with the rational-empirical approach where the change process represents an intellectual engagement with data and information supportive of a new vision of how the system should operate. The commitment to change through a rational-empirical approach is a commitment to what is most logical and effective, even if the rational outcome contradicts some of the deeply held values of the organization's members. As can be appreciated, changes of a normative-reeducative kind generally take longer to carry out. Once initiated, however, and established in a social system, their effects tend to be much more deeply felt over a longer period of time. Recent research covering North America, Europe, and Australia (Emery, 1999) indicates that, where members of a system feel that they can have a direct impact on the way the system operates, broad indicators of organization effectiveness, including output and employee morale, tend to be positively affected.

*Power Coercive Approaches to Change*

Elements of power can be found in all approaches to

<b>Common Assumptions of a Power-Coercive Approach to Change</b>	
1.	Power is legitimate and carries rights with it – people should listen to those who hold power.
2.	Those with power have the responsibility to give direction to others in the system. It is not significant that those others do not accept the direction that they are receiving as appropriate or correct.
3.	Those who hold power have the right to punish those who do not follow their directions.
4.	The best interests of the organization are served naturally by following the directions of those who are more senior in the hierarchy – they naturally, or through dint of their experience, know what is best.

change. In the rational-empirical approach, power is based in the information or knowledge that is used as a prime mover of the change. In this approach, those who possess the knowledge hold power in the system. Judicious use of information represents a clear application of power within systems change driven by knowledge. In Normative-reeducating change, the underlying philosophy of change focuses on the development of a *personal sense of power* and the sharing of *organizational power* through the active involvement of system members in problem definition and solution generation.

The Power-Coercive strategy emphasizes a different approach and different elements of the power process. In general, this approach to change emphasizes the use of political and economic sanctions as the principle strategy to bringing about change, although the use of “moral” power also historically forms a key element of the strategy (Benne and Chin, 1985).

#### *Political / Positional Power as a Change Strategy*

Political or positional power involves the ability to create policies, directions, laws and other legal agreements that bring with them legitimate sanctions for non-compliance. Threat of sanction has the impact of increasing the willingness of system members to follow the directions of those who hold the power and engage in the change that they mandate. In addition to the economic and other sanctions that tend to be associated with this approach to change, many individuals are influenced by deeply held cultural beliefs concerning the legitimacy of senior members of the hierarchy to give direction to members of the systems for which they hold responsibility. The aura of legitimacy of the power source is sufficient, in these cases, to reduce resistance to imposed change. In such cases, a power-coercive way of making decision is accepted as the nature of the way the system operates.

#### *Economic Power as a Change Strategy*

The use of economic sanctions represents a logical extension of political power. Under a political power scenario in the broader social context, sanctions generally focus on jail and other personal liberty sanctions. Under the economic power strategy for change, the rewards (and sanctions) focus on the provision (or withholding) of financial incentives. Organizations can differentially reward members for their active implementation of new methods of management or new approaches to dealing with issues. Governments can dole out (or withhold) funding from organizations in return for their willingness to comply with new policy directions. This last example represents a combination of political power (the right to set policy directions) and economic power (the ability to fund the new directions and to withdraw funding from other practices now seen as outmoded).

Specific strategies of Power-Coercive Change range from overthrow of political regimes through non-violence, the changing of organizational management through stakeholder pressure and the “power of the Annual Meeting”, the use of public policy and legislation to force organizational change, and the use of “moral suasion” to embarrass management into appropriate action. Classic examples of such strategies would include Ghandi’s

efforts to overthrow the British in India, Saul Alinsky's radical work in the Chicago ghettos and Lee Iacocca's management approach at Chrysler. All used different applications of power strategies to force change – and all were effective in affecting the systems within which they were working.

All of the above outlined meta-strategies (rational-empirical, normative-reeducative, and power-coercive) represent approaches to bringing about change in human systems. While few change processes draw exclusively from one of the three, most base their approaches in one of the three camps and use tactics from the other two to initiate change efforts or propel them along at significant moments. When viewed through the lens of these three frameworks, patterns can be seen in the preferred and predominant approaches to change chosen by organizational systems around the world. This is particularly true in public sector organizations where expectations of transparency and emerging demands for greater stakeholder impact on decision-making processes have become increasingly strident (Paquet, 1999: 71). The remainder of this study outlines and compares patterns of change processes, broken down along Chin and Benne's change frameworks as identified through case study and participant interviews in Canadian public organizations and Chinese State Owner Enterprises.

## **Methodology and Research Design**

Two primary approaches were taken to generate data concerning preferred approaches to implementing change in the target environments. The first was a review of case study literature focused on change management initiatives. Twenty two cases related to change within a Canadian public sector environment were identified and reviewed from the perspective of the Chin and Benne framework Results of the analysis of these cases are presented numerically in Table 2 and graphically in Table 3. Due to difficulties in identifying similar written cases of public sector change initiatives in a Chinese environment, individual managers from a number of State Enterprises in China were asked to write descriptive narratives concerning their experiences with change initiatives that they had experienced. These were subsequently translated and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in managerial preferences related to change practice. Patterns identified have been compared and contrasted to those noted in the Canadian cases. Summary finding related to these narrative descriptions is summarized in numerically in Table 4 and graphically in Table 5.

Analysis of Table 2 indicates a slight preference for the rational-empirical change strategy over the normative-reeducative processes, although the use of information as a primary and strong backup strategy is well noted in the cases reviewed. The shift toward involvement of employees and managers in the gathering and analysis of data was noted in the case summaries as powerful in moving the cultures toward more of a sense of collaboration. This contrasts with the predominant use of expert consultants and technical advisors to carry out this task in the past (Halal, 2001).

For many (Pozner and Rothstein:1994, and Popovich: 1998) the more interesting shift has been the movement away from overt Power-Coercive strategies – such as the directive accompanied by threats – toward a more inclusive approach to change. Large-scale public sector changes in Canada have traditionally been accomplished primarily through application of power-based approaches. Although these have been overtly supported through application of sub-strategies associated with the other meta-strategies, the application of hierarchical power has represented a favored strategy for short term movement. Programs affecting the public sector, such as employment equity or bilingualism, represent excellent examples of the application of a power-based approach. Although reporting of Power-Coercive change may be underreported due to a growing social stigma associated with the application of power in this manner, the cases reviewed in association with this research appears to indicate growing support for – and skill in the use of – collaborative and participative approaches to change management.

**Table 2**  
**Change Strategy Preferences – Canadian Public Sector Environment**

Change Strategy Focus	Number of References*	Sub-Strategies Highlighted
<b>Rational-empirical</b>	<b>9</b> 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal surveys</li> <li>• Benchmarking of other agencies (by senior management)</li> <li>• Use of expert consultants</li> <li>• Internal efficiency analysis and reporting</li> <li>• Executive briefing sessions</li> <li>• Informational “townhall” meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Normative-Reeducative</b>	<b>8</b> 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-solving / decision-making training for all staff</li> <li>• Participative redesign of workplace</li> <li>• Data gathering about system by employees</li> <li>• Use of external facilitators to support broad-based problem-solving sessions</li> <li>• Organizational simulations to stimulate change-related discussions</li> <li>• “Vertical-slice” benchmarking visits</li> </ul>
<b>Power-Coercive</b>	<b>5</b> 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit direction from boss</li> <li>• Threats to job security</li> <li>• Promotion to supporters; none for laggards</li> <li>• Educational opportunities for supporters</li> </ul>

**Note: numbers in bold represent *primary change strategy*.** Regular scripted numbers represent the use of *secondary or supporting change strategies*

### **Table 3**

#### **A Sample Case of Public Sector Change in Canada: The Canadian Transportation Agency**

The Canadian Transportation Agency (hereafter referred to as the Agency) is a quasi-judicial tribunal mandated to oversee federally regulated transportation. Government-wide pressures over the last decade resulted in the elimination of various regulations and programs, leaving the organization with half of its staff and less than one-tenth of its budget.

Organizational change imposed by government-wide downsizing, external service pressures that the system was under and the new direction of a deregulated transportation system created service concerns. Results of a consultant-driven information-gathering exercise indicated that clients of the Agency thought that the decision-making process was overly time consuming and complex. The results of the survey were surprising to management of the CTA. The assumption within the organization was that if there was any dissatisfaction with the Agency it was because resources were spread too thin and quality might have been an inadvertent victim of restructuring. The findings of the

research, however, indicated that the quality of the work remained high; it was the process of dispute resolution that was causing dissatisfaction

Agency management began a change process that started with additional information gathering. The first step in that process was the generation of valid data focused on best practices of dispute resolution in external organizations. A key element of the change strategy was the inclusion of individuals from all levels of the organization in the data gathering process. The intent was to share the survey results throughout the organization, and, through this approach, generate a more powerful coalition for change. Information sharing also precluded a power-based approach to changing existing systems and required the Agency to adopt a more participative model.

The final change strategy represented a hybrid between the empirical and normative models described by Chin and Benne. The benchmarking exercise and the survey results pointed the Agency towards a more collaborative dispute resolution model through the use of interest-based mediation as its primary tool. The qualitative and quantitative results clearly indicated that mediation would complement the existing processes, alleviate the pressures on the system, and address the performance gaps identified by clients of the Agency. The challenge for the organization was how to implement and integrate this new process.

In order for a new dispute resolution process to be successfully integrated into Agency practice, a new approach had to be developed as acceptance via empirical justification had reached its limit. There were staff who remained unconvinced that mediation would work, and others who viewed the process as a threat to their existing work. Some believed that if disputes were mediated in increasing numbers, their role in the traditional judicial process – that of a provider of information – would become redundant. Many of these feelings were a legacy of the recent downsizing of the organization, a change process driven primarily through power-coercive processes.

The Agency had two options: it could implement a new system and require it to be used, or it could adopt an approach whereby the organization would voluntarily experiment with the adoption of mediation as an alternative dispute resolution process. As mediation is essentially a collaborative process, the Agency recognized that the way in which it integrated this process had to be consistent with a collaborative philosophy. Management's belief was that changes that require participation or collaboration will not be effective if the way in which they are implemented does not reflect the values underlying the desired process results. In order to be consistent with the collaborative approach, the Agency pursued a normative-reeducative change process to implement mediation in one of its three branches.

With a view to highlighting the positive impacts of the new approach and having individuals experience some sense of cognitive dissonance between their current beliefs and the hoped-for positive results of the new methods, the Agency implemented a mediator training program open to all employees of the Agency. Focus of this approach was on two objectives. The first was that staff accustomed to working through a

traditional resolution process would be now able to function in the role of mediator. The intent of providing skills to individuals was to overcome resistance to change that arose out of personal concerns for job security. The second, and probably more important objective was to challenge what Chin and Benne refer to as the “habits and values” as well as the “institutionalized roles, relationships, and cognitive / perceptual orientations” of individuals. Staff who took part in these training exercises had existing beliefs about conflict resolution and the role of the Agency challenged. Employees were able to experience the advantages of mediation by participating, conducting and observing the new processes in action. At the end of the training exercises, the response towards mediation was drastically different from the initial perceptions held by individuals.

What this change approach was able to achieve was the ability to create a powerful and influential group of employees who not only had a rational understanding of the benefits of mediation, but who were also now uncomfortable with the status quo. The change in the outlook of these individuals drastically reduced the resistance to change within the branch where mediation was being used. The normative awakening was so effective that, within one year, mediation was in the process of being expanded into all areas of dispute resolution at the Agency.

### **The Chinese Experience:**

Analysis of the Chinese approach to management of change in a public sector yields some significant differences between the Canadian experience in emphasis and basic approach. The quantitative data outlined in Table 2 indicates that the preferred Chinese approach is power-coercive. When the analysis of the data is limited to the three meta-approaches originally named by Chin and Benne, fifty four percent of the nominated primary orientations to change fell into this category. Statements concerning this basic orientation to change were so strong among some of the respondents that the choice of using rational-empirical or normative-reeducative approaches seemed relatively less effective. One participant stated emphatically: Of the preferred mechanisms of power assertion, directives, edicts, and regulations were frequently nominated. This would be very much in keeping with the psychological and cultural experience of the Chinese people in which strict adherence to hierarchy and the directions emanating from those in authority is expected and valued as appropriate. Bond (1996) notes that such behavior is very much in keeping with the norms of “filial piety”, in which loyalty and submission to superiors is the norm in a family setting. Hsu (1965) has long maintained that this dynamic can be generalized to cover “any consensually defined situation or superordination and subordination, such as that between teacher and student or between employer and employee.”

**Table 4**  
**Change Strategy Preferences – Chinese State Enterprise Environment**

<b>Change Strategy Focus</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Sub-Strategies Highlighted</b>
<b>Rational-empirical</b>	8  4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education programs to instill common knowledge</li> <li>• Criticism (self and other) and suggestion</li> <li>• Provide information about the change at the critical moment of stress</li> <li>• Identify and apply modern principles</li> <li>• Show people the economic benefits of your plan</li> <li>• Analyze the situation and present the results</li> </ul>
<b>Normative-Reeducative</b>	4  2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building common set of value references around which the change revolves</li> <li>• Expose people to opportunities to try new things</li> <li>• Set up opportunities for people to get frustrated – this encourages them to change</li> <li>• Engage people in thinking through and making the change.</li> </ul>
<b>Power-Coercive</b>	14  6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of regulations to require the change</li> <li>• The organization (management) issues orders</li> <li>• Reward people for their correct performance through public recognition</li> <li>• Tell people about the change and do not allow for choice</li> <li>• Issue disciplinary regulations</li> <li>• Use Senior representative to discuss the change: their position will bring about the change</li> <li>• Use economic power to give gifts to get the change</li> <li>• As leader, make the decision and then be tough!</li> <li>• Reward people through bonus for the changes</li> </ul>

The observations noted here concerning the prevalence of power-coercive strategies is not to suggest that the other meta-strategies to change are not utilized. In the narratives analyzed, thirty-one percent of the respondents noted a primary orientation to rational-empirical approaches. Specific strategies associated with Chinese practice here included analysis of the situation with results presented to managers and employees alike, criticism as an approach to providing information related to preferred change in organizational practice, and education as a preferred process of increasing understanding of more effective methods for approaching organizational issues. This last process again builds on the Confucian assumption that the senior will educate the junior, that providing education and direction is part of the superior's role.

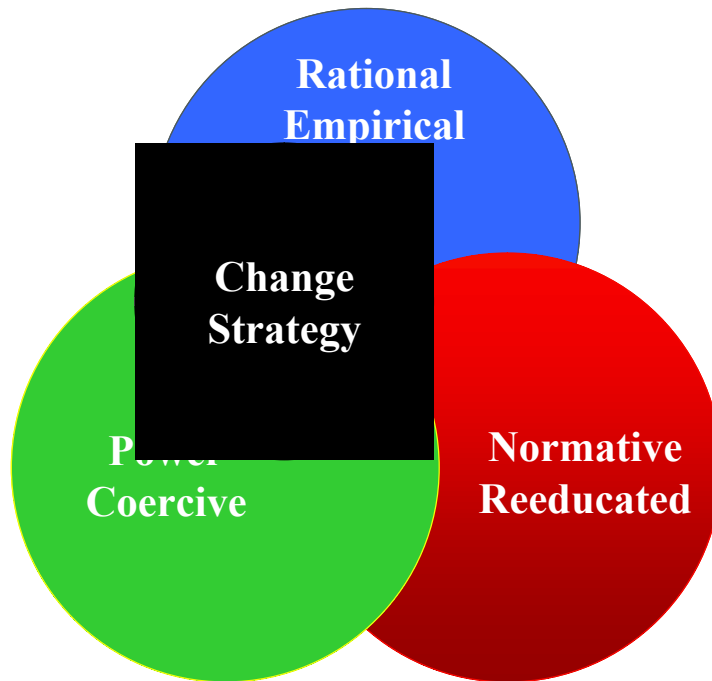
***Change In China  
(view 1)***

“The only way to bring about change around here is to tell people what to do and punish them if they don't obey. As managers we lose face if we are not strong and decisive!”

*Chinese Senior  
Manager*

**Table 5**

**Chinese Change Management Practice**



Finally, strategies of normative reeducation, while not widely discussed, were nominated in fifteen percent of the narratives as the primary orientation of the change leader to bringing about a shift in organizational behavior or structure. A number of respondents referred to examples in which the change agent engineered experiences designed to generate cognitive dissonance along with the opportunity to discuss alternative approaches to the “problem situation”. In another case, one respondent described a meeting session in which the manager structured an intense discussion of values and what was important for the company on the part of participants as an approach to jointly building a strategy of change with them.

### **Relationship: a New Meta Strategy**

Throughout the responses to descriptions of change efforts in the Chinese data, however, participants frequently and emphatically referred to actions that did not easily fit the three meta-strategies outlined above. This strategy was based in the process of building and using personal relationships as a key process of influencing and achieving change objectives. One participant framed this approach clearly when she indicated that “It was not the information or the power that determined whether change would happen or not. It was the quality and depth of the relationship between the manager and the others involved in the change. If the relationship was good, change would probably go ahead easily. Otherwise, the manager would have to fall back on his power – and the change would happen slowly.”

The range of individual strategies uncovered in the narratives was wide, encompassing a varied application of “relationship” as a strategic element in the change process. Most

***Change in China  
(view 2)***

“The most important things are to banquet frequently [build relationships] and speak frankly.”

*Chinese Senior  
Manager*

frequently nominated were strategies of building relationship through social engagements with the effect of building influence and a “circle of comfort within which changes could be discussed openly and freely” [participant data]. The intent of such discussions was to influence the parties in the direction of a preferred change from the perspective of the change agent while “understanding the situation of the employee” [participant data]. This latter represents a significant element of the spirit of the Relational strategy, since it leaves open the possibility that the change, as envisioned by the manager, may be modified by new information and circumstances of which the drivers of the change were not aware. Within the circle of the relationship, the change becomes open to negotiation, with

optimal rational solutions giving way to satisfied operational ones. The key driver of the change becomes the relationship between those in the discussion – especially those that have been developed over time and through personal experiences involving some degree of joint hardship – and their commitment *to each other* as opposed to the solution itself.

These processes proved to be the dominant strategy of those nominated in the narratives analyzed from a quantitative perspective. When added to the total number of change incidents analyzed, the redefined framework yields the frequency distribution outlined in Table 6. Actual tactics associated with the strategy are outlined numerically in Table 7 and depicted graphically in Table 8.

**Table 6**

**Frequency Distribution of Change Strategies  
(redefined Meta-Strategy Framework)**

<i>Change Meta-Strategy</i>	<i>Primary Orientation</i>	<i>Secondary Orientation</i>
<b>Rational-empirical</b>	<b>8</b>	4
<b>Normative-reeducative</b>	4	2
<b>Power-Coercive</b>	<b>14</b>	6
<b>Relational</b>	<b>16</b>	4

**Table 7**

**Relationship as a Change Strategy**

<b>Change Strategy Focus</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Sub-Strategies Highlighted</b>
<b>Relationship</b>	16 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of personal family situation</li> <li>• Recreational activities together – builds relationship and common bonds</li> <li>• Getting to know each other better – just this brings about change</li> <li>• Encourage efforts to change through our close relationship and discussions</li> <li>• Become close to the people and discuss the situation and possibilities</li> <li>• Use close and personal relationship to convince people to do what you want done.</li> <li>• Build good social relationships and use the spirit of relationship to discuss the change</li> <li>• Always use middle people with relationship to discuss the change: its not the information that is important – it is the relationship</li> <li>• Focus on the past good relationship.</li> </ul>

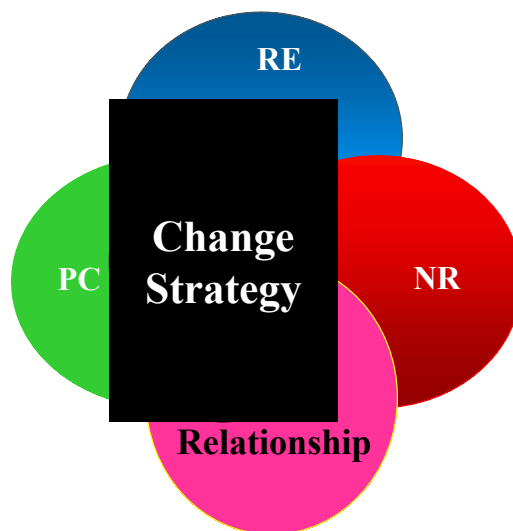
## Relevance of the Findings to Change in a Public Sector Environment

The perspectives and schools of thought within any particular context derive their distinctiveness and, ultimately, their effectiveness from their fit to the socio-cultural and political environment within which they exist. The “fit” is particularly important in environments, such as the Public Service, where agendas are multiple and frequently political in nature. Chin and Benne’s initial analysis of change strategies examined frameworks used to direct change within human systems from a utilitarian and pragmatic perspective. The initial framework, documented initially in 1976 and modified in 1984, focused on three guiding meta-elements of influence in the change process: information (“People are rational”), values (“People commit to self-determined ideals”) and power (“People are driven by fear.”) While this framework encompasses many of the change initiatives researched in their initial study – and frankly, nicely summarizes the dominant thinking in today’s management cadre – it ignores an alternative, potentially powerful, and often neglected path to change in our Public Service environments in the West. The concept of the development and use of “Relationship” as an alternative or additional meta-strategy for the promotion of change represents a potential avenue of exploration that, save the time required for the development of significantly powerful and meaningful relationships, could add tremendous impetus to innovation within our public institutions.

**Table 8**

## Relationship as a Meta-Strategy

**The condition having personal and affective affiliation between one or more individuals built on intense experience over time.**



The research undertaken to develop the framework outlined in this article has clear limitations. A more extensive and rigorous review of case studies, perhaps including those of public service agencies from the US and Europe, would undoubtedly provide a broader understanding of current trends in Western change management practice. A broader-based sample of Chinese managers and the inclusion of documented case studies of change within Chinese organizational settings would also add credibility and nuance to the finding of this preliminary research work. A final but significant limitation to the current study was that of language and culture of the researchers. The reality that the research team itself may have entered into the study with biases related to preferred change strategies driven by their personal and professional culture backgrounds and compounded by language differences certainly exists within a predictable realm of possibility. These limitations are hereby noted and confirmed. Limitations aside, however, the findings of this study toward a pronounced trend toward the use of relationship as a key element of change within the Chinese environment provide a useful starting point toward future studies in this area.

For example, from a governance perspective, the preferences implied by this framework favour the stakeholder approach. Implicit in this philosophy of governance is a preference for collaboration across large bodies of individuals and groups who, through open dialogue, come to trust each other in their decision-making processes. Halal (2001) points out that, by viewing stakeholders as “partners who create economic and social value through ‘collaborative problem-solving’”, the development of a new model – the “collaborative enterprise” can be developed. While his focus is primarily on the private sector organization, he comments that the social responsibilities of business and the dynamics of decision-making around those responsibilities closely parallels the processes that are both necessary within and available to Public Sector organizations. Indeed, within Public Service organization in Canada, the process of public consultation and dialogue currently being used both internally and externally has the potential of pushing discussion beyond the mere exchange of information with the purpose of increasing understanding (Rational-empirical strategy) to a more powerful form of mutual understanding and creative action. Additional research into the use of collaborative approaches to change based on a normative-reeducative strategy and increased levels of relationship represents an interesting area of future exploration.

This later can happen, however, only if the intent and strategy of the change managers is to move beyond dialogue at the level of *information* to dialogue focused on deep listening with empathy, the expression of hidden assumptions, the identification of common interests, and a search for conceptual breakthroughs (Isaacs, 1999). The limitations of our current frameworks of approaching change – outlined so long ago by Chin and Benne – are highlighted by this alternative approach to change management practice modeled by some – not all – managers in the Chinese Public Sector environment. Clearly efforts of senior managers to build relationships of trust with large numbers of employees and the public requires an enormous commitment of time and energy. The movement, through

dialogue and openness to solutions alternate to those driven by power and expert information, also represents high risk in a risk-averse environment. The alternative, however, appears to be to commit the same time and energy to the creation of additional bureaucratic control mechanisms, legislation, and consultation processes designed more to sell than to listen, all of which have had questionable results as change mechanisms in the past. Could it be that we can learn something so simple – and profound – as the power of “relationship” as a strategy of implementing change from the Chinese?

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