

# STILL MOVING

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HOW TO LEAD MINDFUL CHANGE



## Deborah Rowland

'A powerful exposition on the need to look within ourselves to find the leadership required for our fast changing and dislocated world.'

Paul Polman, *CEO, Unilever*

**WILEY** Blackwell

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## 1

## Introduction

*Stillness is what creates love,  
Movement is what creates life,  
To be still,  
Yet still moving –  
That is everything!*

Do Hyun Choe, Japanese Master

My life began in change, the ultimate change, when I was handed over at 6 weeks old and adopted into the welcome and hugely loving embrace of the Rowland family. I had experienced an ending, with my biological mother, at the very start of life. An in-between time, floating without family, in a Lancashire mother-and-babies home. And then here was a new beginning with my adopted family. Born Wendy Juliet, I was renamed Deborah Anne. Since that cataclysmic time, no change has ever seemed insurmountable.

It meant that I learned to live life on a boundary. As an adopted child I grew up with detached curiosity, an outsider in my own life. Seeking to belong yet hard-wired not to trust, I cautiously put one foot into my new family, and, at the same time, carefully kept one foot out, just in case I had to leave – or be left – again. Perhaps I was always on the look out for a bond, for intimacy. However, it seemed I both tumbled into it and ran away from it almost at the same time. The edge, for me, felt the safest place.

Yet this detachment, this instinct to be *alongside* rather than *inside* gave me a helpful vantage point to observe and notice. I was intensely curious about people, in particular how they related to each other and formed systems. I could make good use of my fate.

My earliest companion – detached curiosity – set my life on its course. Holding Mum and Dad's hands as a wondrous wide-eyed 10-year-old, I was transfixed by the blockbuster Tutankhamun exhibition in London

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in 1972, the treasure trove of royal Egyptian artefacts unearthed by the archaeologist Howard Carter. And when in 1977 Desmond Morris published *Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behaviour*, I knew I had found my field.

And so I read archaeology and anthropology at university. From the Trobrianders of New Guinea to the Nuer of the Nile, their ethnographies provided many hours of absorbing reading and reflection in the university library. The anthropological discipline of acute unbiased observation enhanced my sensitivity to diversity and to context. All thought and action, however seemingly strange, make perfect sense when you can see the system within which they are situated. I also spent many hours on my hands and knees in deep Neolithic trenches, using a tiny trowel to gently scrape away and reveal history's previously unearthed layers. I felt both strengthened and humbled when I stood in that deep messy line of time.

As compelling as the experience was, I put down my trowel and continued my personal line out of those trenches. And I did so because a single memory from just one anthropology lecture had already awakened my purpose. A purpose that has guided the intervening 30 years I have spent in business – and that still guides me today. Indeed, it is the reason why I write this book.

The memory came from a grainy black and white film shown in that fateful lecture. Shot at the turn of the last century, it falteringly documented how a group of British Christian missionaries entered a native tribe in Africa with the aim of 'civilising' its seemingly primitive culture. This was the *change goal*. As a result of inter-village warfare, this native culture was thought to be on the verge of extinction. What caught my attention, beyond the misguided arrogance of the change goal, was the *change approach*.

The missionaries decided to introduce the villagers to the game of cricket. Believing they would channel their aggression into this edifying game, the missionaries looked on aghast as the African warriors picked up the cricket stumps as javelins, and the cricket balls as missiles. Far from reducing the inter-village warfare, the change approach amplified it. On entering a strange landscape the missionaries had sought new results by importing old routines. Big mistake.

Worryingly those lessons of over a century ago still need heeding today. There remain plenty of well-intended missionaries with antique approaches to change. History repeats.

But the lessons from the missionaries pointed me to my (professional) fate. I have spent 30 years exploring what it truly takes to lead change in new and uncertain environments, where past solutions no longer work and in fact become a dangerous liability.

I believe I have found some of the answers, and offer them to you in *Still Moving*.

## Leading Change Starts Inside Yourself

Here's my primary insight – start by becoming *still* and examining the source of your thinking and action.

The missionaries leapt into their habitual routines without first questioning the deeper beliefs shaping them. Unaware of these biased lenses they could not clearly see the system they were seeking to change. Blind to their own impulses and ignorant of context, all they could do was reactively shape – and not resourcefully respond – to the escalating fray.

Now, I can hear you thinking, 'I would never have done anything like that!' Really?

We all grow up in our stories, our personal histories. Like my adoption story, the narratives of our lives lay down deep deposits in the layers of our being – deposits of emotional instinct, felt security or insecurity, self-identity, adaptive coping behaviour. And we take those deposits and we import those routines into our adult life: our relationships and our leadership. They are the source of our repeating patterns and impulses in the present – particularly in stressful and challenging situations. In these circumstances we naturally get anxious, and can resort to primitive self-limiting patterns of thinking and acting that lead to the very opposite of the results we are trying to create.

*The dual capacity to be aware of, and able to regulate our response to, experience guides the entire quality of our thinking, action and results. What's more, my new research has shown that this ability to tune into and regulate the self, within an evolving system, is the number one inner skill in being able to lead change well. If senior leaders stay stuck in habitual response, so do their organisations.*

Once you are able to come off autopilot and hold your default impulses lightly, you are freed of their attachment and can intentionally and less habitually respond. You see what shows up in experience with systemic perception not just personal projection. Easy to say, much harder to do!

I am grateful for how my instinctive preference to be on the observational edge of human systems has enabled me to have a rewarding career in the field of leadership and change. Yet, even today when guiding leadership groups, and the two seats on either side of me remain empty, I can easily tip into my default story: 'Here we go again, I am left alone, abandoned!' Rather than hold the systemic insight: 'My distance from others has given me the necessary detachment for leadership'.

It's a wafer-thin line between impulsive, anxious reaction, and mindful, perceptive response, especially when the world feels threatening and disruptive.

Aha, the 'M word' has made its first appearance. Let's go there now.

## The Mindfulness Explosion

In my first book with Malcolm Higgs, *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (2008), we set out the four leadership practices, or exhibited behaviours, that our research showed in combination were highly correlated with successful change outcomes.

These were: *Attractor* – creating an emotional pull in your organisation towards shared purpose; *Edge and Tension* – naming reality and amplifying disturbance in order to innovate; *Container* – channelling anxiety and uncertainty into productive energy by being calm, confident and affirming; and *Transforming Space* – taking actions that create deep change in the here-and-now experience.

At that time we also drew attention to what we surmised were two critical *inner conditions* behind these practices: self-awareness and ego-less intention.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in that round of research we did not empirically test the relationship between this inner state and a leader's successful practice. It remained a hypothesis. We focused on what leaders *did*, the four practices above. And this was largely because we had not found a single coherent framework that could describe this inner state.

In the decade since we wrote *Sustaining Change* there has been an explosion of interest in so-called 'mindfulness'.<sup>2,3</sup> While newly arrived on the public scene mindfulness has in fact been in existence for almost 2,500 years. Originally derived from ancient Buddhist contemplative tradition, and more recently adopted into western settings through the fields of medicine, social psychology, education and general work place productivity, the practice of mindfulness – classically trained via meditation – has now found its way into leadership.

Mindfulness is, in essence, the cultivation of a deeper awareness of the self, others and the world through focused, non-judgemental and intentional attention on the present moment.<sup>4</sup> This is a radical shift in how we show up in our lives, where research shows that our attention is only on the present moment for half of the time.<sup>5</sup> Our uncontained minds naturally wander. The promise of mindfulness is that by bringing our attention intentionally and non-judgementally to what we are experiencing, in the present moment, we will be more able to regulate our

emotional and cognitive response to experience leading to calmer and more resourceful lives.

You can imagine how this capacity to approach all of experience – and in particular difficulty – with greater equilibrium could be important in leading change. I define change as the disturbance of repeating patterns – a task that by definition is fraught with difficulty. Patterns are stable constructs that are hard to break – especially human mindset and behaviour. As a living species our brains are hard-wired for survival and that tends to mean repeating the coping patterns of the past. Disturbing these patterns is not only difficult to do, it comes at a price for those disturbing them, as it requires breaking previous commitments and loyalties. Ouch.

It's hardly surprising then that in the past 2 years alone circa 50 books purporting to associate mindfulness with leadership success have been launched onto the virtual Amazon bookshelf. But while tested in clinical settings and personality disciplines, mindfulness has not yet been empirically proven to relate to management or success in top leadership. Studies to date have been limited to examining personal benefits to the leader; for example, stress reduction, enhanced task performance and general well-being.<sup>6,7,8</sup> They have not looked into broader organisational outcomes. There is a paucity of research into the relationship between mindfulness, leader effectiveness and successful change outcomes.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

I wanted to change that, and address what I saw as the somewhat *mindless* take up of mindfulness, fast in danger of becoming a fad rather than a deeply understood discipline.

## Does Mindfulness Matter?

As I got more acquainted with the field of mindfulness, I sensed that it could hold a key to unlocking the meaning of the inner state we wrote of in *Sustaining Change*. Just after publishing that book, and partly inspired by the wishful thought that I could put my own research into action, I had left consulting and returned to the corporate world. In the two executive roles that followed, both of which entailed leading major restructurings, I certainly learned about what *not* to do as well as what *to* do when leading change. But more than that, I came to a stark and vital realisation that proved a further ignition point for this book.

My realisation was that change does indeed start on the inside. I had always claimed that 'change starts with self', however I had not quite comprehended that this did *not* mean having to change yourself. It meant accessing your highest and most conscious self.

What do I mean by that? In my corporate roles it became very clear that I had to be in the right place personally before I could skilfully lead or do anything. *Being* at ease with all of experience felt as important as what I *did* in experience. And for that ease to be with me it required that I cultivated a point of inner spaciousness, or stillness. From this place, and only this place, could I gain the courage, resilience and wisdom to tackle the most stressful and complex of changes.

I was starting to see why those four leadership practices we set out in *Sustaining Change* were theoretically sound yet dastardly hard to practise. I had had to do it to get it.

With my personal experience in the corporate world and the burgeoning field of mindfulness entering into leadership, I wanted to investigate more fully the relationship between a leader's ability to mindfully regulate their inner state and their ability to lead change. The workings of destiny continued in that I was then offered the chance to act as change coach to the Executive Board of a large European energy company going through a major transition. The CEO, my client, wished mindfulness to be the cornerstone new skill for his leaders. This experience was the final tap on the shoulder that I needed to return to the drawing board of research.

And here, in summary, is what my research team and I found.

After the forensic examination of evidence coming from coding 88 different stories of leading change, we can say, *yes*, mindfulness does make a difference to a leader's ability to lead big change. Staying calm, connected and resourceful in challenging conditions was a hallmark of the most successful change leaders. And yet we found that mindfulness, while the starting point, is not the only component to a leader's inner state.

*We found that a leader's ability to be mindful needs to be supplemented by a deep capacity to perceive the world through a systemic lens. And it was this deeper interpretative capacity that proved the biggest differentiator between high and low success in leading large complex change.*

This systemic capacity, the *perceiving skill* of being able to look beneath visible experience and see its deeper governing structures, was a clear differentiator between leaders who could lead big change well, and those who could not. It led them to create movement – and not just busy action.

It makes sense. When you rise to a senior leadership position, such a role requires you to understand and influence a large complex interconnected system that seems to have its own life and intentionality (if only we could simply pull a lever at the top of an organisation to change it!). In times of major change, systemic capacities enable leaders to sustainably and more effortlessly move this wider and deeper field.

## Still Moving – a Call to Leadership

We found that when mindfulness and systemic skills were combined, this inner capacity led to highly successful change outcomes. To be mindful and systemic at the same time requires you to stop and find an inner place of stillness. Just as the Hindu concept of *Madhya* describes that still point of pure present-moment awareness, like the momentary pause between your in breath and your out breath, so does a leader need to find that place of deep consciousness from which they can clearly perceive and respond to experience. This inner still capacity is a quality of *being*.

Successful change leadership is also about moving the world around you, and for this task the four external leadership practices combine. With a nuance here or there, our new research re-validated the vital role that Attractor, Edge and Tension, Container and Transforming Space leadership play in leading change well. This external moving capacity is a quality of *doing*.

*This combination of being and doing – at the same time – is the concept behind Still Moving. Our research found that this combination of skills explained 52% of the reason why leaders can lead big change well. Put another way, if you can't practice Still Moving leadership, you reduce your chances of successfully leading change by half.*

To be still, yet still moving, that is (almost) everything.

## Who is This Book For?

*Still Moving* is a book for leaders wishing to approach the challenges of changing their institutions, or society at large, in a more skilful and humane way. This is not a book for leaders wishing only to increase shareholder value. But it will appeal to leaders who desire to bring about big change in ways that increase productivity *and* achieve those desired outcomes in ways that leave the world in a stronger place.

The concept of Still Moving has, of course, a double meaning. It not only encompasses putting two skill sets together to describe a certain way to move a system. The concept also means the ability to achieve ongoing, longer lasting and more sustainable change that replenishes the world and our leadership more than it takes away. Still is an adverb as well as an adjective.

The book is also aimed at leadership coaches and change consultants who wish to create a deeper capacity for leading change in the systems of their clients – be they individuals, top teams, whole organisations or multistakeholder societal groups. To cultivate both being and doing requires a certain kind of development experience, one that is grounded

in lived moments rather than taught models. (If this were followed through it would call into question the vast bulk of the €45bn spent on leadership development and training every year.<sup>12</sup> That might also help the world a little.)

If you already feel this book speaks to you then I welcome you on its journey. To help you *mindfully* navigate that journey, here's an overview of what to expect.

## Chapter 2: Is Change Changing?

In this chapter I set out what I see as the bigger picture context within which today's leadership is exercised – the major societal trends that both challenge and disrupt how today's businesses and institutions are run. This presents an adaptive change challenge requiring an adaptive leadership response such as greater agility, shorter planning cycles, working more collaboratively across multistakeholder groups, and upturning conventional hierarchies and control systems. At its core, it requires that we operate from a new mode of perception about the world and our place in it.

## Chapter 3: Still Moving – The Inner and Outer Skills

In this chapter I describe in more detail our research and the Still Moving framework. I reiterate the four external leadership practices set out in *Sustaining Change*, including how I have now refined these through the lessons of experience. And I will introduce you to the four inner mindfulness and systemic capacities, which we found to be essential antecedents and enhancers of these practices. A story of business transformation illustrates these throughout.

## Chapter 4: It All Starts in Mindfulness

In more detail I set out in this chapter the two inner mindfulness capacities that we found to be most associated with success in leading big change: *Staying Present*, the ability to pay close attention to the present moment without getting caught up in it; and *Curious and Intentional Responding*, consciously choosing how to be with what you have noticed is present. I draw from the research and my experience to illustrate these capacities and share an in-depth case study of how they can be used to lead big change well.

## Chapter 5: The Power of the Systemic

Two systemic capacities significantly differentiate the most successful change leaders: *Tuning into the System* and *Acknowledging the Whole*. These two inner capacities place the mindful self within a wider context and in this chapter I show how a leader can not just notice and regulate what is going on for them, but use this inner awareness as a valuable source of data about the system – in particular tuning into the emotional climate of their organisation and giving a place to difficulty, the two greatest sources of movement and change.

## Chapter 6: Make Disturbance Your Friend

This leads me to illustrate the leadership skill of *Edge and Tension*. Our research showed that this was the external practice that made the biggest single difference to a leader achieving successful change. Yet despite its power, it is the practice most feared, avoided or clumsily done. In a revealing case study, I show how Edge and Tension can be combined with the inner capacities to enable a leader to disturb repeating patterns using great poise and empathy, without causing resistance and defensive routines in others.

## Chapter 7: Holding the Fire

Our research found that top leaders in high magnitude change need to combine Edge and Tension with *Container* leadership practice – the ability to channel the fierce energy stirred up through Edge and Tension without anxiety. I describe how Container leadership can build ownership, trust and psychological safety across a system in turbulence, and, in the case study, show again how this practice must be combined with certain inner capacities so that the human dynamics of change are skilfully handled.

## Chapter 8: The Time for Emergence

This chapter steps away from your personal leadership capability to show how you can architect an overall approach to change that fits today's dynamic and increasingly uncertain context. It is around 15 years since the notion of *emergent change* hit the world of organisational theory and management practice. I show in a story of radical performance improvement how this more bottom-up, step-by-step and giving-up-of-control change approach is more suited to today's world.

## Chapter 9: A Tale of Still Moving and Business Transformation

Our research found that leaders who had been exposed to a Still Moving type leadership development experience displayed greater change leadership skill. In this chapter I tell the story of how I partnered with a courageous CEO and a strong faculty team to deliver a pioneering and innovative developmental experience that helped an entire organisation face major disruptive change.

## Chapter 10: Still Moving and Your Leadership

In this chapter I set out the key principles for how to cultivate your own Still Moving leadership skills. Much traditionally delivered *offline* leadership development programmes are not worth their investment, and a more *online* experiential form of leadership development could yield far greater return. This chapter will take you along what I hope is a rich personal learning journey.

## Chapter 11: The Sense of an Ending

Finally, I summarise the main messages and provocatively place them into a wider societal context. Still Moving is a style of leadership that allows us to be part of something bigger. How can the insights be applied to the wider challenges of the world we live in? What deep shift in mindset is required and how might that come about, including how our institutions might need to be set up and governed differently?

I have been on a personal journey in the 10 years since I wrote *Sustaining Change*, which has proven challenging. It involved a deep look into my self and my repeating story. This was not always a pleasant experience. Yet what is a life unless it can be lived with full awareness?

I share some of my personal journey in this book. This is not without risk but it is with intention. And my intention is to help you look inside yourself too. I can stay very safe and comfortable in my old story of deficit. Yet it never brought me the prize of living my full life.