

THE ETHICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE (II)

Denis Bourgeois

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This article is the second in a set of three papers on the ethical issues one may face when leading or promoting change in an organization.

It is based on personal reflections and on interviews of 31 practitioners (consultants or executives). Chapter 2 of the first paper presents the research methodology and gives information about these interviews.

As also explained in more detail in the introduction to the first paper¹, my objective in these papers is not to tell people what they should do; it is to help them in their own ethical reflection regarding their actions by exploring the issues they may encounter as change agents and the possible ways to address them. In this introduction, I also defined ethics as “a feeling we experience more or less clearly that tells us what is right for us to do or not to do and that consequently provides each of us with our own inner law. As with any law, we may choose to obey it or not, but the fact that we may sometimes ignore it does not prevent it from existing”. The paper should be considered as having been written in a Western perspective and may therefore not be totally relevant in some non-Western cultures.

The first paper dealt with the ethical issues related to the purpose and consequences of any given change. This second paper deals with the ethical issues related to the way change is delivered, with a particular focus on issues around coercion and manipulation. Later, a third and final paper will deal with what it takes to be ethical in the midst of life’s practical, everyday constraints, i.e. how one acknowledges and listens to this inner law.

In terms of structure, this paper first presents the range of ethical issues that, in my view, may occur in a change process and that are linked with the actions of the change agent, consultant or executive (chapter 1). It then gives an account of what my interviewees told me in relation to the same topic (chapter 2) and goes on to provide some further comments and analysis (chapter 3).

As mentioned in paper 1, problems people may face when choosing between their ethical inner voice and their practical or symbolic interests will be addressed in paper 3.

1. The issues at stake: does the end justify the means?

In this chapter, I wish to identify possible ethical issues that are linked with the actions of change agents when leading or promoting a change in an organization. It is based on my own reflections and on selected literature.

¹ The Ethics of Organizational Change (I) - available on the same website

In one of the quotations from my interviewees mentioned in the first paper, I only picked the first part of his sentence, because this was the most relevant part at that stage. However, the full quotation goes like this:

“The first hurdle is (for) the greater good; if not, why are you doing it? But then, the second hurdle is: what needs to be done? Otherwise, you fall into the trap (whereby) the end justifies the means.”

Does the end justify the means? This is another deep philosophical question and it is particularly relevant when the end is regarded as important. As another interviewee emphasized:

“In business, you always aim for a result; you cannot be indifferent as to whether the result will be reached or not”.

We already touched on this question in the first paper, when we considered the issue of benefits and damages. In a way, damages in a change situation that are accepted for a greater good are indeed the means that justify the end.

However, the question comes up again even more strongly when we look at issues in the delivery of the change process, because then possibly unethical aspects no longer lie just in the consequences of actions, but in the actions themselves. This can easily occur when one wants someone else to act in a certain way and this applies to organizational change situations as well as to many others in private and social life.

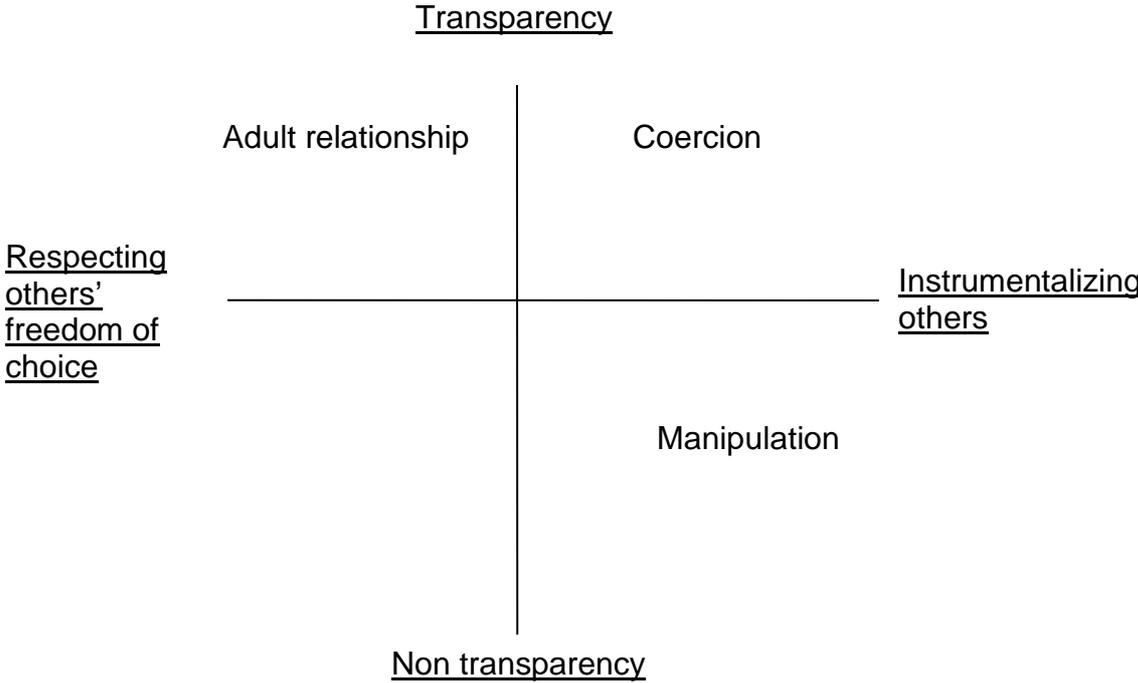
We have seen in the first paper that, among possible ethical “logics” (i.e. ways of reasoning), some are what I termed “non-interventionist”². People adopting such logics do not necessarily want something in particular to happen, preferring to be just mediators, facilitators of dialogue between stakeholders. Therefore, although **they** may not face this kind of issue, **we do**, as long as we are not adopting “non-interventionist” logic fully and exclusively.

1.1. What can you do when you want someone else to change their way of thinking or acting?

Let me use a new 2*2 diagram. Its vertical axis represents the transparency dimension. Being transparent in our actions means that we say openly what our purpose is in our interaction with others. Being non-transparent means that we do not disclose our purpose fully; we even hide it if necessary or lie about it. The horizontal axis represents the dimension of respect versus “instrumentalization” of others. Instrumentalizing others means using them as mere means in order to reach our goal, without consideration of their own interests or wishes. Respect, here, means respecting others’ freedom of decision and, more generally, their freedom to be what they want to be.

² a reminder of these logics is also given on page 23 below

We need these two axes because they are key in any human interaction, particularly when we want to make an impact on our social environment; we cannot avoid making choices about them. Also, they address commonly acknowledged ethical issues: How far can we use others as means? How far can we cheat them? As with any of these deep questions, there is no clear and universally accepted answer. If you have absolutely no problem with the idea of using others as a mere means to an end (and of tricking them), this paper will be of little interest to you. However, if you have issues with that, at least in some circumstances, then you may feel concerned.



- Table 1: a simple taxonomy -

If you wish to be both respectful of the other’s freedom of choice and transparent with him or her about your purpose, you will aim at being in the upper left quadrant: talking openly with the other person, assuming he or she is responsible, willing, trying to find “win-win”, mutually agreed solutions.

If that does not work, you will need to move to one of the other boxes. You may then choose the upper right box, in other words use coercion. You drop the principle of respect for this person’s freedom of choice, i.e. you instrumentalize him or her, but remain frank and transparent.

Coercion can be meant in the hard sense: “This is the way it is, otherwise I’ll kill you” or “Do this, otherwise you’re fired”. It can also be in a softer sense: “Sorry, you can’t do this any longer, the budget has been cut”. In these cases you are using your inherent power over a person to shape their behaviour. However, perhaps you don’t have such power of coercion, or maybe you need this person to be really motivated

to do what you wish them to do and coercion would not be appropriate. Then you might have to leave aside the transparency principle and move to the lower right quadrant, “manipulating” the person, i.e. instrumentalizing him or her and hiding the fact that you are doing so. Of course, this has taken you away from your initial principle!

There is a way of shaping others’ behaviours that has not yet been explicitly considered in this model: using incentives. Some incentives can be ingredients of an adult peer-to-peer relationship, where a fair deal is made between stakeholders, but some may not be. Sometimes rewards are just a way of softening the power relationship, making it more acceptable or less painful for a person to perform as required, but this person has no real choice, or at least this is their perception of the situation. In such cases, incentives are an ingredient of a form of coercion. In this simple taxonomy, there is no possibility associated with the lower left quadrant, because, if you fully respect the others’ freedom of choice, you cannot hide your purposes.

However, life is not quite that simple and this is why table 2, below, shows a more elaborate taxonomy, taking into account the fact that the frontier between an adult relationship and the rest is blurred.

There may be situations in which you feel, rightly or wrongly, that the open, frank, adult-to-adult discussion is not possible or could even be detrimental. This can be the case when the person is a child whose limited view of the world would not prevent him or her from being exposed to certain dangers, but we will deal here only with relationships between adults, although the frontier between childhood and adulthood can be blurred too.

Indeed, there are cases in which adults are not fully adult, i.e. when they are in a difficult emotional state. Each of us could be in such a state at one time or another, depending on the bad news or pain we may be facing at the time. This might also be the case when an adult has temporarily lost control (e.g. through excessive drinking). There are also situations when you need a person not to know all of your intent in order for them to discover something useful about themselves. Placing students in an exercise situation through which they gradually discover lessons about themselves is an example of this. Socrates’ “maieutic” approach is another.

In such cases, you coerce or manipulate the other person, but within a longer process where you fully respect their freedom. This is not a problem when this option is part of the implicit or explicit contract between you and the person, for instance if your relationship has a therapeutic or pedagogical purpose and you are the therapist or the teacher.

However, there is an ethical issue when there is no such contract in the relationship. Doctors experience it sometimes when they know that a patient is going to die. What and when should they tell them might depend on their presumed capacity to take in such information. Even in less extreme cases, hearing the truth all at once about something that deeply touches a person can be unbearable to them, so to what extent should we unveil it gradually or partially? If we want just to be heard by a given person or group and be accepted as someone to talk to, don’t we sometimes need to, at least for a moment, show a very partial and biased image of ourselves? This is

why life is not so simple and why frontiers between adult relationship, coercion and manipulation are blurred, as illustrated in table 2.

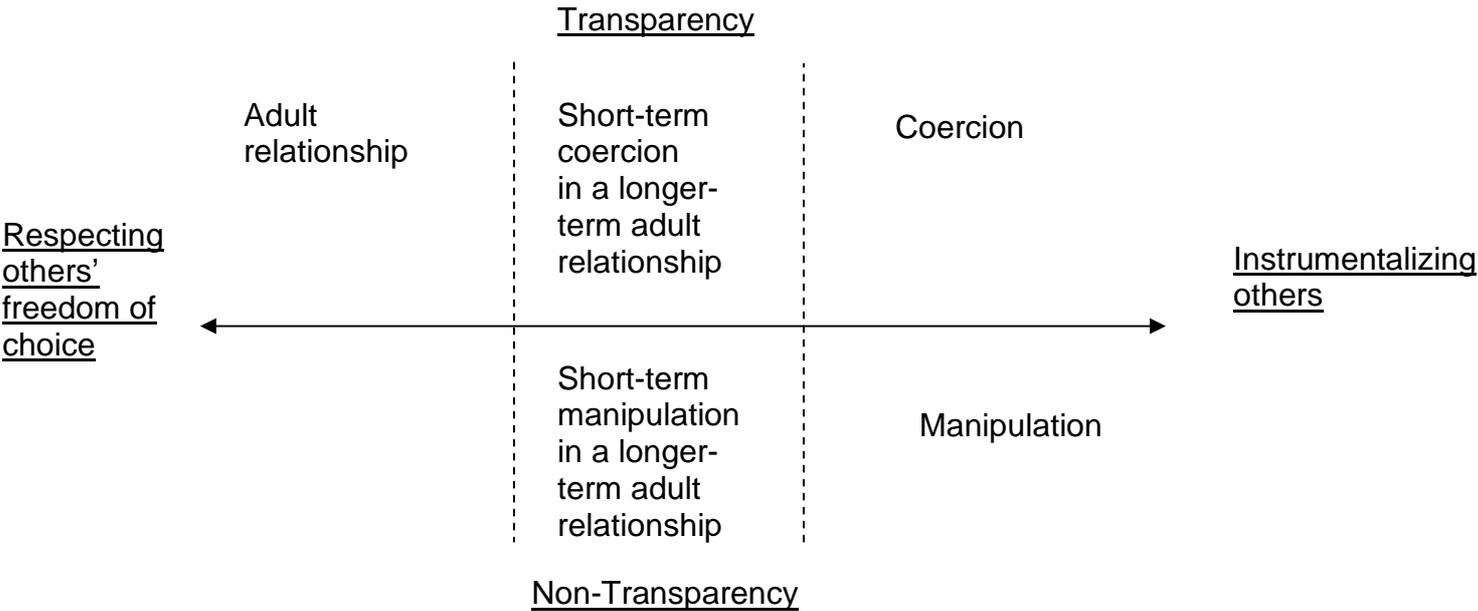


Table 2: A more elaborate taxonomy

Consequently, ethical issues will arise in the four right-hand “quadrants” (yet not in the upper left one); if you position yourself in one of those four, you have to accept in some way that the end justifies the means and this is associated with coercion or manipulation.

In the next two sections of this chapter, we will explore in more detail the various and sometimes subtle forms of coercion and manipulation. The problem concerns not only what we should or should not do, but also understanding what we are doing when we interact with others with the aim of bringing about some change in their thinking or behaviour.

1.2. On coercion

By coercion, here, I mean forcing someone to do something against his or her will. As mentioned before, there can be hard and soft coercion.

By “hard” coercion, I mean giving an order to someone, who will obey it for fear of the consequences if they do not. This excludes the case when an order is given and one obeys it because one trusts the person giving the order or regards them as legitimate in doing so in these particular circumstances. Coercion starts when the person obeys, because they fear being sacked, bullied, killed or treated in any other unwanted way, or because they fear losing access to money, promotion, or other desired resources. In all these cases, it is true that coercion is only possible because the person fears for something. Without fear, there can be no coercion, except in a few extreme cases such as losing one’s life or basic physical capacities, which would prevent somebody from doing any number of things but quite often would not force them to adopt some other required behaviour. However, almost nobody can master all their fears; hence the universal and timeless success of coercive practices.

The ethical issue can of course be about whether or not coercion is acceptable, but it can also be about whether or not, in a given situation, one is actually using coercion. All relationships entail power positions, even between friends. Each person holds concrete or symbolic resources that can be of interest to the other, hence potentially having some power over them. People in a relationship choose to use it or not; true friendly relationships are supposed to be places where people do not use their potential power; in other places, such as markets, people are commonly supposed to use it (e.g. the respective complementary powers of supply and demand) but they can decide to relinquish at least part of it for ethical reasons. This has, for instance, given birth to “fair trade” and can lead to big purchasers not exerting too much power over smaller suppliers. In any case, being ethical requires assessing the power we have over others and the way we use it.

There is a gentler form of coercion, which also requires using one’s power. I call it “soft” coercion, because it is not based on giving orders or on fear of consequences in the event that they are not obeyed, but it is nevertheless just as constraining. Instead of forbidding tramps from lying down and sleeping on the benches of Paris metro stations, with the associated threat of fining them (hard coercion), somebody one day had the idea of replacing the benches by individual chairs upon which it was impossible to lie. This meant depriving people of the physical setting enabling them to behave in a certain way. This approach may sometimes be more efficient, but it is not free from ethical issues, as one is clearly exerting one’s power. The ethical issue remains, as in the case of hard coercion, about the acceptability of coercion at all, and if it can be acceptable, then under what circumstances?

In situations of organizational change, coercion can be frequent. Many changes are enforced by top management and accepted because employees simply do not want to lose their jobs. The two issues for top management in such cases are:

- Are we aware that we are using our power? (If so, is it our belief that employees are OK with the change and is it well grounded or is it just an illusion?)
- If we are using our power of coercion, are we OK with that?

The problem with coercion is that it mainly acts on behaviours, very little on inner attitudes or preferences, and it works only so long as it is being applied. As soon as

the coercion stops or loses its impact, the desired behaviour stops, because coercion usually does not change people's mindsets in such a way that they internalize the order. At best, the rate of success in this respect is low and this is why manipulation is so attractive!

1.3 On manipulation

We have previously defined manipulation as instrumentalizing others and hiding it from them. There is an impressive variety of ways of doing this and entire books have been written on the subject, so I will only summarize what I picked up from my own reading on the matter. As manipulation seemed to me to be a much more complex and multi-faceted notion than coercion, this summary will go into greater detail than the previous section and I will close by focusing on one key point: the occasional difficulty of assessing what is manipulation and what is not.

The summary is based on two basic books:

« Influence et manipulation » - Robert Cialdini - First Editions, Paris, 2004. The original English version was "The Psychology of Manipulation" – 1984,1993, NY, HarperCollins

« Petit traité de manipulation à l'usage des honnêtes gens » – Robert-Vincent Joule & Jean-Léon Beauvois – 2002, Grenoble, PUG (1st edition, 1987). This one is, in my view, a must-read in this field, but unfortunately it has not been translated into English.

Further to this essential reading, I have skimmed through a few "How to" books on persuasion and sales techniques in order to check that the techniques they teach fall into one of the categories identified by the above-mentioned authors.³

1.3.1 How manipulation works: two bird stories

It seems that literature that describes ways to manipulate others is much more widely available than literature explaining the in-depth mechanisms of manipulation. The reason is probably that we still know little about how we make our decisions and about the complex interplay of rationality, feelings and emotions that manufacture them. This is a current field of research in the neurosciences, psychology and economics, with lots of on-going debates and questions being asked. The consequence is that well-identified manipulation mechanisms can be explained today in various ways and can probably be combined in ways that are still to be unveiled.

Cialdini's (op.cit.) thesis is that manipulation works by hi-jacking cognitive routines that we have developed or with which we were born. These routines are designed to let us make decisions and identify what is good or bad for us. At the cost of being often imperfect, of taking short cuts, they provide us with quick answers and enable

³ The two books on which I spent more time were:
« Mieux vendre avec la PNL » – Catherine Cudicio – Editons d'Organisation, 1996
« La force de persuasion » – Lionel Bellanger – ESF, 1997

us to save time and analyse each situation in great detail. In other words, in our brain machine, trade-offs have been made between excellence in computing, efficiency in delivering quick outcomes and needs in terms of neurones and brain capacity.

Cialdini gives the example of a mother turkey, who only feeds her offspring if they utter a particular sound and who can even feed her worst enemy and predator, the polecat, if she is tricked into hearing that it utters the same sound. Turkeys' brains are not big and although this routine is not perfect, it performs well enough most of the time to ensure the species' longevity; a perfect system would require a bigger brain. The very fact that the routine has got some blind spots makes it possible for us to manipulate the mother turkey. On a different scale, Cialdini says, we are like the turkey. He then describes ways to hi-jack our own routines, based on our own blind spots or weaknesses.

However, there is at least one other way to look at it, which pays more attention to emotions and feelings: another bird story. French readers will probably know one of Lafontaine's most famous fables, "Le corbeau et le renard" (the raven and the fox), for having learned it at school. In just a few words, the story goes like this. A raven is perched on top of a tree and is holding a piece of a cheese in its beak. A fox standing at the foot of the tree clearly wants the cheese. As no coercion is possible here, the fox flatters the raven, telling him how nice he looks and saying, "If your voice is as beautiful as your looks, then you are a star!" The raven is so pleased and wants more of such praise, so starts singing... and the piece of cheese falls down out of his beak. "Learn", the fox concludes, "that the one who flatters lives on those who listen to him". In this archetypal example of manipulation, "cognitive routine" may not be the first explanation we think of. It would probably be more about the raven's struggle with self-image, anxiety about not being "someone of value", being emotionally vulnerable.

In many manipulation processes, one can see both phenomena: the hi-jacking of cognitive routines and the exploitation of people's struggles with their anxieties and emotional discomfort. These ideas, in my view, can be reasonably substantiated; the way they are combined and play together is still quite often mysterious.

This already teaches us the antidote to manipulation: being conscious, being careful not to let our "automatic pilot" take the driver's seat when the stakes are high (the cognitive routine lens); being self-aware, as far as possible being aware of one's anxieties taking the lead (the emotional – feeling lens). Of course, being all this without interruption is impossible, at least for most human beings, and this is why manipulation is so often used with success.

1.3.2 The wide array of ways to manipulate people

Cialdini (op.cit.) offers a useful classification of seven major levers for manipulating people. He assumes that they work mainly by hi-jacking our cognitive routines, but, as mentioned previously, one can also assume that they often build on our psychic fragility.

- Contrasting: we know that our physical senses can be deceived by the fact that they will perceive the same object differently, depending on the context around it and other objects perceived at the same time, before or after it. For instance, we will assess differently the size of an object, depending on whether it is shown beside, or just after, a bigger or a smaller one. This also happens with more abstract perceptions, i.e. with judgments on events. For instance, Cialdini, Joule & Beauvois report that experiments have shown that people will often tend to regard a given event as bad news, or not so bad news, depending on what they have experienced, or feared experiencing, just before it. This can be used in a manipulative way on a small or a big scale in social life in general and in organizational change in particular. On a small scale, it is frequently used in the way data are presented, in the order of news or arguments given to people. On a bigger scale, an unpleasant change becomes less unpleasant if people involved have thought that a worse one was going to take place (e.g. the whole plant being said to close down, and finally only 30% of employees being made redundant). In this particular case, manipulation occurs when the fear of the worst change has been artificially created.
- Reciprocity: we often tend to feel obliged to “give back” when we receive a present. This is why one manipulation technique consists, for instance, of first giving a small thing to someone to whom you want to sell something bigger. In organizational change, following this track would mean giving a target person or group some advantages or benefits without telling them that you will ask them for a greater effort in the following weeks.
- The commitment trap. This is particularly well described by Joule & Beauvois (op. cit.). Numerous experiments have shown that people tend to remain consistent with a decision they made previously, even if the events seem to show that their initial choice was not appropriate. This opens wide avenues for manipulation, the most famous one being “the foot-in-the-door” technique, which consists of getting someone to take a small step in favour of whatever one wants them to do; then, it becomes easier to ask them later for a bigger commitment. For instance, you have far more chances of getting 1€ from someone in the street if, beforehand, you have asked them the time and received a response. This is a significant item in our reflection on manipulation in organizational change. In change, people may be taken on board without knowing where the change is headed. This can just be because the future cannot be predicted, but it can also be manipulation if change promoters do not disclose where they want to go with it.
- Pressure towards social conformity. It is not easy to remain different from others and it is comfortable to align one’s judgment to the common opinion. This can be used in manipulation. Cialdini mentions that people used to be hired in some opera houses to start the applause. Social conformity can be engineered and this can be manipulative in organizational change (see the discussion on this, later). On a smaller scale, the use of words, in conversations or speeches, like “we all know that...” is a minor manipulation.

- Authority: one of our “short cuts”, Cialdini says, is to trust people in authority, i.e. those who are supposed to know better. Manipulation then consists of choosing to use sources of authority that are biased in favour of the cause one wants to promote, without clarifying it. On a smaller scale, in conversations or speeches, this lack of clarity about who the sources of authority are can be used in phrases such as: “Science tells us that...” or “Experts agree that...”.
- Scarcity: it is a classic trick of sales people to claim that they are soon running out of inventory.
- Sympathy: in my view, this Cialdini’s category seems to embrace at least two different types of phenomenon. Seduction could be another word for the first one, i.e. the fact that people will agree to do something because it has been requested by someone they like or love. This can be manipulation when the seducer stimulates sympathy with a view to shaping the other person’s feelings and behaviours (as we will see later). Another type of phenomenon is the fact that people act differently depending on whether they feel comfortable (physically and psychologically).

This classification is useful; I feel, however, that at least three types of manipulation are missing:

- Lying: purposefully providing people with truncated or false information is a basic act of manipulation. There is a whole continuum of ways to trick others: from blatant lying to subtle and intended vagueness of words and sentences that creates ambiguities and enables our thoughts to be hidden.
- Physical parameters or processes. More mysteriously, we seem to be influenced by very physical parameters or processes. The authors mentioned previously reported experiences showing that, at least in Western cultures, it is easier to get someone to do something when the person doing the asking touches the other person physically, even slightly, for instance on the arm, during the conversation. NLP teaches that synchronizing one’s breathing and one’s gestures with an individual makes it easier to establish contact, and, once this has been done, unconsciously to influence their behaviour during the interaction.
- The paradoxical action: as made popular by Palo Alto therapists⁴. When A keeps asking B to change his behaviour with him and does not succeed, A instead starts suggesting that B does more of what he currently does, and/or starts acting in a way that seeks to enhance this current behaviour. As a consequence, B changes his behaviour. Risky, but under certain conditions, surprisingly effective.

1.3.3 When does manipulation start?

There are at least three issues here.

⁴ Excellent examples are in Watzlawick and al. – Change, Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution, chapter 10 – Norton, 1974

Firstly, is communication necessarily manipulation? Whenever we communicate with someone, we make choices and these choices are most often made with the intent of being listened to and of delivering a message. Therefore, we will choose the words and the sentences we feel are adequate in order for the other person to receive our message. If we can, we choose the most appropriate circumstances in which to deliver it, e.g. avoiding moments when the person is shocked or upset by something else. A number of communication techniques are designed to optimize these choices. They help us find arguments, frame them and put them in a given order in such a way that they will be best accepted by the other person, because of this person's own interests or cognitive maps. NLP teaches us how to identify the preferred channel of people (vision, hearing, movement) and how to use it. Is that manipulation? Not necessarily, according to the definition of manipulation we are using here.

The key question is: are we instrumentalizing others when we talk to them? In the example of a discussion where we choose our arguments, it **is** manipulation if we use arguments that we know are meaningful to the other person, and if we try to give the impression that we find them important, even though that is not the case. It is also manipulation when we select biased arguments and carefully avoid mentioning other information that would be necessary for the other person to make an informed decision. It is **not** manipulation when we simply try to help the person make an informed decision in such a way that they can understand what we say. In other words, the difference is in the intent, which means that the frontier is sometimes very narrow and requires strong self-awareness in order to be identified.

Secondly, is influencing necessarily manipulation? According to the definition of manipulation we are using here, the answer is no.

We do not make our choices in life as on a desert island. We are inspired by what others say, write or do. We build ourselves, first as children then as adults, through encounters with others and what we learn from them. It would be wrong to say that all these influences are manipulations, because at least some of them are done without any intent and even sometimes without the influencer being aware of it. Seduction, for instance, can occur just in the mind of the seduced; it becomes manipulation when the seducer does things with the intent of enhancing his or her seduction power over the other. Seduction is a form of power over other people; as with the inherent power which enables coercion, one is responsible for the way one uses it.

The same applies to exemplarity; when someone does something that others will find excellent or clever and therefore try to emulate, it is not necessarily done because the person wants to be imitated, but because it is just their way of acting.

Being authentic in what we say and do often enhances the impact we have on others. When leaders talk to their followers and energize them with talk strongly connected to their inner feelings and values, they might have real impact. It **is** manipulation when they do not really mean it, when they are just good stage performers who fake it, or of course when they bias their message and arguments. It is **not** manipulation when they are just being themselves and talking to them while fully respecting their freedom of choice. Again, the frontier of manipulation is where the intent of instrumentalizing people comes into play... and this is not always easy to identify.

One last issue about influence is peculiar to social change. When a whole population of hundreds or thousands of people changes in some respects (opinions, behaviours) they do not change at the same pace. Moreover, early adopters influence the next wave and the change becomes easier and easier to promote, as long as it has been adopted by a growing majority of people. Consequently, promoting change in a social group does not require convincing everybody; it is enough to take on board a sufficient number of members of this group and they will, directly or indirectly, convince the others. It is difficult to call this manipulation, because change happens that way anyway. However, what about when the change agents carefully choose the people they first try to convince, selecting those that they know will be more influential with the others? What about, for instance, when they choose this particular person or group as participants in a test or workshop, assuming that they will more easily build a good reputation for the programme or the new process? In other words, what about engineering social influence within the social group? Even assuming that the interactions with the various individuals or sub-groups are not manipulative, is engineering social influence manipulating? Is manipulation restricted to individuals or is there such a thing as the manipulation of a social group?

This is a difficult question since one can view social groups as entities in themselves, to whom one can do things (like manipulation) or as a mere collection of individuals. At the very least, individuals can feel manipulated if the information about a given change is not distributed equally among all members of the group.

1.4. Combining coercion and manipulation

There are frequent cases of hybrids, combining coercion and manipulation. The two can easily reinforce one another. Joule & Beauvois describe how, in organizations, manipulations based on the commitment trap (e.g. foot-in-the door) are helped by the fact that employees may not resist the call for small initial commitments, because, for instance, they would fear for their jobs and because, after all, these things are “no big deal”. Then they feel compelled to remain consistent with their earlier commitments and are consequently embarked on doing things they might not otherwise have accepted.

More generally, modern management has been criticized as being increasingly manipulative, because it uses less blatant coercion and thus needs other means to maintain the same basic asymmetric power relationships. It therefore uses seduction and ambiguity of “discourse” (the way things are announced or presented) in order to let employees feel that they adhere to the organization’s objectives and ethos. Coercion comes into play, because employees may feel they have no choice and therefore convince themselves more easily about the organization’s intentions. This results in “fake” selves that employees need to build and live with in order to survive in the organization.

Note that even political regimes that are mostly based on coercion use manipulation as a necessary complement. Max Weber wrote that any dictatorship needed a minimum of legitimacy. In these cases, manipulation takes the form of propaganda, i.e. biased information blended with pressure for social conformity, commitment traps and sometimes seduction.

1.5. The issues at stake: conclusion

Finally, what should a change agent take away from this chapter?

Even if they feel that the content and purpose of the change they are promoting is ethically good or acceptable (see paper 1), there still may be some ethical issues in the way the change is promoted. Consequently, they might need to decide whether the end justifies the means and, if so, under what conditions; when acting as a change agent, one might be tempted to use coercion or manipulation. Then, two questions arise:

- Are they sure they are not coercing and/or manipulating? This is sometimes obvious, but in other cases it cannot be so easily identified as it depends on our underlying intent in a given interaction. It therefore requires significant self-awareness and honesty.
- If they are indeed coercing and/or manipulating, are they OK with that?

2. What my interviewees told me

As explained in more detail in paper 1, I interviewed 31 practitioners: approximately 2/3 consultants and 1/3 executives. My aim was to look at possible “world-views” and “logics” adopted when facing ethical issues in change. The limits of this sample and of this methodology are discussed in paper 1. The interviews were semi-structured, starting with very open questions and ending with more precise ones, including sharing some of my own hypotheses. As far as the topics covered by this paper are concerned, my open questions aimed at exploring ethical issues interviewees experience in their actions as change agents. They reported mainly on manipulation issues, with very little said about coercion. I will comment on this point later. In the second part of the interviews, I followed this flow and went deeper into manipulation issues. Rightly or wrongly, I did not insist on coercion. Having only limited time for interviews, which also covered the topics of papers 1 and 3, I suspected that I could more easily guess what people would tell me about coercion. However, I acknowledge this strong limitation to my research and I will comment on that later.

I will also not report here about what many consultants understandably mentioned as key ethical issues for them, but which pertain to the deontology of consulting in general more than to the change process itself. Such issues are about selling only what one is really competent of delivering and about maintaining this competence, selling only what can be useful to the client, delivering a good job, maintaining confidentiality and not using privileged information for purposes other than those related to the assignment.

It must be emphasized that I chose people whom I knew and whom I believe are concerned about ethics; I was not interested in meeting people who were just cynical about ethics. All interviewees expressed concern with acting ethically in their change agent roles.

“We are given power, we have an aura. We can abuse this and fulfil personal goals. The ego is inflating...”

“I was talking to my 300 managers. On that particular day something happened in the room between them and me. I felt I could have taken them anywhere. It was so strong! But at the end I said to myself: “Where is the limit?”

Two points need to be kept in mind:

Firstly, few of these people adopted what I called “non-interventionist” logic, i.e. where they regarded themselves as mediators or facilitators (see paper 1). Instead, most of them adopted “interventionist” logic, i.e. where they wanted to achieve a given outcome in the social system in which they were intervening as executives or as consultants. More precisely, most of them adopted “pragmatist-interventionist” logic, whereby the ethical acceptability of actions was assessed through outcomes. A minority were closer to “idealist-interventionist” logic, whereby ethical acceptability of actions was assessed according to conformity with principles (see paper 1 for more details on this logic).

Secondly, thoughts regarding these issues were not always completely clear in all interviewees’ minds. It is likely that not all interviewees had reflected in depth about what manipulation is, when it starts and when it is ethically acceptable. Incidentally, that was also my case before I started this research! Of course, all of them were concerned and had some ideas about it, but they were occasionally hesitant or inconsistent. In difficult and subtle issues in life, it is generally only after deep reflection that we develop clear views and coherent answers to questions. Since most of us do not spend the time or energy to reflect deeply on all such issues, we proceed in life with a number of “good enough” theories and some still unanswered questions!

I will report about two main issues or debates that came out of these conversations: when do I manipulate and when is manipulation necessary or acceptable?

2.1. When do I manipulate?

There are two uncertainties underlying this question, which are sometimes combined; the first is about the definition of manipulation and the second, even when one is clear about what it is, is about identifying when one is doing it or not.

Whereas many interviewees would implicitly or explicitly use a definition that was close or identical to the one I am using in this paper, some were more or less restrictive. The differences resonate with the debates on the three issues I listed in section 1.3.3. (When does manipulation start?)

- For some interviewees, communication is necessarily manipulation...

“Whatever we do (as consultants), we have power and we manipulate. Persuading is manipulating.”

- For some, it is in almost every communication in an organizational context:

“Every communication is manipulation, except if there are no stakes and the freedom of people is acknowledged.”

However, there were sometimes uncertainties about where manipulation starts:

“I use the word “performance” as a carrot; otherwise I do not get a conversation. Is this manipulation?”

“We bring chocolates to meetings, not just boring slides. Is that manipulation?”

- Similarly, there were some questions about seduction or charisma, what these are and at what point they become manipulation:

“I possibly build emotional manipulation unconsciously. I build emotional relationships, ties. It is part of who I am. That might lead people to do things that they would not do if I were cold and distant. I speak with passion. I tell them what they do well. Is that manipulation? I don’t know.”

“People are persuaded by the passion of the leader. It is another sort of manipulation. This idea of “not manipulation” comes from the fantasy that there is an objective good.”

- Regarding tactics in approaching a social group or an organization, people would acknowledge that they use them.

“I will carefully choose participants in a kick-off meeting and I will avoid including an opponent.”

“I work according to the system. I use tactics; this is not manipulation. For example, I choose my arguments, the order in which I talk to people. I present the positive before the negative. There is a timing issue. Not everything can be said at a given time, but manipulation is lying or encompasses the intent to deceive.”

However, as one of my interviewee said, this notion of intent makes the frontier with manipulation “as thin as a cigarette paper”...

2.2. When is manipulation necessary or acceptable? A prevailing guiding principle

A vast majority of my interviewees admitted that they more or less use manipulation. They would not necessarily be happy with this, they would try to come to it only

occasionally and when they felt they had no better solution, but they would accept it as being unavoidable sometimes.

As mentioned previously, none of my interviewees were cynical or without concern for ethics. They simply meant that, to some extent and in some circumstances, the end justifies the means.

There were nuances inside this general guiding principle and the differences lay in the “when they feel they have no better solution” and the “sometimes”. This means that, probably in real life, in certain clear cases, all would actually reject manipulation, but in other more complex cases, some of the interviewees might accept some manipulation. I reached here the limits of the interview as a research technique.

“Whatever we do, we have power and we manipulate. Convincing is manipulating. I manipulate all the time to reach my goals. I only hope my goals are good. »

“Everybody uses seduction, minor manipulation.”

However, there was general agreement that blatant manipulation had to be banned. It seemed that “small” manipulations could be more readily accepted than “big” ones. “Big”, here, would mean deceiving people on a key issue, and there stands the limit: in other words “small” ones would be OK, but not “big” ones.

“The ethical issue is when you trick them into change, i.e. create expectations that you know will not be fulfilled.”

“Using people till the end before laying them off, and knowing from the start that you will do this, is not acceptable ethically and also it is not good for business.”

This last quote suggests something that many of my interviewees emphasized. If not for ethical reasons, avoiding “big” manipulation is necessary in order to maintain a good reputation and, hence, a good business in the long term.

“Doing this (manipulation of any sort) is temporary, not sustainable. People will not trust you afterwards.”

2.3. When is manipulation necessary or acceptable? Typical difficult cases

I was interested in getting a panorama of difficult cases regarding manipulation that a change agent can face. From what my interviewees reported to me, I identified four broad categories, i.e. cases where they could be tempted or feel obliged to manipulate. The way they would face them, as reported to me, is consistent with the guiding principle described earlier.

2.3.1. To what extent can one disclose where we go and the problems we face?

One often needs people to be involved in a change. For this, they need to be motivated. If they have no expectations about any benefit they can take out of the change, or, even worse, if they have fears about the change and its consequences, this will not help and it can even make the change effort fail.

The cases in this first category are about ways of dealing with these expectations and fears, i.e. about how change agents communicate about events and issues that will or may occur during the change process.

Change agents saying all they know about what will happen or may happen can worsen the situation and make the change even more damaging because of the negative reactions of some stakeholders. A typical example of this is a restructuring, which often entails cutting jobs and reshaping or relocating those that are saved. If some information is given, there may be a risk of some stakeholders reacting in such a way that the business would end up in an even worse situation and the number of job suppressions being increased.

In other situations, confidentiality rules forbid telling stakeholders how the situation will evolve. This is the case, for instance, in the preparation phase of some mergers or acquisitions.

Another case is when acknowledging the existence of certain internal burning issues and initiating debates on them within the organization might increase the risk of leaks to the outside world and harm the organization's reputation and the confidence its clients place in it. An example of this was experienced by a consultant hired to help the board of an organization build a strategic plan. Through his interviews with the staff he realized that there were serious, but so far hidden, complaints by the staff about their boss, an icon in his particular environment. If the consultant did not raise the issue, he would not be doing a good job in helping design the strategy and he would be betraying the confidence placed in him by the stakeholders. On the other hand, if the consultant did raise the issue, this would probably "leak out" and, given the organization's specific role within this environment, possibly destroy the boss's high prestige and consequently the confidence of outside stakeholders towards the organization.

These situations put the change agent in a dilemma, at least potentially: if they are transparent, they may worsen the situation; if they are not, then they start being dishonest with people.

The issue is about transparency and we have seen that manipulation starts when transparency is ignored. We have also seen that most of my interviewees were concerned about avoiding "big" manipulations and these can happen potentially in such situations. The case of a merger is often rather simple in this respect, because there is frequently an obligation of confidentiality, which can be understood by stakeholders. What, however, about the other cases?

The general attitude of my interviewees was to favour adult conversations as much as possible. As mentioned previously, possible differences between them may lie in the phrase "as much as possible", but I would have needed to observe them in real life events to identify those differences.

- Navigating into complexity

First of all, as many told me, a lot of changes are “adaptive”⁵ or emerging changes and that means that they are at least partly unpredictable. The only thing you can share sometimes with other people involved is uncertainty. However, this requires a courageous attitude when other people may be searching for reassurance.

“Increasingly, change happens in complex adaptive systems. So, there is a lack of knowledge of what the consequences will be. When you start a dialogue, you do not know what the consequences will be.”

“Almost all IT projects (like SAP) are manipulative, if you consider that you cannot explain the implications for everybody. Even the one who decides does not know.”

“You need steps; you cannot always disclose the final objective if it is too high. You need steps; things can evolve differently from what you had anticipated. One never knows what will happen.”

“I would discourage a client from telling people that there will no longer be any lay-offs when he is not sure; I would work with the client, advise him to be more honest and say: “It's not sure”. Nevertheless, I would work with him on how best to keep people on board.”

“In some phases, there is a lot of uncertainty. There is a temptation to minimize this, to say that it will be easier than it actually is or to say we know more than we actually do. The solution is in experience and leadership, helping people to have confidence. The key is managing expectations while making the change palatable.”

Sometimes, also, complex changes may result in people facing new situations and ways of doing things that they cannot yet understand, because they are too new to them. Whatever the change agent knows, he might have difficulties in making it understood.

“You cannot explain to people how to use TV when they do not even have a radio!”

- Telling bad news...

Secondly, there are situations in which the change agent knows that something, for instance lay-offs, is happening or will happen. Then again, the most frequent opinion of my interviewees was that an adult and frank conversation is often possible, in fact more so than one might be tempted to think at first.

(In the case of threatened lay-offs): *“I prefer to generate adult conversations. I can remember an example of a guy who was finally happy to take the package and leave.”*

⁵ changes that are not fully designed and controlled by the top of the organization. In these cases, the top's role is to set a direction and give freedom, support, stimulate efforts of the rest of the organization to make the change happen. The term “adaptive” is borrowed from Heifetz R. & Laurie D. – The Work of Leadership – Harvard Business Review, Jan. 1997.

“Transparency is the thing. I would not support a client who is hiding facts. I have seen an example where workers have decided to run the factory, because they had been properly informed about the situation.”

“One way to get out of such ethical dilemmas is to have an open dialogue with stakeholders, open new horizons for them.”

“What do I do if I know that we will have to downsize from 1000 to 100? Do I tell them or do I make a first step at 900 and say no more? I tell the truth. I feel I am in charge of the 1000 and I need to take care of what happens with the 900.”

“If I say that x% will lose their jobs, it creates a lot of anxiety and I do not know exactly what will happen, so I may inflict unnecessary pain. If I keep saying nothing, I'm in trouble too. Our golden rule: we say that we are looking for X million savings, not saying where to find them and inviting people to participate. Turkeys can vote for Xmas dinner. Sometimes, there are interesting packages. I try to be hard-evidence based. I have stepped out once (as a consultant) when a MD was dishonest with data.”

« People are not stupid. They are capable of hearing bad news. »

(In the case of a serious restructuring plan): “We were very transparent inside. There were serious risks of damage if this leaked out; it did not appear in the press. People acted responsibly.”

“I am in favour of being as clear as possible; in lay-offs, people need to have a chance to prepare themselves.”

However, some felt transparency in certain difficult and touchy processes is not always possible:

“Getting people to take a small step without telling them what comes next is not always bad; change works through trial and error.”

“I am not obliged to say all I know to everybody; it can be damaging. It can be manipulation, but it is OK if it is for the common good.”

Interestingly, transparency can also be left aside to make news worse than it is, in order to manage staff morale:

“I realize it is important to keep some pressure on the organization. Sometimes, in this perspective, I may over insist on some events as a reason for changing or keeping up the pressure.”

One of the interviewees had an interesting way of checking whether he was OK with what he was doing, even when lacking transparency:

“Transparency is good, but you cannot always achieve it. There are times when you do not know where things are going. I use what I call the hindsight test: at the end, will I be able to explain myself to others with integrity so that I can be happy with it?”

2.3.2 To what extent can I challenge people, and in particular, the boss?

In most cases, when there is a problem, the boss is at least part of it, whatever the problem. This is, of course, not true when a new boss is hired to change things in the organization. However, when the boss has been in charge for some years, he or she has necessarily done things or let things be done that created or contributed to the problems the organization is facing.

The typical scenario goes like this (and this was not rare in the interviews): a boss is unhappy about some performance issues, behaviours or attitudes in the organization. He or she asks change agents, either someone inside the company (e.g. HR people) or an outsider (consultant), to sort this out. The boss often acts as if bringing a car for repair, leaving the keys of the car with the mechanic and expecting to find the car back and ready to run at the end of the day.

The boss and sometimes the top management team generally do not realize to what extent they are actually part of the problem. So, here is another dilemma: if the change agent says nothing to the boss about this, they may more easily get the job, but may later fail to work on the key issues, because the boss and the top management team are not prepared to be challenged. On the other hand, if the change agent tells them that they may need to change dramatically their way of managing or behaving in certain circumstances, then the agent may not be listened to and may not get the job!

This question of how far one can challenge people is not limited to top management. It can also be true for any stakeholder. Whatever the role of top management in a problem, it should not prevent people lower in the organisation from making efforts. So, being nice with people may help build alliances, but it may not always help change.

I picked up various ways of talking about this topic:

Some interviewees were clearly in favour of transparency on this issue:

“I speak my mind at the start. I am a bad sales person. If I do not know the person, I test him. If I lie (to him) in the beginning, I will not be able to help him.”

“We have long-term relationships with some officers who commission us. We need to remain sufficiently independent from them, not necessarily support their views.”

“Being open, saying things as I thought they were, gave me the feeling of doing the right thing.”

“Making things clear at the start gives you the authority to drive the changes.”

Some were in favour of transparency too, but with greater nuance:

“When the boss is part of the problem, I say it clearly when people are ready to take a good look at themselves. I never shy away from that.”

“I speak frankly to people, except when it becomes harmful. I go as far as possible.”

“The job is usually made of small steps; at the end of each step, the client can see whether they want to take the next one.”

Finally, some interviewees clearly admitted lack of transparency at times. In such cases, the justification remained the common good, or the good of the organization.

“I often manipulate. In my position, I avoid confrontation; I avoid finding myself with someone telling me ‘no’.”

“I have this case in (Organization X): I sold something and I did not warn the boss enough that she would need to be challenged. Then, as the job goes on, either I am not true to the initial contract, or I stay on the boss’s side and nothing is solved.”

“(The dilemma is choosing between) being tough - and therefore not helpful because the other is scared - or being manipulative - and helpful. I solve this through sheer will-power.”

2.3.3. Am I sure I am not being manipulated myself?

The third category of difficult cases concerns being manipulated by certain stakeholders, and in particular by the client of the change agent. In such a case, the change agent is at risk of complicity with actions upon which he is not in agreement, particularly on ethical grounds.

Typical examples are:

“A company was in the process of being sold. Its price was linked to the know-how of the staff, who were not aware of the on-going negotiations. Top management hired consultants to set up a programme to stimulate staff motivation; they did not explain the real purpose to the consultants either.”

“I had been manipulated by the client. The real reason for the change was about getting rid of someone and I saw it too late.”

“I do not want senior management to hide behind me to deliver bad news.”

Consequently, this is part of the job where the change agent needs to check in which game he is playing. This was mentioned to me several times. This is particularly accurate in a consultant’s position, though insiders (e.g. HR people) may also be instrumentalized.

“You need to find out why they hire you. You need to find out what the job really is, and who you are dancing with. I see more and more ambiguous hiring situations.”

“I am fortunate to work with clients I know and respect.”

2.3.4 How much is about playing politics?

I mentioned in chapter 1 that one possible avenue for manipulation is engineering social influence. As previously stated, it seems that my interviewees generally accept doing it and do not see any ethical issue there, provided the communication with people is honest, but this is only the first step in political games and it may remain free of manipulation, depending on how it is defined.

More generally, however, my interviewees are experienced people and they know that organizations are most often political arenas with power struggles, alliances and hidden agendas. They generally accept taking this dimension into account, i.e. thinking of possible allies to the change process and taking sides in certain internal fights. This, then, is a more elaborate step towards political games, but can easily lead to a differentiated level of transparency and of information sharing with the various stakeholders, and hence, possibly, some manipulation. Some of my interviewees accept this:

“To act on a system, you need to be part of it. You may need to instrumentalize some people in order to protect others; this is not always comfortable.”

“I have been manipulative sometimes. There is a continuum between influence and manipulation. You cannot avoid politics; whether this is acceptable depends on your ends, personal or otherwise.”

According to the guiding principle I presented earlier, this does not mean that manipulation becomes a major practice, but that it can happen sometimes, provided that it is intended for the greater good.

3. A few comments and analysis

3.1. Consideration of ethical logic regarding manipulation

In paper 1, I used the notion of logic to describe the link between the way people deal with ethical issues in change, the way they justify their legitimacy as a change agent and their style in the job. For the reader's comfort, the mapping of these logics is shown again below.

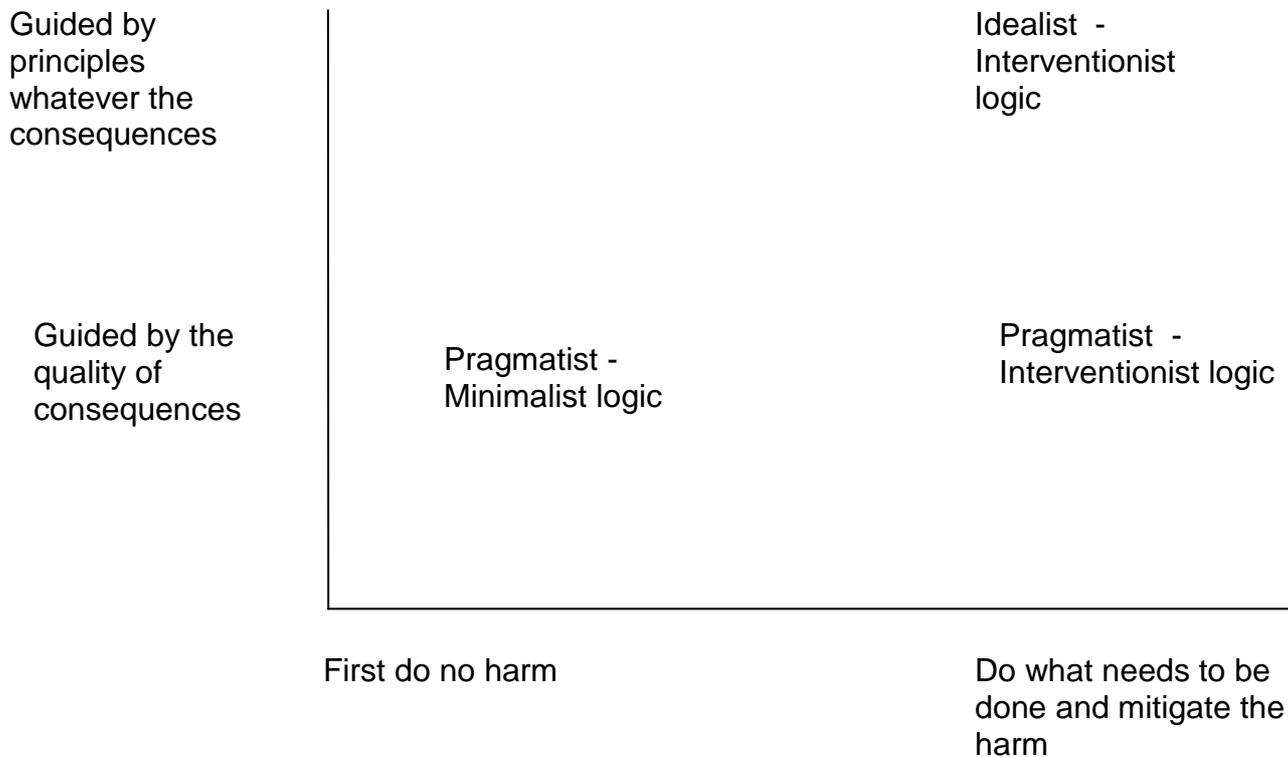


Table 3 - Ethical logics in organizational change

It is possible to explain attitude towards manipulation by reference to these different logics.

As mentioned earlier, people following a minimalist, non-interventionist logic (bottom left of the diagram), i.e. positioning themselves as mediators, facilitators of dialogue, without any commitment to reaching a given result, may encounter fewer temptations or opportunities for manipulation. At least, that is what has been reported to me.

In my view, however, there may be some manipulation even in a mediator's job, and more generally in jobs where the change agent aims at getting stakeholders to reach a common solution, not bringing them to an already defined one. In such cases the change agent sits halfway between the extreme minimalist and the extreme interventionist logics on the horizontal axis of the diagram; they have at least one result to achieve, i.e. establishing a good dialogue among the stakeholders, which entails building a fair degree of trust among them. Given the need to achieve even this minimal result brings with it the possibility of manipulation.

An example of this was given to me outside of this set of interviews by a colleague. He had to gather round a table various stakeholders in a conflict.

He managed to bring them to the table by telling each of them that the others had agreed to come and talk. Without these initial “lies”, he thought he would not have been able to stop the conflict.

So, possibilities, temptations or needs for manipulation increase as we shift towards the right-hand side of the diagram, i.e. as we increase the importance and the precision of the result to be achieved.

Not surprisingly, people acting according to “interventionist” logic will accept manipulation if it cannot be avoided. Some interviewees told me they could usually avoid it, others that they sometimes had to accept it. In any case, when they do manipulate and are OK with it, they try to do so as little as possible and they justify it by the search for the common good (refer to paper 1) to justify the possible consequences of the change. This was quite explicit in the interviews, as reflected in the earlier quotes.

Looking now at the vertical axis of the diagram, it seems obvious that the idealist’s logic would not accept any manipulation, whatever the consequences, if its guiding principles were opposed to lying and to deceiving people. As mentioned in the previous paper, I met few people who prefer this logic, and even those that did would sometimes accept “small manipulations”. As stated earlier, this simply shows that pure logics, particularly the idealist ones, are difficult to follow in real life.

All logics, however, favour adult relationship, located on the upper left-hand side on table 1 in this paper. All interviewees agree that this is the preference. Then more or less comfortably, people acting along the prevailing pragmatist interventionist logic would move towards the right-hand side of table 1, stopping in the middle of it, accepting short-term manipulation in a longer-term adult relationship. This is beautifully exemplified by the “hindsight test” mentioned above by one of the interviewees (refer to the end of section 2.3.1). In this view, this is still acceptable because, being guided by the common good, it can be regarded as not being the instrumentalization of others. Conversely, if the persons act in their own interests, and no longer for the common good, they position themselves on the far right-hand side of the diagram, and then become “unethical”.

The key questions, however, are about this intermediate zone of short-term manipulation in a longer-term adult relationship.

On the one hand, when one decides to leave the adult relationship zone, is it thanks to a wise realism, an appropriate empathy with the other’s difficulties and defences, or is it through lack of courage? On the other hand, is it really aimed at the common good, or does it maybe conceal some personal agenda?

I have said previously that I did not focus on coercion issues in my interviews. The few remarks or reports I got about it were also consistent with what the above model predicts. Interventionists would accept coercion, if needed, provided it is legitimate. We saw in paper 1 that they would agree with what Max Weber called rational-legal legitimacy, which means they would accept forms of coercion which are allowed under the terms of the contracts and laws which govern a given situation. In this framework, they would accept it if it serves the common good (pragmatist

interventionist logic) or if it enables them to fight for justice or any other leading value (idealist interventionist logic).

3.2. Ethical traps in the change agent's way and the value of courage, anticipation and clarification

What does it take to avoid manipulation, or depending on one's views on it, to avoid unnecessary manipulation?

The first obviously needed quality is the ability to initiate and take part in courageous conversations. It comes as no surprise that ethics requires courage.

However, this is not all. It appears to me, at the end of this reflection, that courage is certainly necessary to be a (successful) change agent, just as it is to be a (successful) warrior, but courage alone is not sufficient. In order to survive, a warrior must also avoid falling into traps, i.e. be good at anticipating possible problems. The same applies in change processes: courage is not enough, because when certain problems arise, it is already too late to avoid them becoming dilemmas where the choice is only between bad options. Anticipation is required too and this is greatly facilitated by experience.

Many of the ethical issues can be avoided before the change process starts, and, if the change agent is not the boss, when the job is designed with the client. Before starting, one can anticipate many of the issues and dilemmas we have described in this paper. In some cases it will not eliminate the dilemmas, but knowing in advance that they may occur can help one act in the most appropriate way. In many other cases, it can help avoid the dilemma. For instance, deciding not to have to make promises on things of which one is unsure certainly shapes the process of interactions with stakeholders, the scheduling of meetings and announcements.

In a consultant's job, as a further instance, clarifying, at the start their role, what they will or will not accept to do certainly saves a lot of trouble later, even at the risk of not getting the job. The client often does not know what he may be tempted to ask him later; an experienced consultant can more easily anticipate those issues than the client and be clear about the limits of his intervention.

If courage and anticipation are key words, clarification is another.

Many of the difficult issues my interviewees mentioned are linked with managing expectations or fear. Sometimes the change agent knows whether the stakeholders' fears or expectations are appropriate, in which case the ethical issue is quite simple, even though possibly not easy to face. In other cases, the change agent does not know and this adds another degree of complexity to the ethical issue. Those cases are probably the most frequent.

By choosing to invest their energy in a change process, even as followers, people take risks: sometimes it is a practical risk about disclosing certain secrets that make their working-life more comfortable, or protect them from stress, or save their job; sometimes it is a psychological risk, like accepting to lower their defences and get

involved in a project (lack of involvement being possibly a survival mechanism in a poorly managed environment). The responsibility of those promoting the change, if they wish to avoid manipulation, is to clarify its consequences for stakeholders, in terms of both benefits and damages, and how far this is uncertain. Even when things seem to be predictable in the short term, there is always a horizon where they cease to appear clearly, and nowadays this horizon gets closer and closer.

3.3 What can be generalized to social change in general?

In order to identify a workable research topic, I have focused on organizational change. However, there are other changes in wider networks, communities or societies. Could the above findings apply to them too? This would of course need to be checked. However, from a theoretical point of view, it seems that they can. The ethical logics I have described are not restricted to organizations. Any person wishing to bring about a change in such social systems will face the four categories of issues I have identified above: How far can we disclose the final goal and the present or future problems? How far can we go in challenging people? How far is one sure not to be manipulated oneself? How far can we go in playing political games? The literature on political leadership can easily confirm this, starting with Machiavelli's seminal work!

However, a deeper investigation into those types of changes may also lead one to discover other sorts of problems or dilemmas.

3.4. CEOs, internal or external helpers: probably similar ethical issues

I did not notice any significant difference in what insiders (CEOs, HR executives, internal consultants) and outsiders (consultants) told me. It seems, at least from the people I interviewed, that they potentially face the same issues. Therefore, the generic term "change agent" seemed appropriate in this context. Even if the issues are the same, a key question is the extent to which people are free to withdraw from a situation where they do not feel ethically ok. A consultant may theoretically appear as more free to do so but, in practice, it all depends on how urgently he or she needs to get some job...

The differences between roles as change agents however were not my main focus and further research might also bring more light into them.

Conclusion

I concluded the previous paper by writing that I was leaving the reader with questions with no quick answers, assuming that being ethical is a continuous self-questioning process.

This second paper adds more to those questions.

I have first tried to map possible ways of acting when one wishes someone else to think or act in a different way and have identified possible ethical issues in some of these areas, namely coercion and manipulation. This resulted in several useful questions for the change agent:

“Am I sure I am not coercing and/or manipulating when leading, promoting or facilitating a change?”

“If I am coercing and/or manipulating, am I OK with that?”

Then I gave an account of my interviews with practitioners on this matter, with most interviews concentrating mainly on manipulation issues. Not surprisingly, their answers about manipulation were consistent with the various ethical logics I described in paper 1. In particular, alongside the most widespread logic among my interviewees, the pragmatist-interventionist one, manipulation can be acceptable when there is no better option, provided it is limited and short-term, in a wider process where the others' freedom of choice is respected and provided this serves the common good.

This leads to other key complementary questions:

“If I condone manipulating others, because I think I have no better option, is it thanks to a wise realism, an appropriate empathy with the other's difficulties and defences, or is it through lack of courage?”

“On the other hand, is it really aimed at the common good, or does it conceal a personal agenda?”

Finally, thanks to my interviews, I have identified four categories of difficult cases in which manipulation is hard to avoid, or for which real dilemmas exist:

How far can we disclose the final goal and the present or future problems? How far can we go in challenging people? How far is one sure not to be manipulated oneself? How far can one go in playing political games? Dealing with these, according to the logic described previously, requires the ability to initiate or take part in courageous conversations, but it also needs a good ability to anticipate the possible issues and seek clarification of the uncertainties that might impact the change process and the risks the various stakeholders take in being part of it.

This leads to two final questions:

“Do I make sure that the people involved in the change process can assess the possible risks and benefits for them after having been properly informed of what is known and of what is uncertain?”

“If not, then am I OK with that?”

All these are tough questions. It can be an enviable quality of human beings to be able at least to face these questions and to live with them while the answers are written (probably) nowhere.

The research presented in this paper has, however, some significant limits. I mentioned in paper 1 those related to the interviewee sample and the research design. They of course apply here also. Among them, the limits of interviewing are particularly worth noting. In these issues more than in many others, the way things are announced and described (the “discourses”), even by persons acting in good faith, may not reveal in detail how people would deal with tough issues. Ideally, real-life observation, or, more simply, getting people to react to a choice of typical cases, would probably have enabled me to search more deeply. Rather than trying to depict the behaviours of a given population, I was attempting to grasp the logic and key issues; nevertheless, a more in-depth exploration may have given me insights that I missed here.

Another limit is peculiar to this paper and concerns the lack of attention to coercion in the interviews. I have given some reasons for this, i.e. the necessity to focus on chosen topics in the limited time available for the interviews and the fact that the issue seemed to me simpler to understand. It remains, however, that placing more interest on coercion may possibly have given me a better view on when ethical problems or dilemmas occur in this respect.

While writing these concluding lines, I have to admit that this choice of focus can be linked to my own style as a change agent. Looking back, when I have been unhappy with what I have done from an ethical point of view, it has more often been on the manipulation side than on the coercion side.

In an on-going change process in which I have been involved while writing this paper, I have found myself much more attentive to these issues than I was before. I felt I was already attentive to them in the past; however, beforehand, for instance, I would have avoided lying to stakeholders about the validity of their expectations or fears whenever questions about that were raised; but I would have tended to spare their feelings if these questions were not raised. I realize that I am now taking more initiatives in making clear to stakeholders what is uncertain, be it good or bad news for them. In other words, I have set myself higher standards of clarity in this respect. This confirms what I have often thought from observing colleagues and myself: research can also be a soft way of working on oneself!

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