



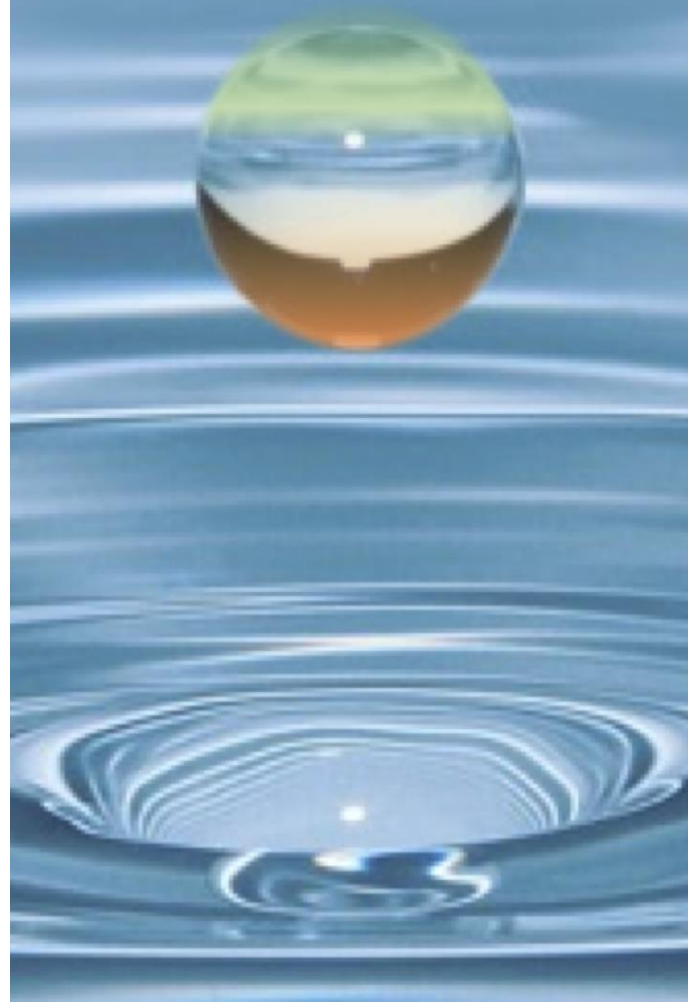
# CAPLOR HORIZONS RIPPLE PAPERS

*...creating ripples of change*

Responses to  
Change –  
*research by*  
*Professor*  
*Sharon Turnbull*

---

**Professor Sharon Turnbull,  
Organisational Development Advisor**



*Learning differently*

*Thinking differently*

*Acting differently*

## Introduction

This paper examines the hidden dynamics under the surface of organisational culture change. It identifies six types of responses and goes on to suggest practical strategies to lead and motivate each type. The proposition is that most change theories focus too much on the strategies for implementing change programmes, and too little on how to understand the different ways that people respond to them and how to lead these differences.

When a culture change programme has been launched and is underway, many leaders breathe a sigh of relief. It is tempting to move straight on to other challenges and take your eyes off the cultural ball. But this is exactly the time when you need to be most alert to what is happening on the ground. How are people really responding? What level of buy-in do you have? What could now threaten the programme's long-term success?

Employee questionnaires may be useful as a preliminary gauge of attitudes prevalent in your workplace, but they are not likely to give you a detailed picture on which to base your actions. How then to gauge the 'real' feelings out there?

As a culture change programme progresses, a range of different behaviour patterns begin to emerge. Many of these, however, are not visible on the surface. What are these responses, why do these differences occur, and how can you recognise them? This paper will address these questions and then go on to propose strategies for leading these different players through change.

These findings are based on a year-long study of a major organisational change programme in a large engineering corporation. More than 70 interviews were conducted before, during, and after the programme, in addition to numerous informal discussions during the modules of the programme itself. Since then, the research has been validated by offering this model to leaders from all sectors who have immediately recognised the 'players' described below.

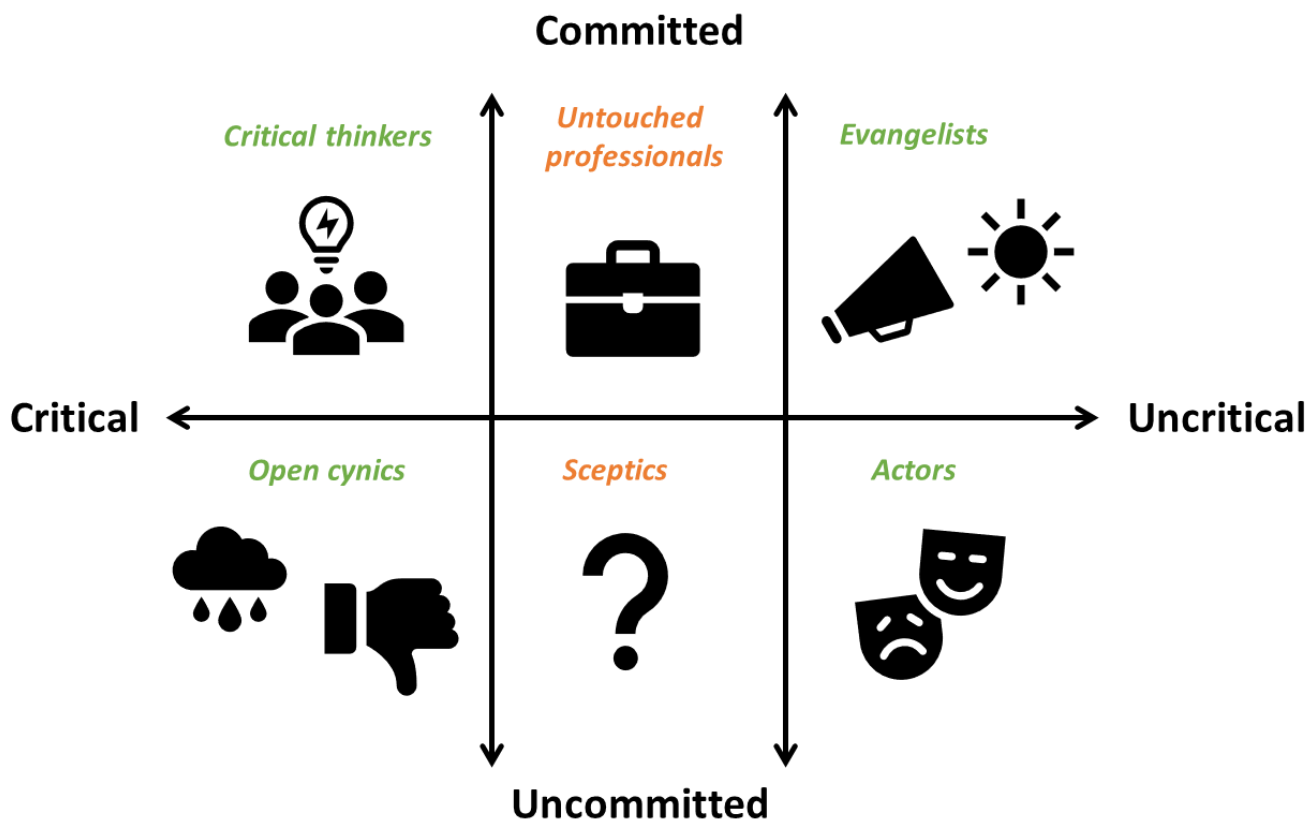
## The 'Players'

I map the players using the two key dimensions of committed and critical.

By 'committed' I am referring to the commitment of an individual to the success of the organisation. The term 'critical' refers to an individual's willingness to ask searching questions (these may be either positive or negative).

Using these dimensions, my research has uncovered six key groups of ‘players’. I first discovered these when undertaking an in-depth cultural study of a major global organisation. Since that time, I have found these players in all of the many organisations I have studied.

These roles are not fixed. They can shift, and indeed the good news is that you can influence how they change through strong and focussed leadership strategies. Your skill in doing so is the key to any change programme’s success.



### The Evangelists

Evangelists are common in many organisations. You can recognise them by their intense loyalty to the organisation, but also by their tendency to take all corporate messages at face value. They are highly committed, but deeply uncritical – and always very keen to adopt and implement any new initiative that comes their way. Their expectations of their leaders are very high, and they are unquestioning in their ‘followership’. The Evangelists would not dream of questioning their leaders’ judgment, but nor would they feel comfortable asking probing questions to clarify their understanding. This group are content to follow.

You might then be lured into thinking that the Evangelists are an easy group to lead and pose little trouble. But beware. The Evangelists can seriously impede your judgement. Evangelists will tell you what you want to hear, and it is very tempting to believe that your cultural change initiative is taking root much more quickly than it is in reality. Because of their, often unrealistic, expectations both of their leaders and of

the pace of change, they can be easily disappointed if you are unable to live up to their hopes or if they see that you are after all fallible!

### **The Actors**

Equally uncritical, but much less committed than the Evangelists, this group might not be easily distinguished from the Evangelists at first glance. Both groups will lead you to believe that they have fully bought into the organisation's vision. However, although the Actors may act identically to the Evangelists, they feel very differently. Actors are chameleons with well-developed thespian skills. They want you to believe that they have bought into the corporate message because they fear that to dissent would bring reprisals. Actors are very prevalent in 'fear' cultures, and much rarer in cultures where challenge is encouraged. Actors appear to change their allegiance to new ideas very easily. They do not engage very much or identify very strongly with their organisation. Their true feelings when exposed, however, are usually of deep scepticism or detachment. This is a group that is hard to detect, because they cover their true feelings so successfully. You will, however, find that they occasionally drop their guard with trusted colleagues or in social situations.

Many Actors have revealed to me during my research that they adopt this tactic as a result of a fear of losing their jobs if they do not appear to conform. They can be influenced, but the danger is that they may capitulate and become 'evangelistic' in their behaviour. If you find that you have a large number of Actors in your organisation, you should start by asking yourself why people feel that they cannot voice their honest opinions.

### **The Untouched Professionals**

The Untouched Professionals are usually lawyers, accountants, research scientists, or indeed any professional whose loyalty lies with their profession above their employer. They often have high market value and view the organisation as a place that hosts them in pursuing their profession. They feel untouched by programmes which sell values, visions and missions, since their own values and visions are deeply embedded in their professional identities.

Committed to their roles, but much less to their employer, this group is unlikely to engage with the programme themselves, remaining ambivalent and showing only a polite passing interest in the changes you are introducing. In other words, they can see the merit of cultural change, but as professionals they do not think that it applies to them. They expect their leaders not to bother them with it, and if asked to attend associated events will assume it is for appearances only. The problem they pose is the potentially negative impact of their ambivalence on those around them.

### **The Critical Thinkers**

An important group for the success of any change programme and a crucial sounding board for any leader to test their ideas and judgment, the Critical Thinkers are critical, questioning, but also highly committed. This means that their ability to be critical is likely to be constructively focussed. These are the members of your organisation who think the most deeply and are not afraid to ask awkward questions. You can

trust these people because they will tell you honestly what they feel and because they really do want what's best for the organisation. Critical Thinkers are loyal, but if they feel that you are making a mistake, they will tell you, whilst remaining constructive about how to put it right. Not surprisingly, organisations rarely have enough Critical Thinkers. You may not always recognise their value as they can be demanding and challenging, and even question your judgement at times. But this may be an important safeguard - if you do not have any Critical Thinkers in your team, you are totally dependent on your own judgement.

### **The Sceptics**

This is usually a large group. These people will be found 'sitting on the fence' in the early stages of any change programme. They tend to observe and watch their colleagues and superiors very carefully before deciding whether to accept or reject any new initiative. They do not have strong feelings or beliefs of their own and are the most easily led of the players. The Sceptics often become Actors if put under pressure (or if their scepticism is driven underground by authoritarian leadership), and if you do not pay attention, they can be easily influenced by any negative views around them to undermine cultural change. On the other hand, with consistent positive leadership, reinforced by positive role modelling, they can be persuaded to support their leaders' endeavours. The Sceptics are an important group for leaders to pay attention to, particularly in the early stages of cultural change. Stronger employees with more vocal opinions will have a big influence on the Sceptics.

### **The Open Cynics**

The Open Cynics are both critical and uncommitted. Organisations rarely contain many of these, since openly cynical behaviour is known to be 'career limiting' in most arenas! So who are these people? These are strong individuals with strong personal agendas. They have often come to believe themselves to be untouchable, sometimes possessing a skill or expertise that the organisation cannot do without. Or they may sometimes be so near to retirement that they no longer fear reprisals for speaking their mind. This group, for various reasons, know that they are untouchable. Unlike the Critical Thinkers, their loyalty is to themselves, and so they set themselves up as self-proclaimed rebels and open cynics – often saying what others do not dare. They are very often attention seeking - their motivation is to be heard and recognised. They can be damaging to a change agenda, as they can be a strong influence on Sceptics. On the other hand, if carefully managed, they are useful group for any leader seeking to understand the concerns around the organisation. They often speak with passion and hold strong beliefs and so it is worth giving them discussion time. If they do 'convert' to your perspective they will be staunch allies and their conversion will send out an extremely powerful message to the less vocal and less visible Sceptics.

## **Shifting the Responses and Balancing the Players**

Having acknowledged that not everybody in your organisation has responded to change in the same way, what can you do about it, and how can you ensure that you engage with and motivate each group throughout the change process and beyond?

My research has shown that these responses are not static and can shift – sometimes slowly and often dramatically, so it is crucial that you keep a close eye on the movements of these behavioural patterns in response to your leadership over time. If you are not in touch with these patterns, you will not be able to take the appropriate actions to steer your programme. If you lose touch with the feelings of the people, you will be in danger of allowing their responses to shift in directions that will be counter-productive to sustaining the change process.

I have found that one of the most successful strategies for influencing groups of leaders to shift in the direction you need, is to enhance their self-awareness by showing them the diagram above and asking them to try to categorise their own teams. Prompted by the model, most leaders cannot resist reflecting on themselves and their own response to change, before going on to reflect on others. By providing a language for addressing this emotive topic, the model has frequently prompted some very valuable group discussions, often within senior leadership teams.

Raising self-awareness is not always enough, however, so let us now return to these response types, and, for each, ask firstly what might happen to each group if left unchecked, and then discuss strategies for handling each group during the change programme.

### **The Critical Thinkers**

These people need to know that their leaders value them highly and are listening to them. They are often talented individuals who are independent in their thinking. But the most common mistake is to ignore their value. If you ignore your Critical Thinkers they will leave you.

*How can you harness the energy and enthusiasm of the Critical Thinkers?*

These are the true leaders of your organisation. They are persuasive and influential at any level because they are credible thinkers. People know that they are not gullible or easily led, and that they speak their mind openly, so will engage with them and trust them. To get most value from your Critical Thinkers and to maintain their commitment, put them into your key strategic organisational roles. Let them lead others. Their critically constructive behaviours will encourage similar behaviours in others, fostering an open and healthy workplace where debate is valued, and where upward and outwards leadership is as well developed as the top-down kind.

### **The Evangelists**

This group can be easily hurt and let down. They give the appearance of being easy to lead. Often, however, they expect too much and their expectations of their leaders are unrealistic. They always take you at your word, but at the slightest glimpse of a human flaw in their leaders, they can be left disillusioned and in despair, in danger of becoming an adversarial open cynic. These people will jump on board any change programme really easily, giving you positive messages and encouraging you to continue with whatever you have embarked upon. But beware – they will never engage more than superficially with your ideas, and will jump off equally fast if you let them down.

### *How can you avoid disappointing the Evangelists?*

The Evangelists are important to you as they are so loyal, and are often hard working. However, without a touch of realism their eventual disappointment will be inevitable – the only question is how soon. A organisation full of disappointed people is not desirable, so make sure you take action before it is too late. Many believe that the launch of a change programme should be accompanied by rolling drums, lights and a fanfare. Be careful – the more you raise the hopes of the Evangelists, the more you will disappoint if you are not able to fulfil your promises.

Your most effective strategy for leading these people will be to ensure that they are led by Critical Thinkers who can encourage more critical and realistic thinking across the organisation. Value and reward the loyalty of your Evangelists, but help them to question, and to understand the challenges of leading a complex organisation. Moderate expectations of your change programme by moderating the language you adopt. Evangelism might well inspire passion in people, but if the hopes raised cannot be met, this passion is likely to be redirected against you in the future.

### **The Actors**

Actors breed fast in a fear culture. The higher the levels of fear and mistrust in your organisation, the more you will drive people to act, and to suppress their true feelings in favour of giving you what they think you want to see and hear.

If you ignore the Actors, they will continue to display the behaviours you requested of them until the next change programme comes along, but they will never engage more deeply, and their deeper-level values and beliefs will remain untouched. Research has shown that acting inside organisations takes its toll on the individuals who are acting.

### *How can you encourage the Actors to stop acting?*

Firstly, you need to ask whether your organisational climate requires people to act. Do your rhetoric and actions instil fear or trust? Are your actions consistent? If you believe you may have hidden Actors in your organisation, you need to win back their trust. Do not start a witch hunt! This will be counterproductive and will drive their true feelings further underground.

Encouraging ideas and suggestions, and making it safe to challenge or question the leaders is an important first step. Your Critical Thinkers will help you in this endeavour. They will become role models for others to emulate, if you show that you value these behaviours. It is your actions, not your words, that will hold meaning for the Actors. Whatever you say, they will not trust you until they genuinely believe that the punitive culture is at an end. Then and only then will they feel able to act authentically.

So in summary – act fairly, openly and with integrity and slowly your staff will recognise and reflect this by doing the same themselves.

## **The Open Cynics**

Open cynics can sometimes be healthy for organisational dynamics, provided that their impact can be turned in a positive direction and is not left to fester and have a negative impact on colleagues. Ignored, the Open Cynics can be quite destructive; they seek attention and if they do not get it can become increasingly vociferous and rebellious.

*How can you harness the influence of the Open Cynics in your favour?*

They are attention seeking and sometimes bitter, but the Open Cynics are rarely a lost cause. If you give them some of the attention they are seeking, listen to their criticisms, and acknowledge their uniqueness as individuals you can sometimes turn them round. Your aim is for them to continue to be able to critique and question, but from a much more committed position, and only then can the extent of their influence and leadership be turned to your advantage. Never seek to convince the Open Cynics with empty rhetoric – they have very strongly developed lie detectors. What matters to this group is that they are given the full recognition they feel they deserve, and are kept involved. If after all your best efforts you still have a handful of Open Cynics in your organisation, always ensure that they are fully occupied, so that their energies are channelled into productive and not destructive activities.

## **The Untouched Professionals**

Don't worry too much about this group – unless of course they are in such a large majority that it is essential for your change programme to bring them into line. Otherwise leave them to get on with the work for which you employed them – they are probably correct in their judgment that they are peripheral players in your change programme. Left alone they are unlikely to have any negative impact on the rest of your people – indeed provided that they continue to provide expert professional services for you, they are serving the purpose for which you recruited them.

*How can you minimise any negative impact from the Untouched Professionals?*

Accept and recognise that the identity of this group comes from their profession and that they have a transactional relationship with you – they provide a service in return for a fair package. Give them this freedom and enjoy the fruits of their labour for as long as they stay with you, and when they are ready to go, help them on their way. The rest of your staff will understand that the Untouched Professionals have a long-term career path outside your organisation, and will view their participation in any change programme with the same detachment as they do themselves.

## **The Sceptics**

These players are extremely open to the influence of others, and it is important to recognise that they will tend to emulate the behaviours of their leaders. My research has shown that where leaders are genuinely committed to a change programme, and sustain consistent supporting behaviours over time, the Sceptics will eventually buy into it, once they become convinced that they are not being duped. However, if their



line manager is an Actor, an Open Cynic or an Untouched Professional then my research has shown that this same behaviour will almost always also be displayed in their followers.

*How can you influence the Sceptics to follow you?*

If you put too much pressure on this group to take a position, there is a risk that they will feel impelled to become either Evangelists or Actors. Either way you are then faced with a new problem. Instead, seek ways to draw out their views and help them to make sense of the changes taking place around them. Where possible, ensure that your Critical Thinkers are given control of units where there are large numbers of Sceptics. This is the best way to encourage open and honest discussion and in turn to influence this large group to become more able to engage in critical thinking themselves, and in time to take up leadership roles in the organisation.

## **Conclusion**

Leading a cultural change programme is not rocket science but it is complex, and it does require an acknowledgement that the way people feel and act is inevitably influenced by their colleagues and their leaders. All of the research that I have conducted into cultural change programmes has found that social dynamics are even more influential than psychological dynamics. People watch each other and emulate the responses of those they admire far more than we realise. The vast majority sit on the fence for as long as possible whenever a new programme is launched, waiting to make up their minds about which way it will go, and how seriously to take the changes proposed. Questions about trust, and about the integrity, consistency and commitment of their leaders are going through their minds.

Understanding the hidden dynamics that lie under the surface of your organisation is the single most important step in a change process. By recognising the unique needs of each of the players we have discussed, and by discovering how to address these, you are already on the path to winning the trust and engagement of each group over the long term. The only way to sustain this is to ensure that consistent and appropriate leadership behaviours at all levels become so deeply embedded in your organisation that the momentum for change will be sustained over the long term – even in the face of changes in the market and economy, and even when threatened by the occasional maverick or cynic.

## Caplor Horizons – Background

Established in 2014, Caplor Horizons is an independent charity. We work with other charities and responsible businesses and now have over 50 Advisors. These are outstanding people that bring specialist knowledge and experience. They contribute their time on a voluntary basis, or at reduced rates, so that Caplor Horizons can provide high quality and distinctive services at an accessible cost.

Working locally, nationally and internationally, we help other organisations think differently about themselves and the new horizons that they face. We support them in strengthening their leadership, renewing their strategy and improving their influence.

We want to encourage and assist a new generation of organisations that are committed to making a positive and lasting impact. We believe that if we are to achieve real, sustainable change, we need to inspire and enable people to learn differently, think differently and act differently.

**Our vision is:** *A world where leaders deliver a sustainable future for all*

**Our purpose is:** *To be courageous, compassionate and creative in facilitating transformational change*

**Our values are:**

- **Courageous** – We are courageous change makers committed to challenging assumptions, taking risks and having difficult conversations
- **Compassionate** – We are open, understanding and heartfelt, encouraging the nourishment of our whole selves and others
- **Creative** – We learn, think and act differently, and are innovative and resilient in an ever-changing world

**Our beliefs are:**

- Through diversity we ignite dynamic innovation
- Collaboration helps achieve greater impact
- Everyone matters
- We are all leaders in our individual and collective ways – we are all change makers!
- Learning is more effective if it is fun, engaging and creative
- Building on people's strengths creates greater resilience

**Our strategic goals:**

- Goal 1: Transforming Leadership
- Goal 2: Strengthening Resilience
- Goal 3: Increasing Collaboration

Learning differently  
Thinking differently  
Acting differently

