

Fearless Thinkers: Episode One

Masami: This is Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and your host today is Rick Cheatham, our head of marketing at BTS. So Rick, what do we have for today?

Rick: Hey, Masami, I'm super excited today because we have Jeni Fan and Kathryn Club, both from our Change and Transformation practice. They recently were published in *Harvard Business Review* with a point of view around change that is both challenging traditional thinking and also quite empowering.

Masami: I can see why you're excited.

Rick: Yeah, it's gonna be a great show. Let's jump right in. So Kathryn, Jeni, welcome to the show.

Kathryn: Hi, Rick; good to see you.

Jeni: Hi, glad to be here.

Rick: Great to have you. So, as I've looked at some of your most recent work, it seems you've got a perspective on change that really challenges traditional thinking. Could you share a little bit of that with us?

Kathryn: Let me start that, all right. So I've been doing this for more than a few years, and one of the things when you're working with clients with change that I've noticed is there's always something else in the room, right? That when you're dealing with change, you're actually dealing with everybody's personal history with change. It could be the change they recently experienced at their same company. It could be something much older than that. And there was always... The thing that we'd been saying, which is, "It's much harder to let go of the past than it is to envision the future." We started doing some research on that, and it turns out that we are... You know, we have found that the antecedent events in people's relationships to change are one of the biggest predictors of whether a company's change will be successful or not.

Jeni: What's really interesting is traditional change management, as it's experienced in kind of broader industry, largely focuses on single-point, discrete events. We see a lot of change management offices, a lot of perspectives on how to manage your way through change, as if these changes are, in fact, distinct events in time. So you see a lot of people planning their way through change. And I think the perspective that we're bringing right now is how do you operate and perform, as an organization, in a time when change is no longer discrete? When change is continuous, in fact, our relationship, then, to change and how we lead in change must effectively change as well.

Rick: So that's really interesting, to go from a way of thinking that says, "Change has a beginning and middle and end," to, "Change is ongoing." And if I'm understanding a little bit of what you said earlier, Kathryn, the... For lack of a better way of saying it, the tools we bring to the table when we're experiencing great change are a huge predictor of success. Is that a fair way to think about it, or...

Kathryn: It it's not the tools as much as, really, how we... What our relationship is with change. And what that means is, "What was my personal experience?" You know, we generally operate out of habits, and habits are developed at some point in time for very good and valid reasons. However, those times change, right? And so we generally use habits that now are out of sync with what we need to do. And our habits around change - because change can often be experienced by the brain - are really a threatening kind of thing, and get kind of hard-coded early, right? And so letting go of those habits and taking on a new perspective, or new habits is really the hardest thing we can do.

Rick: And so, what I wanna get to next is the mindset piece. So, Jeni, if there's something that you can build a bridge between the habits that Kathryn was just referencing and the whole mindset concept that you guys -

Jeni: Building on what Kathryn just said about these habits, right? A good example of this is, if you think back to the research that we just presented, and was recently published in HBR around the four

relationships of change - if you take a look at one of those unique relationships, which is the resistor take, for example: resistors actually have a lot of goodness in them, right? They want to protect their teams, they wanna see around corners, they wanna risk mitigate. And a lot of that was built as a habit because they've been in an organization where they see change initiatives spin up and then go nowhere. And another one spin up, and then go nowhere. And nothing gets traction, so they're fatigued and they're burnt out, and they're almost just exhausted by change itself. So instead of going for a spin again, when they see change, they tend to double down on what is right, right now, but that is a learned behavior. So there's good news to that, right? Which is that it's 100% changeable, right? But the bad news is that habits are really hard to break, and so we need to be very intentional.

Kathryn: I would add that organizations reinforce habits, right? People reach a particular level in an organization and they are meant to be the decision-makers, and we actually train and expect a lot of our leaders to be change controllers. And I think one of the things we saw in the pandemic were the people who were the most exhausted and burnt out, right? The notion of a change controller actually made a lot of sense as an expectation and even a muscle that a manager would build when change happened, sometimes not at this level, a little episodically.

Rick: Great, so I would wonder... So that's two of the relationships to change. Can you tell us a little bit more about the others?

Jeni: Yeah, sure, so the receiver holds a different mentality from resistor and controller in the sense that they almost feel like the change is being done to them. We often actually see this in very hierarchical organizations of top-down command and control, where, again, to the point of habits, leaders have actually grown up in the organization building the habit that they will be directionally told what to do. These are largely organizations that focus less on alignment and more on execution, so that they're pushing direction down, and leaders get this habit of, like, "If there's a new change,

someone above my pay grade will tell me how to execute." And that, "I don't really know how to engage in this change necessarily," and rather than doing something wrong or it's directionally misaligned, it's better to do nothing at all. Now, they're also great corporate citizens, right? They have wonderful, like, trust in leadership and expertise. So for these individuals, we see that the best way of bringing them into the fold is helping them find their voice, helping them see the vision, articulate and co-create the future together. Now, the one that's actually obviously missing is the change-ready mindset, which is kind of the holy grail. And so I wanna see if Kathryn wanted to speak a little bit about that.

Kathryn: Sure, so as Jeni said, the fundamental mindset that a change-ready leader is holding is that change is continuous, right? I can't gear up for this change, and then it's gonna ebb later, right? I am in an environment of continuous change. So that's the mindset. And when you do that, there's a couple things that become clear to leaders. One, I can't know everything, right? I just can't. I mean, things are changing too rapidly. I'm not as close to the customer, not as close to the operations, whatever it happens to be. Two is that all the complex problems we are being asked to solve have to be solved by more than one person. Nobody can possibly have the ideas to do that. It is a matrix organization or a complex problem we're solving. It's gonna require more people. And often, the leader's not even the most qualified person to make those decisions or move forward with those sorts of things. So the thing for a change-ready leader to keep in mind is that catalyzing their people, co-creating with others, doing those things that only they can do because of their perspective or position, and actually focusing as much or more on leading change than leading their operations or sales or function, whatever they're looking at, that's really the set of characteristics that will serve people in the kind of environments we're in right now.

Rick: So what would be some methods or process that... Let's say I'm going through major change. I recognize myself not as the change-ready leader. What are some

things that either... Or, I'm looking at my organization and potentially seeing that in others as well. Once we know, what do we do?

Kathryn: Well, I think understanding what your relationship to change is underneath it helps, right? Because if you're not aware of it, you can't fix it. You can't change it. So that that's one. Two is you have to understand that we always make systems, right? And if I'm a change controller and I'm making all the decisions, and I'm giving directives and I'm telling people what to do, I am actually creating an entire generation of change receivers or change resistors, right? It's like either they're gonna fall in line and say, "Okay, you know, you get paid to the big bucks," or they're like, "No, you can't possibly do that. You're not doing it right." So, I would say those two things are perspectives that are necessary for leaders to move forward, as a start.

Jeni: And I would add to that, you know, we have a solution for that. You know, I would recommend everyone take the Change-Ready Explorer, get really deep in understanding what is really underneath your personal relationship, and therefore reaction, to change. And as a part of that assessment, we give you some actual actionable guidance, right? To pivot your behavior to becoming more change-ready right away. But outside of these kind of, like, self-coaching tools and, you know, assessments, quite honestly, sometimes it just takes a moment to step back and say, "What is the intention that I'm coming with, and what is the impact that I'm actually making?" And by seeing both sides of that coin, you can start to decide for yourself, "Is this impact the one that I want to make, and, if not, how might I actually pivot this to be one that is more collaborative?" 'Cause change-ready leaders are very, very rarely the smartest people in the room. So they are looking for ways to bring others into the dialogue and bring them along in the process.

Kathryn: One of the complaints we sometimes get about change-ready leader is, "It takes too long. I have to involve more people." You know, it's like, "Why would I do this?" And you actually have to stop and think,

right? If I give an order that gets followed and people don't make it better, debate it, improve it, those sorts of things, but just do it because I said to do it and then it fails, how much more time do you take in, you know, rectifying a failure than getting the input upfront? How much more time does it take to create a solution that everybody feels ownership of? It does take more time, but what you're doing, actually, is helping people internalize the intent that we're trying to accomplish, owning the solution, and being able to improvise in real life when you're actually implementing. We are always improvising, and people who are owners, authors, and co-creators with their leader are more able to improvise and actually get to the results, to hit that intent, no matter what the conditions are.

Rick: Well, I think it's pretty incredible. It's almost cliché at this point to say, when people don't have the information, they tend to fill in the blanks with the worst-case scenario. And it sounds like, not only in identifying my relationship to change, you were also talking about a new way of implementing change that does allow people that understanding of intent. So when things seem wrong, dumb, or bad, they're able to go back to that. Is that a fair understanding?

Jeni: I would think so. And I think it goes back to that whole idea of, like, discrete change management, right? So we get, oftentimes, asked by clients, "Well, what's your model of change? What's your... What's the process that you guys follow for change?" And sure, we have a point of view. If you look at what those four things are, you can overlay them on any type of, quote, "change management framework." So in that way, we're kind of agnostic. What we're talking about is, you know, if we wanna get super meta about this, right, it's the level up from that. It's the thinking that goes into it. Because if you have co-creation, you have alignment, you have understanding, and you have people's internalized intention. To what Kathryn was saying, it doesn't matter what model you're following. You can be agile in the way you navigate through it.

Rick: Great. Thank you both for joining us today. It's been both insightful and inspiring. So really, really appreciate the time and wisdom you shared.

Kathryn: Thank you.

Jeni: Thanks, Rick.

Masami: If you'd like to stay up to date on the latest from the Fearless Thinkers podcast, please subscribe. Links to all of the relevant content discussed in today's podcast are in the show notes, or you can always reach us at bts.com. Thanks again.