

continuous change is characterised by people constantly adapting and editing ideas they acquire from different sources. At a collective level these continuous adjustments made simultaneously across units can create substantial change.

The distinction between episodic and continuous change helps clarify thinking about an organisation's future development and evolution in relation to its long-term goals. Few organisations are in a position to decide unilaterally that they will adopt an exclusively continuous change approach. They can, however, capitalise upon many of the principles of continuous change by engendering the flexibility to accommodate and experiment with everyday contingencies, breakdowns, exceptions, opportunities and unintended consequences that punctuate organisational life (Orlikowski, 1996).

Developmental, transitional and transformational change

Change can also be understood in relation to its extent and scope. Ackerman (1997) has distinguished between three types of change: **developmental**, **transitional** and **transformational**. (See Figure 1.)

1. **Developmental change** may be either planned or emergent; it is first order or incremental. It is change that enhances or corrects existing aspects of an organisation, often focusing on the improvement of a skill or process.
2. **Transitional change** seeks to achieve a known desired state that is different from the existing one. It is episodic, planned and second order, or radical. The model of transitional change is the basis of much of the organisational change literature (see for example Kanter, 1983; Beckhard and Harris, 1987; Nadler and Tushman, 1989). It has its foundations in the work of Lewin (1951) who conceptualised change as a three-stage process involving:
 - **unfreezing** the existing organisational equilibrium
 - **moving** to a new position
 - **refreezing** in a new equilibrium position.

Schein in 1987 further explored these three stages. He suggested that unfreezing involves:

- disconfirmation of expectations
- creation of guilt or anxiety
- provision of psychological safety that converts anxiety into motivation to change.

Moving to a new position is achieved through cognitive restructuring, often through:

- identifying with a new role model or mentor
- scanning the environment for new relevant information.

Refreezing occurs when the new point of view is integrated into:

- the total personality and concept of self
- significant relationships.

Managing Change in the NHS

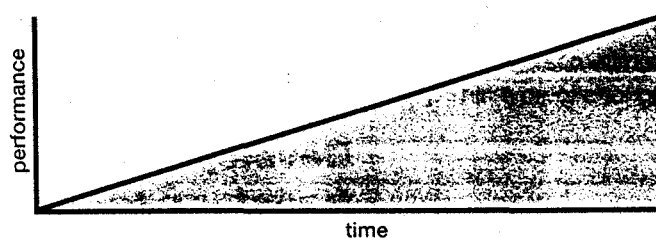
3. **Transformational change** is radical or second order in nature. It requires a shift in assumptions made by the organisation and its members. Transformation can result in an organisation that differs significantly in terms of structure, processes, culture and strategy. It may, therefore, result in the creation of an organisation that operates in developmental mode – one that continuously learns, adapts and improves.

Figure 1: Perspectives on change

Adapted from Ackerman (1997)

Developmental change

Improvement of existing situation



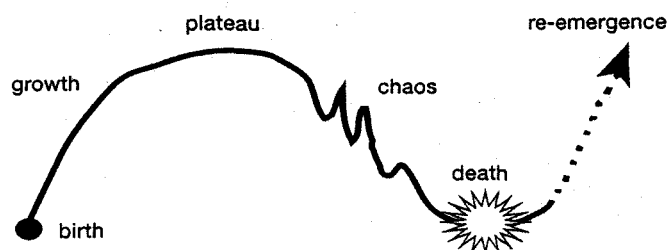
Transitional change

Implementation of a known new state;
management of the interim transition state over a
controlled period of time



Transformational change

Emergence of a new state, unknown until it takes
shape, out of the remains of the chaotic death of
the old state; time period not easily controlled



Systems thinking and change

Many of the approaches to organisational change found in the literature give the impression that change is (or can be) a rational, controlled, and orderly process. In practice, however, organisational change is chaotic, often involving shifting goals, discontinuous activities, surprising events, and unexpected combinations of changes and outcomes (Cummins *et al.*, 1985; Dawson, 1996). Accordingly, change can be understood in relation to the complex dynamic systems within which change takes place.

Systems thinking originated in the 1920s within several disciplines, notably biology and engineering, and grew out of the observation that there were many aspects which scientific analysis could not explore. Whereas scientific method – summarised by Popper (1972) as the three Rs: reduction, repeatability and refutation – increases our knowledge and understanding by breaking things