Change: It’s a matter of life or slow death

Professor believes one person can – and must – change the world

By Dennis Sparks

JSD: Many of the ideas in Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within and Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Accomplish Extraordinary Results can be summed up in the following passage from Deep Change (Jossey-Bass Inc., 1996):

“Deep change assumes that one person can change the larger system or organization in which he or she exists. … When we have successfully experienced a deep change, it inspires us to encourage others to undergo a similar experience. We are all potential change agents. As we discipline our talents, we deepen our perceptions about what is possible. … We must continually choose between deep change or slow death.”

Quinn: A number of subjects are addressed in those sentences. Let’s begin by talking about slow death. Because it’s natural for all human beings to experience disappointment, failure, and difficulty, it’s very, very easy over time to get committed to our comfort zone, that place of habit in which we know we can exist without effort. Over time, these habits are equivalent to slow death — if I am not learning, I am dying. When our comfort zone solidifies into habits, we get trapped in slow death, which eventually turns into negative emotions such as depression and anger. We have magnificent defense mechanisms that allow us to deny and project so that we don’t have to admit our slow deaths and deal with them.

The second big point made in the passage you read is that individuals can change the system, which is an observation contradicted by our normal experience. The normal curve of distribution shows us that middle-of-the-curve behavior is most likely to occur. It is shaped by the system. Consequently, the average person learns to move along and not make waves.

I am very taken by the concept of positive deviance. Deviance is generally viewed as a bad thing. But on one end of the curve, we find deviance in the form of excellence, the very behavior we want to promote. Systems don’t like either positive or negative deviance, though, and are designed to crush both. So if we take risks to be excellent, the system will push back.

Richard Pascale in Surfing the Edge of
**Chaos** (Crown Business, 2000) describes positive deviance as it is practiced by Save the Children in poor villages in Vietnam. Rather than simply throwing resources at the problem, which will later be withdrawn, after which the situation will return to normal, Save the Children went into villages in Vietnam where many, but not all, children were starving. They engaged the villagers in studying the situation and identifying the positive deviants who were also poor but had healthy children. Then the villagers showed one another how this was done. Save the Children was amplifying positive deviance. So now when people say something can’t be done, I ask for examples of positive deviance. But people are often uncomfortable with these notions because they suggest that we all have the potential to do things that many claim are impossible.

To tie all of this together, if we are not growing, we are dying. And if we are growing and pushing the edges of the system, we will meet great resistance. And yet it is possible for us to be positive deviants, and positive deviants change the world. There are documented cases of this phenomenon in education just as there are in other fields.

**FIND YOUR OWN SOLUTIONS**

**JSD:** Your discussion of positive deviancy reminds me that no matter how challenged a school may be, there is almost always outstanding teaching going on in at least a few of the classrooms. And no matter how challenged a school district may be, there are almost always some outstanding schools within the system that are positive deviants. Unfortunately, within the school, the outstanding teaching practices usually do not spread from classroom to classroom, and in districts, outstanding schoolwide practices do not move from school to school.

**Quinn:** What we usually do in such a situation is have experts determine exactly what happened, publish it, and then tell others to replicate it. That is a disastrous prescription. If you take the

Save the Children story, they began with deep appreciation of the Vietnamese villages. They looked at what was happening extremely closely. They had to be within that system to truly understand it. And they were very, very careful about the process, the interactions they had with community members.

When we think about the lessons of positive deviancy, we can never provide such prescriptive lists because each district or school is unique — the people working in it are different, the challenges are different. Instead, leaders must seek to
see their district or school deeply and to get themselves out of their own slow death patterns so that they can make a bigger difference.

CHANGE THE SCRIPT

**JSD:** I’d like to read to you from Change the World (Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000) and ask you to comment on what you’ve written, particularly as it relates to leaders moving beyond slow death to creating schools that are truly wonderful places for everyone in them. In the book, you describe a parent who made a transformational change in relation to her daughter. “The child was encountering a mother with a new self,” you wrote. “When we alter our scripts, we, like the acorn, initiate a new pattern of being, a pattern of high potential.” What are scripts and why are they so powerful?

**Quinn:** In a play or movie an actor says things that are in the script, the story that someone has written. Over time, each of us develops a script, a story for our life. A parent may have told us we were ugly or beautiful. Our teachers told us certain things, our culture told us things. Consequently, through these scripts we learned to act in patterned ways. For example, a teacher learns to have an objective and a lesson plan that is deductive. Such a script keeps one from ever entertaining the possibility of conducting a lesson in which students construct their own meaning.

These scripts we carry in our head may be called paradigms or mental models and are an important part of our comfort zone. Therefore, if I am to increase my capacity, I have to move outside my comfort zone, which means rewriting at least part of that script. For instance, do I dare to try a teaching method I have never used before? There’s nothing more terrifying because we prefer the devil we know to the devil we don’t know.

But when we muster the courage to act on new scripts, amazing things happen. When people become empowered, they realize that they had put constraints upon themselves. Suddenly, they are able to do all kinds of things we previously thought were impossible. I think the most important thing we give students as teachers and leaders is our example of aliveness and courage. We become empowered and empowering to them because we have demonstrated the courage to change our scripts, even though they probably would not use those words to describe what happened.

**SEE THROUGH THE LIE**

**JSD:** When individual teachers or schools demonstrate the courage to change in a way that clearly benefits students, they often evoke fear in others. It’s almost as if excellence is a virus that the system’s immune system must protect against.

**Quinn:** That protective wall goes up for a good reason. If I’m a superintendent living in the middle of the curve, where most of us are, I see and experience the grief. The payoffs don’t seem big enough to suffer through the costs. That’s when we discover the great lie — we say that we’re here for the customer or for the student, but really we’re here for administrative convenience. We design for administrative convenience and we live for administrative convenience.

**START A SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

**JSD:** In Change the World you wrote, “In over 25 years of working on issues of organizational change, I have come to the conclusion that most important changes require the creation of a social movement. It is, in fact, more accurate to say that change is a social movement. The first step in creating a social movement is having a single actor who asks questions: What is the right thing to do? What result do I want? How do I behave in a more authentic way?”

**Quinn:** That’s a very important concept. People who have internalized the normal, hierarchical model believe that their job is to preserve equilibrium. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi were deviants who fostered social movements.

Superintendents and principals can only bring about transformational change if they lead a social movement. By social movement, I mean a change in culture. It always begins with a few and moves to the many. Every major organizational change requires a social movement. Show me a superintendent who has transformed her school system or a principal who has transformed his school, and I’ll show you someone who led a social movement, because they had to attract all the resistant teachers out of their shells into a new script.

The answers to the questions you just read can lead school administrators to recognize that they can no longer live with the results they are seeing and to acknowledge that they are prepared to do whatever’s necessary to create something far better. Then they learn their way forward to do whatever is necessary.

**CREATIVITY IS JOY**

**JSD:** Moral authority certainly comes through in your writing, as does the importance of being creative. “We all want to experience ourselves as a creative force,” you wrote in Change the World. “That’s when we are most influential and happy.” I assume that this applies to all educators and that the creative process lies outside a formulaic process.

**Quinn:** Our greatest joy no matter what our role comes from creating. In that process, people become aware that they are able to do things they once thought were impossible. They have empowered themselves, which in turn empowers those with whom they interact.

People empower others by being inner-directed and other-focused. Inner-
directed means that I have high standards and that I’m not taking my direction from the middle of the curve; I am choosing to live in positive deviancy. As a result, I am willing to absorb social punishment for the achievement of my purpose. At the same time I’m other-focused — I’m doing it out of love. This results in what I call “carefrontation” or tough love. Human beings grow in those types of relationships.

**FUNDAMENTAL CHOICES**

**JSD:** In *Change the World,* you cite the work of Robert Fritz, who talks about fundamental, primary, and secondary choices. Fundamental choices are a basic orientation to life or work. These choices, in turn, affect the primary and secondary choices that flow from them. About this you wrote, “The individuals, groups, teams, and organizations will not change until they can identify and embrace their potential — that is, really grasp what they are capable of achieving. This will not happen until one person, somewhere, makes a fundamental choice and begins to demonstrate a new way of being. This will result in new actions, words, and commitment.”

A few months back, I read an essay by an urban superintendent in Ohio who came to realize that teaching African-American youth to read was for some youngsters literally a matter of life and death. She said that once she realized this, she attended, what she said at those meetings, and so on throughout her day. Every decision was affected by that fundamental choice.

**Quinn:** That’s a perfect illustration.

**WE FEAR OUR OWN POWER**

**JSD:** “Regular personal transcen-
dence of fears, constant effort to step outside our scripts and engage emerging reality, continuous struggle to live an inner-directed and other-focused life, leads to an opposite conclusion: We are not zeroes. We are of infinite potential,” you wrote in *Change the World.* You go on to quote Nelson Mandela: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

**Quinn:** I love that quote. We all have a deeply rooted fear that we are zeroes, and that if we try something and fail, it will confirm that fear. But the greater fear is that we have enormous potential that we are not using. We fear that we will get to the end of our lives and discover that we could have done much more, but that we chose not to. There is good reason for that fear because enormous responsibility comes with the awareness that “we are powerful beyond measure.”

If we run from our fears, they multiply and create slow death. While we may never totally conquer our fears, we can confront them. That’s what happens in that dark valley during the hero’s journey described by Joseph Campbell. And because we are of infinite potential, we always win that battle and become deeply gratified because we see our impact in the world. Our rewards are internal because the greatest satisfactions in life come when we confront our fears and become empowered and empowering.

**TEACHERS MODEL LIVING**

**JSD:** Here’s something else you wrote: “Our enthusiasm is infectious. People around us are moved in ways that are subtle but powerful. We become living symbols of a new vision. We send out new signals to everyone around us and, if we are in an organization, our very presence disrupts old routines. A new dialogue is born and the culture in which we are participating begins to change.”

**Quinn:** I have six children, all of whom have graduated from high school. Over the years, I listened to endless discussions of their teachers. Eighty percent of the people they described were experiencing slow death. What kids look at is what they see modeled by the human being at the front of the classroom. Teenagers in particular are very good at picking up authenticity or the lack of it. When they encounter authenticity, they gravitate toward it. When they pick up hypocrisy, they move away from it. What we teach kids is not just subjects but how to live.

**LEADERS STAND WITH THE GROUP**

**JSD:** To me, one of the most important ideas you address is contained in this sentence: “The transformational change agent says, ‘Here is the standard, which I know is impossible, so let’s stand together and learn our way into a higher level of performance.’”

**Quinn:** We tend to think that the directing and demanding kind of leadership improves performance. What I promote are leaders who stand with the group to do what seems impossible until together they learn what works. People become willing to try things that would have previously left them feeling paralyzed.

**SEE BEYOND COMPLEXITY**

**JSD:** “When someone is in a transformational state,” you wrote, “they see things with this simplicity that is conferred only to those who have transcended complexity. They have a view of the system that is both profoundly deep and profoundly simple. Because they have a deep understanding, they can offer an image, make a statement, or ask a question and the world changes.”

**Quinn:** Here’s an example. I was once asked to talk with a group of teenagers. I decided to first try out what I was going to do on my own kids. I got them together and passed an old basketball around. I asked them to describe it. My third child, a basketball-playing introvert who was never one for words, said: “This is an object through which someone can create communities that excel.”

The next day as I passed the ball around I told the teenagers with whom I was speaking what Sean had said and asked who had an object that mattered to
them in the same way that the basketball mattered to Sean. One girl said, "Sometimes when life seems painful, I go to my room and play my flute. I can’t describe what happens because it is so wonderful." Another kid raised his hand. "I feel that way about my computer. I only know enough to take advantage of 10% of its power, but when I’m using it, I can feel its potential." Everyone was glued to the conversation. What those objects had in common was that they were things through which kids moved into their creative space and which they knew so deeply that they saw beyond their surface features.

The goal is for superintendents to see their schools that way, for teachers to see their classes that way. The superintendent in Ohio who sees life and death in what she does is seeing beyond complexity to an incredibly simple proposition.

DON'T INFORM — TRANSFORM

JSD: Here’s another quotation from Change the World. “I explained that my courses are designed not to inform but to transform. I do not want my students to leave the course with only information. I want them to leave with an increased capacity to change the world. That means creating an environment where they are more likely to choose to empower themselves. Dispensing information is a very minor part of my class. Instead, my classes are carefully designed to call forth divergent processes. I try to disturb the scripts of the class. … I try to prepare myself to be fully present, to ask the right questions at the right time, and give them assignments that facilitate transformation.” In that passage, you are describing yourself as a teacher, but the same things might be said of a superintendent preparing for a school board meeting or a principal about to begin a conference with a teacher or parent.

Quinn: If we go back to the superintendent in Ohio, I suspect that the day before she came to the conclusion that schooling was about life and death, she was doing things as dictated by a paradigm that was rational and focused on telling and providing information. That paradigm says leaders are experts who pour their expertise down on the system. Once she stepped outside that script, I can imagine her asking questions that disturb the system. I can imagine her throwing pebbles into the intellectual ponds of individuals. When teachers get to the other side of complexity, the methods they use radically alter.

CHOOSE TO CHANGE

JSD: What you have been saying is that it’s critically important for educational leaders to be authentic, to choose deep change over slow death, to engage themselves and others in the process of examining and perhaps changing their fundamental choices, and to move ahead by creating the results they wish to achieve.

Quinn: Absolutely! I recommend two books to everyone. One is by Robert Fritz, The Path of Least Resistance (Fawcett Books, 1989). The other is Parker Palmer’s The Courage to Teach (Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997). Read them back-to-back and I think they will lead to the conclusions you’ve just expressed.