

Change Days

by Holger Nauheimer

“The Change Days provide a unique-in-the-world forum for the incubation, launch, and refinement of change leadership and management.”

---Dr. Doug Gilbert

The Story of a Learning Journey

I am watching three gigantic statues being moved to the center of the auditorium. The yellow one—symbolizing CHANGE—is shaped like a butterfly. The turquoise one—representing TRUST—bears the silhouette of two mountaineers giving support to each other. The crimson statue is topped by a huge bull’s head, an allegory for POWER. Each of the structures, made from cardboard, is covered with hundreds of handwritten notes which are pinned to them. For a brief moment, the 150 people in the room stand calm and silent in the inner circle, contemplating what they have accomplished over the last three days. Some of the messages on the notes read:



- VUCA (*volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity*) is an invitation to enlightenment. Let your ego die.
- You need to open up to make change possible and to find common ground with others.
- Mirroring others as human beings as a strong driver for change.
- There is power in forgiveness. It’s the way to regain power.
- Being grateful for the power & privilege we have helps us bounce back from the dark.
- If trust is fairy dust, how can we spread it?

The silence only lasts seconds, then everybody bursts into applause. For three days, the group made a deep dive into the theme of the Berlin Change Days 2017: *Power & Trust. Leading Change in a VUCA World*. Rather than watching a series of Power Point presentations and listening to endless panel discussions, they were on their feet constantly, discussing theoretical foundations to help understand the deeper meaning of the overall theme, experimenting with new tools and facilitation techniques, and continuously exchanging insights with each other. At the end of the event, they are exhausted, and joyful. They return home with fresh commitments to making change happen wherever their place of intervention is.

- Seating was arranged in theatre style, and because you came late, you only found a seat in the last row. Or you were seated at round tables, so large that you could only communicate with your neighbor but not with the person at the other side of the table.
- Productive group work was not possible at those tables because of the noise level in the room and the distance between you and your peers at the table.
- Your active participation was limited to the opportunity to ask questions to presenters in the breakout sessions.
- During many of the breakout sessions, presenters tried to convince you to buy their book or their board game or to sign up for a licensing program, workshops, or certification etc.
- You saw one or two inspiring lectures, but you endured a dozen boring ones.
- You watched a minimum of 300 slides, but only remembered a few. You took photos of them instead of listening and engaging. While you posted some of those photos on Twitter, you never looked at them again after the conference.
- You learned something, but the event did not transform you.
- The highlights of the conference were the lunches and the reception when you met interesting people.

None of these elements are present at Change Days, except that you meet exciting and like-minded people in lunch and coffee breaks. At Change Days, you have the opportunity to exchange and network with them beyond the official breaks. There are no billboards, no sales shows, no book signings. You are on your feet more often than you sit. You will experience one inspiring keynote but the number of slides is limited. You will leave the event with a hunch that those days have transformed you, and with the assertion that you have learned something that you will apply in your work. Chances are that you are going to start making change happen in your organization tomorrow.

The vision of the Change Days' founders is that the conference experience is being redefined.

The Berlin Change Days is only one example for the many applications of the concept. We discovered the approach when we wanted to fill the gap between monotonous conferences focusing on the delivery of pre-defined content on the one hand, and events that follow the principles of self-organization but offer limited opportunity for gaining deep insights into new developments in one's field, on the other. We were inspired by Open Space Technology, World Café, Art of Hosting and similar frameworks, and we wanted to combine them with a profound learning journey.

The Basics

What is Change Days?



Figure 2: The learning journey binds the different elements together

Change Days is a specific large group event that runs over one to three days. It blends large group facilitation methods, arts and physical experiences with workshops on topics that allow a deep exploration of the overall theme of the event. As in conventional conferences, there is a group of people who prepare their input beforehand. However, unlike in conventional conferences, the input and exchange between participants takes place simultaneously.

The **origin** of the event goes back to the first Berlin Change Days in 2009, when a small group of international change facilitators came together to explore their common field. The event has since grown and now takes place once a year. Feedback from participants allowed us to see the red thread connecting all Change Days. Applying the principles and the design elements, Change Days are now applied worldwide as a format for open fora, thematic conferences and in-house corporate learning and development events.

The **design** of the Change Days respects people's desire to learn something new, to experiment with new knowledge on the spot and to process their new insights with peers in order to make them applicable to their specific professional and personal contexts.

The **inclusion** of a faculty of facilitators who provide inputs—complementing the self-organized learning process—distinguishes the Change Days approach from most other large facilitation approaches. Change Days blends training and workshop elements in order to offer participants the highest possible benefit for their investment of time.

The faculty might consist of external resource persons or of people from inside the organization who want to share their insights and methods. A mix of both is highly recommended. We believe that some organizations are in need of a kick if they are stuck in their old habits; this kick can be provided by outsiders or by those from inside whose voice is usually not heard. The difference to a classic conference approach, however, is that at the Change Days the faculty blends in and participates in all other activities. Once the facilitators have delivered their message, they leave their role behind and become humble learners themselves.

*The only way to change someone's mind is to
connect with them from the heart.
(Rasheed Ogunlaru)*

There is more one aspect which differentiates Change Days from other conferences or gatherings: The design of the entire event which connects all parts together and which makes sure that participants speak of **one** experience when they leave. In the ten years in which we have hosted Change Days we became aware that emotions enhance the learning experience and the connection between people. This is why we include elements in the design of each event which evoke joy, happiness, connection. Also, we do not stifle conflicts and emotions that emerge. For example, tensions arose one time because some of the participants felt that the female voice was not equally represented in the hosting team. We opened the space for a dialogue in which strong emotions such as anger, sadness and frustration surfaced. Within a short while, emotions cooled down; people felt heard and extra space was opened for additional conversations. It is possible and necessary to divert from the preconceived agenda if the process requires this. We sometimes think of the Change Days as an Italian Opera with an energizing overture, a series of arias and chorales and a strong emotional ending. That way, we make sure that all senses, the left and the right brain are equally stimulated.

The Principles

Like most of the other methods described in this book, we did not invent the principles. They emerged naturally over time and have proven to be key elements that form the structure of an event. The principles of the Change Days are what makes them alive and different:

- **Capacity building and transformation happen at the same time** when people are in a space in which they feel confident to experiment.
- **Everybody is a co-creator** of their own and of the collective experience.
- **Members of the faculty provide both their focused contributions and partake in the wider experience**, equal to the audience they serve.
- **High-quality contributions, deep insights and real-life case studies are crucial** to create trust in the process and to inspire participants.
- **The learning journey is integral to the experience** and begins before and continues after the event.
- On the learning journey, we **provide space to breathe and time for individual and collective sense-making**.
- The design reinforces the fact that **emotions and creativity are integral parts** of any learning experience.
- **Fun and joy connect people** as peers.

The Design Elements

The overall design of Change Days is meant to address different learning styles and speaks to all parts of mind, body, hearts and soul.

No two events organized according to the Change Days principles are alike. However, over the years we have learned that the following design elements are instrumental for a good outcome.

Duration: between one and three days. We found starting on the afternoon of Day 1 and ending at lunch on Day 3 to be the ideal set-up.

Interventions. An event can be composed of different interventions: workshops, a keynote and a learning journey which binds the different elements together and allows participants to process their new experiences.

Workshops are usually 1 ½ hour sessions. In the call for proposals, facilitators are requested to link their specific workshop topic to the overall theme of the event. They are asked to provide a balance of industry-specific case studies, theory, exercises, games and group reflection. Facilitators experiment with different art forms including painting, theatre, music etc. in order to provide different learning channels for getting their message across. Other workshops dive deeply into the theory of a certain subject. We insist that workshops contain at least 50% interactive elements and a thorough debriefing at the end.

One energizing *keynote* at the beginning opens the playing field. The keynote speaker is not selected based on their reputation but on the depth with which they can lead participants into the theme of the event. For example, if the topic is *power*, we would like to hear how power dynamics interact with the dynamics of a change process and how we—as leaders or facilitators—can find out the right power balance in relating to others.

The *learning journey* covers those plenary sessions of the event, in which all participants come together and reflect on their learning experience. It starts on Day 1 and continues until the end of the gathering, with participants returning to the plenary regularly to jointly reflect. They are invited to create profound connections with their peers. On the learning journey, we might use established facilitation approaches such as World Café; however, often the head facilitators tailor-make a design for that specific event. It has proven beneficial to introduce learning triads, i.e. ask each participant to bond with two other people to support each other's learning process during and after the event.

We have experimented with other forms of interventions like flash-mobs, joint art projects, short inputs by experts into the plenary etc. All is possible in a Change Days event if it serves the overall purpose and responds to the principles.

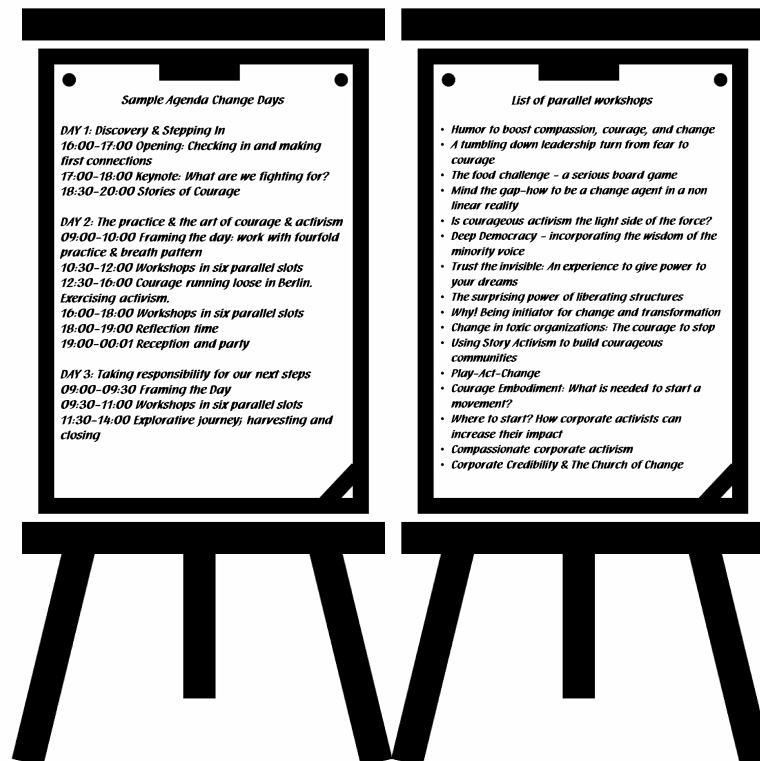


Figure 3: Example of a Change Days agenda

Roles. At the Change Days, there are different roles to be filled:

The *team* consists of faculty, coordinator, design and hosting team.

The *faculty*: all facilitators and head facilitators and the keynote speaker.

The *facilitators* are those who host a workshop and provide their special expertise.

The *head facilitators* are the persons who design, frame and facilitate the overall event, in particular the learning journey.

The *design team* shapes the agenda, and selects and supports the facilitators.

The *hosting team* provides the onsite support, covering all logistical tasks.

The *coordinator* is the person who coordinates an event before during and after.

In case of an inhouse event, the *sponsor(s)*—as in *client(s)*—is the one or the group who has commissioned the Change Days event and is usually funding it.

Careful planning with a group of allies. Some months before the event, a group of people who ‘live and breathe’ the Change Days spirit constitute the *design team*. They can be people who have experienced the approach before, or in the case of an in-house event, a group of employees who have a passion for change or a specific project they wish to develop. The committee discusses and decides on the theme and crafts a powerful statement used to announce the call for proposals. They help select the facilitators for workshops and ‘hold the space’ together when the event is opened by providing a profound experience to all participants.

Selection of facilitators. The facilitators of a Change Days event can be chosen from a group of people who are known by the sponsor or the hosting team, or they can be selected in an open application process. For the Berlin Change Days, we interview every applicant and make a selection based on the following criteria:

- Is the suggested workshop relevant to the theme of the event? Have the applicants understood the mission behind the specific theme?
- Are they humble, and wanting to both learn and provide opportunities for learning? Are they adept at two-way communication and willing to step away from the “expert status” that distances them from participants?
- Do they want to sell a product? This is a no-go!
- Is the proposed methodology of the workshop suitable to energize and engage participants? Will they get on their feet within the first minutes of the workshop or will they sit for 1 ½ hours?
- Do the facilitators understand that they will be part of a community? Are they willing to attend the entire event and not just ‘fly in’ for their workshop?

Each of the team members applies a simple voting system to rate the applicants they have interviewed and the decision on the selections is made by the team, based on the results of the voting.

During the time between the selection process and the event, facilitators are coached by the team to make sure that their workshop design matches the high standards expected at the Change Days.

Number of participants. We have found that around 100-200 participants, including facilitators and the hosting team, best suits the purpose and the dynamics of Change Days: this number is large enough to provide the required diversity and small enough to facilitate networking and exchange. Nearly everyone meets and converses with nearly everyone else.

Documentation: There is no standard form of documentation of a Change Days event. Graphic recording has worked very well for many of our events. Photos and short video clips can capture further aspects of the process and in particular the emotions that surface. The different documents including background material from facilitators, photos of flip charts etc. are collected and made available to participants on a virtual platform after the event.

Action planning: Depending on the purpose of the Change Days, different forms of action planning can be applied, for example those which are common in Open Space Technology or World Café events.

Technology: Onsite and Online Applications

Change Days is an onsite event and because of its strong emotional element it cannot be fully translated into the virtual world. Some of the essential features are not adaptable to virtual environments, e.g. theatrical and artistic interventions and other exercises that involve physical exercises. However, virtual elements can be incorporated, e.g. by streaming certain parts of the event. We often include blended workshops with one facilitator on-site and the other one brought into the room by a video conference. Finally, social media such as Twitter, Yammer, Slack, Facebook, LinkedIn etc. are used to synchronously and asynchronously communicate among participants of the Change Days but also for reaching out to the wider community.

Table of Uses

The Change Days approach has countless potential uses, for closed or open networks, organizations and the broader public. The following list offers some applications.

Setting	Brief Description
Corporate strategies	In a VUCA world it can be beneficial for a company to bring in some external resource persons or discover hidden expertise in the own workforce. Giving room for collaboration on strategic issues and engaging a broader audience helps flattening the hierarchical order. In Change Days, ranks or titles disappear.

Leadership development	Bringing together a large group of leaders, offering them the opportunity to choose the topics they want to update themselves on and facilitating collaborative learning.
Corporate learning & incentive event	Applying a strong focus on arts, theatre, body work, etc., Change Days can offer activities catering to different personal preferences and learning styles. Interventions are light but still contribute to organizational learning.
Design conference	Applying Design Thinking methodology, Change Days can be used for events that focus on innovation. Customers and stakeholders can be invited to contribute to product or service design.
Network event	A meeting of people who are already connected through a common cause or project. Change Days offers to such a group the opportunity to reconnect, to update the knowledge base and to plan new activities.
Open enrollment	The Change Days approach provides the opportunity to explore any theme related to change in organizations, communities or society as a whole. For example, it has been applied by the Storytelling community which have repeatedly used the format for their <i>Beyond Storytelling</i> conference. Organizers in other cities, such as Toronto, have taken the concept to host a local event on change management related topics.

Getting Started

Like with any other large group event, Change Days preparation starts with a simple question, “What is the purpose of this specific event?” Assuming that there is a core group of people who are passionate about driving the preparation, the answer to this question determines the rest of the process. Once the team aligns on the purpose and on the principles of Change Days, they will look for a metaphorical or explicit theme for the event and then write a compelling case that describes how the Change Days will serve the purpose.

Early in the planning phase, accountability must be distributed. Head facilitators need to be selected early on and given the task of designing the overall flow of the event and in particular the large group interventions in between workshop slots, which we call the learning journey. Those interventions provide the glue by encouraging participants to constantly reflect on their experiences and exchange those reflections with their peers. Team members who carry out interviews with potential facilitators have certain criteria at hand. The design team meets regularly (face-to-face or virtually) to discuss the applications and to fine-tune the agenda. They make sure that the inputs address different learning styles, speak to people’s emotions, anchor learnings and include elements from the arts. Preparation time of Change Days usually starts three to nine months before the event.

Everybody can use the concept. However, if you plan a Change Days event, want to use the universal logo, be listed on the Change Days website and be supported by a global community, the founders require proof that you will adhere to the Change Days principles.

The best guarantee for this is that you have attended a Change Days event and have met with somebody of the core group.

Roles and Responsibilities

	Before	During	After
Design Team	Define purpose, theme and flow; craft a compelling pursuit; select and coach facilitators	Support facilitators	Do an after-action review
Coordinator	Be a leader serving the team; bring all preparation activities together; be the focal point for the sponsor(s)	Hold things together by making sure that all team members work to provide a hospitable space, and adhere to the planning & schedule	Lead the evaluation and coordinate documentation
Head Facilitator(s)	Design the overall event and the learning journey	Facilitate the learning journey	Contribute to the evaluation of the event
Facilitators	Develop a concept for an engaging workshop, provide material needs or bring them along	Deliver a 1 ½ hour workshop; engage participants	Provide documents for their workshop, to be distributed to the participants
Hosting Team	Align with coordinator, prepare registry, and help setting up the space.	Welcome and register participants. Make sure that all administrative and logistical issues run smoothly	Upload materials provided by facilitators to the common platform, collect feedback
Participants	Sign up!	Engage in workshops and in the learning journey; come up with interventions on the spot; share and enhance the experience	Provide feedback

Conditions for Success

If you want to organize a Change Days event, there is one essential precondition: you must think of your participants first. Forget all the methods and approaches you master, because if

your purpose is to prove that a certain method works, it might eventually not, in which case you have lost momentum and legitimacy. Change Days is successful if there is no hidden agenda but one purpose: to provide the attendees with the best learning & development opportunity they can get. Observing the principles which are described above ensures a lasting experience.

Theoretical & Foundational Basis

The Change Days is a blended approach that stands on the shoulders of giants. Without the groundbreaking work of people like Harrison Owen (Open Space Technology), Juanita Brown & David Isaacs (The World Café), Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff with their ground-breaking contributions on large group facilitation, and of many others who have contributed to the Change Handbook, we couldn't and wouldn't have developed our approach. We apply the principles of the Art of Hosting and on the joint learning journey, we mix all methods which seem suitable to achieving our purpose.

Sustaining the Results

The Change Days can be a unique event which has no sustained activity beyond the actual conference. For such events, a careful evaluation helps to assure that the community is served with the same quality of intervention in the case of a future episode. If the Change Days are designed as an intervention that is part of a broader organizational development initiative, typical process steps such as joint action planning, distribution of roles and responsibilities, follow-up meetings need to be implemented to ensure that the energy, ideas, commitments and other impulses resulting from the Change Days are sustained.

Final / Concluding Comments

Over the ten years that I have been part of the hosting team providing and holding the space for Change Days, many participants have asked me why this type of event feels different from all other conventions they had attended before. Likewise, I have wondered why there are so many conferences out there which only appeal to the rational brains of the audience but not to their hearts. Maybe it is the magic number of 150 participants which helps to create an intimate atmosphere while at the same time bringing together a critical mass of diverse ideas and approaches. The Change Days is a special event because people who attend are willing to be honest and to share. It is designed and staged based on the collective wisdom of a global community that honors a circle of people as the basic structure which enables dialogue. It has a soul, and the soul needs to be nurtured before, during and after the event.

Maybe the essence of the Change Days is captured best in a poem of the ancient Persian poet Rumi, which we often read at the end of an event.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.*

*You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.*

*People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.*

*The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

Where to Go for More information

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Holger Nauheimer has been an observer and chronicler of the field of change and organizational development since the early Nineties. He was first known to the community by the Change Management Toolbook ([www.change-management-toolbook](http://www.change-management-toolbook.com)); later through his other publications, blog posts and articles on the Web. Holger advises corporate clients and non-profit organizations in their transformation strategies, facilitates small and large group meetings and trains people in developing a mind-set for creating organizations that thrive in the digital age. He can be reached at holger@berlinchangedays.com.