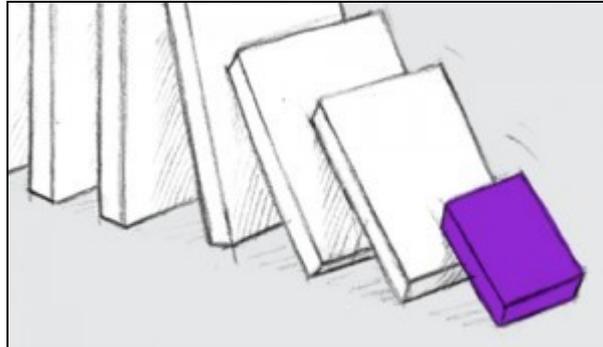


Minimalist Intervention

Create mission-critical change, fast.



The idea in brief

A small change, if it's the right one, can have huge results. But much of what we do has only a proportionate, linear effect. In even the most successful executive's career, relatively few actions lead to truly dramatic progress.

So imagine if you could systematically increase the number of those actions.

This exciting idea - dramatic change from small, catalytic actions - recurs in the business best-sellers in the form of 'nudges', 'tipping points' and the '80:20' principle.

It's one thing to discuss examples after the event, but the challenge is to pinpoint the right catalytic action in advance. In collaboration with Interchange Research, headed by the University of Oxford philosopher and scientist, Dr James Wilk, we offer a way to do just that.

This know-how has already achieved stunning [returns on investment](#) for its early adopters. If you are looking for new approaches to mission-critical, apparently intractable, challenges then we can help.

Read on to learn more, or contact Andrew Bass for an informal discussion.

If you think back over the really significant successes in your business, your career or your industry, it's likely that many of them turned on some pivotal event that of itself took no time or special effort, and may even have seemed insignificant at that moment. It may have been a surprising meeting, a new piece of information at just the right time, a new perspective on what made a previously intractable adversary tick, or one of a myriad of other possible occurrences.

Once the pivotal event had occurred, it triggered a change from which the full transformation inevitably flowed. From that point on, it was just a matter of subsequent events following a new trajectory through to their conclusion.

What if you could design those pivotal events to order?

Science has yielded incredible transformations in everyday life, most obviously in the technologies of information and communication. The routine use by almost everyone of today's pocket-sized gadgets would be utterly mystifying – in fact would have seemed impossible – to all but the most sophisticated observers in 1950, let alone 1850. But where are the corresponding, incredibly transformative applications of science to be found anywhere in the world of management?

Most contemporary management science can justly be called 'old wine in new bottles' (and often the old wine in the old bottles is, in fact, better). However, whatever its provenance, it's increasingly clear that the old thinking has reached its limits: markets – be they for products, services, capital or talent – are changing too fast for the old ways of doing business to remain dependable, and radical new approaches are the order of the day.

Minimalist Intervention is a change methodology developed by University of Oxford philosopher and scientist Dr James Wilk and his think-tank colleagues at Interchange Research. The method is the epitome of the 'minimise input/maximise output' approach that guides BassClusker's work, and starts from a radically different understanding of the world from that of the orthodox behavioural sciences. As a consequence, it has produced extraordinary results for senior executives wrestling with mission-critical issues, some of which are discussed below.

Interchange Research is the exclusive owner of the proprietary scientific know-how behind the Minimalist Intervention approach. Dr Bass has worked closely with Dr Wilk as a member of the Interchange think tank. As a licensee and affiliate company of Interchange Research, BassClusker, in partnership with Interchange, offers Minimalist Intervention to leaders who want to transform their most pressing challenges decisively and effectively in undreamed of time-frames.

Who is this for?

Minimalist Intervention requires a certain sort of client: someone who is prepared to have their assumptions about change, and the possibilities for their organization and industry, radically challenged.

The results of Minimalist Intervention are dramatic; indeed they can be so far-reaching, yet so swift and precise, as to defy common sense and to provoke scepticism that such things could even be possible. Yet such scepticism ought perhaps to be tempered by a glance at recent history: after all, 'personal communicators' were the stuff of science fiction only a few years ago, and now there are well over five billion mobile phone subscribers globally (that's over 70% of the world's population!).

Once an underlying science has been understood – whether it promises mobile communication or previously-impossible change – there's no mystery to its technological application. The results of Minimalist Intervention are achieved through analytical means that are deployed nowhere else, and with the highest degree of scientific rigour.

An executive-friendly (and organization-friendly) approach

Just as there is no need to understand how a smartphone works in order to use it, there is actually no need for the executive to explore the science underlying Minimalist Intervention, although some clients, over time, have chosen to do so for their own interest. Indeed, from the point of view of the pragmatic user, here is a method that is fast and easy, that doesn't involve bringing in armies of consultants taking up the time of a lot of people, and that instead works directly through a single executive, with a typical intervention design involving no more than 4-8 hours of the executive's time and keeping them firmly in the role of change agent, rather than relegating that role to others.

How does it work?

While it is invariably quicker to demonstrate the results than to explain their scientific basis, here are some ways to approach the radical perspective underpinning Minimalist Intervention.

You may be familiar with the old unfreeze-change-refreeze metaphor of organizational change – it's pretty pervasive, even if the exact words vary. The key assumption – and it's a fallacious one – is that things don't change unless you do something to them: a situation is 'frozen' and can be unfrozen only by the addition of large amounts of external energy (in organizational terms that means armies of consultants, grand IT projects, "Ra! Ra!" sessions, creating widespread 'urgency' – aka Panic – internal communications campaigns, sheep-dipping the entire company through workshops, and so on).

Minimalist Intervention is based on a very different view of the way the world works, and people often find it easiest to grasp it if they are given a number of angles. Here are three:

1) It takes a lot of work to stand still!

What seems like the inert status quo – with all its boundaries and limits – is actually a dynamic, constantly recreated situation which is being actively maintained (just as it takes a lot of energy and active muscle coordination for the human body to stand upright). Understand the pattern that recreates a situation and you can redirect it, producing – in fact releasing – change quickly and without applying the huge external energy often called for by conventional approaches.

Or you can think of it this way:

2) The fatal Venus comma

The 'freeze' is not a lack of energy, but an unhelpful pattern in the communication of information – think of a computer that always hangs when you run a certain program. When a computer freezes, it is almost never because of a hardware fault – processors are startlingly reliable – it is instead that the instructions the processor is following are (unbeknownst to the programmer) actually instructions that cannot be followed without freezing. The fact that a program always hangs is the proof – it means that the impasse is being systematically generated, probably by the smallest of oversights (like the comma which should have been a full-stop in the guidance program of the Venus probe satellite which crashed into the sea). Given the constraints of its program, the only thing the processor can do is freeze.

Or you can think of it this way:

3) Not a monolithic iceberg but an oceanic eddy

The organization is not like a block of ice at all but is much closer to an eddy or whirlpool. A whirlpool has an identity – you can point and say: “that’s the whirlpool” – but its boundaries are softer than those of an ice-cube, and it is in a constant interchange with the surrounding water (and they can be huge and persistent: mesoscale eddies in the ocean may be hundreds of miles in diameter, and persist for periods of months or years). This is a much more realistic picture of an organization than the one offered by a block of ice – after all, people, information and energy all flow into and out of your organization on a moment-by-moment basis. A whirlpool is a pattern, not an inert mass. You don’t change it by scooping it out of the river in a big bucket, or by heating it up. Instead, you alter the flow, for example by inserting or removing rocks or debris upstream. In other words, you work with the constraints – those factors, along with the shape of the river bed, the amount of water flowing down the

river etc, which determine that the whirlpool to be this shape and – for the moment – no other.

Together these three examples offer partial analogies for the view of change underpinning Minimalist Intervention. In the world of organizations the existing “freeze” is simply the only situation currently possible given the constraints in place. Pinpoint and remove these hidden constraints, and insert a few new ones, and you can release the desired transformation overnight, with precision, and without applying the huge external energy often called for by conventional approaches.

Results

To date, Interchange has completed the design of more than a thousand minimalist interventions, including over 750 successful assignments on behalf of blue-chip corporations where minimalist interventions were designed that instantly resolved major, mission-critical business issues, most valued in the millions, tens or hundreds of millions, or in some cases billions of dollars.

Results of the application of MI have included:

- Rapidly restructuring a plastics manufacturing giant, to create a flatter organization all in one go, without the 18 months of dedicated work, culture change and delicate, protracted union negotiations believed by all concerned to be required.
- Adroitly resolving a costly, previously intractable industrial safety problem at a major refinery.
- Transforming a major medical centre in turmoil and on the point of closure, getting the key decisions accepted and initiated with full commitment essentially overnight.
- Dissolving, in a single negotiation meeting, a major, intractable, industrial relations problem which had been running on for years.
- Taking a mission-critical manufacturing project from the brink of disaster to world-class, record-breaking results, faster than the CEO could believe.
- Pinpointing and harnessing apparently intractable resistance, and converting an entire sales force to aggressive cross-selling overnight.
- Enabling a prominent nationwide company to thwart a deep-pocketed chief rival's year-long aggressive campaign to poach prized customers through a subtle change in negotiating strategy.
- Helping a Chief Executive easily overcome stiff resistance to consolidation plans worth tens of millions of dollars a year to the company.
- Resolving intractable turf wars between prospective merger partners, allowing the transaction to proceed easily.

- Enabling a firm to maintain “impossible” premium price levels in the face of widespread competitor discounting in an aggressive, highly price-sensitive “commodity” market.
- Transforming an R&D division riddled with internal competition between projects and failure to deliver to customers.
- Restoring to harmony a market-leading regional health-care corporation, assailed by serious and damaging internal staff conflicts and deteriorating external relationships.
- Resolving years of heated, destructive party-political wrangling in a major public sector body.
- Transforming the culture, staff attitudes, and organizational behaviour of a major manufacturing site of a multinational chemical company after conventional approaches had been exhausted and the problem labelled intractable.
- Such dramatic transformations as these, brought about swiftly and sustainably by means of small, safe, catalytic interventions, are not science fiction but science fact, and there is nothing magical about them.

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This work is based on a large body of well-founded and well-documented scientific research carried out over half a century, albeit in areas of the natural, behavioural and information sciences almost universally ignored in traditional business schools and consultancies. To the best of our knowledge there is no one, anywhere, doing anything like this, other than Interchange and its licensees.

To learn whether the challenges you are facing would be amenable to a Minimalist Intervention approach, please contact us.