

Tool 32: Five Colours of Change

Aim of the tool

Assess what type of change agent you are.

When to use it?

The divergence stage, where the differences of understanding, seeing and valuing become apparent.

What are these Five Colours of Change about?

There are probably as many opinions about how change occurs as there are people in the world. Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak developed a model which differentiates between five fundamentally different ways of thinking about change. Each represents different beliefs systems and convictions about how change works, the kind of interventions that are effective, how to change people, and so on.

Different kinds of thinking about change are labelled by colour: yellow, blue, red, green, and white. Each type of thinking is based upon a family of theories about change. As change is a collective exercise, requiring communication and cooperation with other stakeholders involved, the colour model aims to provide a language that facilitates discussions about change. These five models function as communication and diagnostic tools and provide a map of possible change strategies.

- **Blue-print thinking** is based on the rational design and implementation of change. Empirical investigation is seen as the basis for defining outcomes, and planned change (e.g., project management) is responsible for delivering them.
- **Yellow-print thinking** is based on socio-political ideas about organizations. This type of thinking assumes that people change their standpoints only if their own interests are taken into account. Change is seen as a negotiation, and is achieved by forming coalitions.
- **Red-print thinking** focuses on motivation: stimulating people in the right way is believed to induce behavioural change. Interventions range from reward systems or strengthening team spirit to an inspiring vision of the future.
- **Green-print thinking** has its roots in action learning and organizational development: changing and learning are deemed to be inextricably linked. Change agents focus on helping others discover their limits and learn more effective ways of acting.
- **White-print thinking** views change as continuous and pervasive. In this view, while change agents cannot control change, they can catalyse it. Change agents try to understand undercurrents, support those who grasp opportunities, and help remove obstacles in their path.

Watch a [short video](#) where De Caluwé and Vermaak introduce the model.

De Caluwé and Vermaak also developed an interactive test that helps you identify your convictions about change. The test results can be used to assess what type of change agent you are, what you are good at, and what personal skills could be developed further. You can do a free online test [here](#).

Based on the use of the colour model throughout the years, several insights have emerged, which are valuable for the facilitation of multi-stakeholder partnerships:

- In order to survive and achieve long term success, multi-stakeholder partnerships need a diversity of participants with different insights and values. Each and every colour of the change agent model is important.
- A foundational (colour) focus on the change strategy is needed, especially when problems are deeply rooted as different coloured approaches can interfere considerably with one another.
- The colour of the change agent should match the change effort.
- Dialogues in organizations based on a multi-paradigm perspective (such as the colours) enhance organizational vitality.

Learn more

Caluwé, L. & Vermaak, H. Change Paradigms: An Overview. Open [here](#)

Caluwé, L. & Vermaak, H. – Twynstra Gudde (2001). The color test for change agents. How do you think about change? Open [here](#)

Caluwé, L. & Vermaak, H. (2015). Creating a colorful model of change. Best Paper Proceedings Academy of Management. Open [here](#)

Colors of change – de Caluwé and Vermaak Youtube playlist by Twynstra Gudde. Open [here](#)

In Dutch: Hans Vermaak publicaties 'kleurendenken'. Open [here](#)