

THE ART OF CHANGE

Patterns
for
Success

A Modern
Interpretation
of the *I Ching*
by Erik Schön



Drawing both on ancient philosophy and today's experience of running a tech company, Erik provides better perspective on change and how to think about it and manage it than the more frantic advice we get from modern business books.

HUNTER HASTINGS, executive director and value creator

I really liked how you turned an ancient and complex text into something so practical and easy to understand for modern times.

Congrats on making these ideas clear and helpful for anyone looking to improve themselves and lead with purpose!

EXCELSIOR IGNU, storyteller

Thank you for sharing all these profound insights, which remain highly relevant, in a very digestible format!

JOHAN IVARI, officer and teacher

I have read things that I needed to read — right now, in my life. As usual, the [I Ching](#) never fails.

ROD LEAVERTON, strategist

This is wonderful.

FRANK CHIARO, passionate explorer

*If you use it long enough and continually enough,
it will begin to **change** and **shape** you as a person.*

PHILIP K. DICK, writer

The only thing that is amazingly true, period.

BOB DYLAN, musician, poet and Nobel laureate

*The primary source for
the pragmatic mysticism of **Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching**
and the analytic strategy of **Sun Tzu's Art of War**.*

THOMAS CLEARY, writer and literary translator

*There is genuine value in relating this ancient text
to the dilemmas of the modern **business world**.*

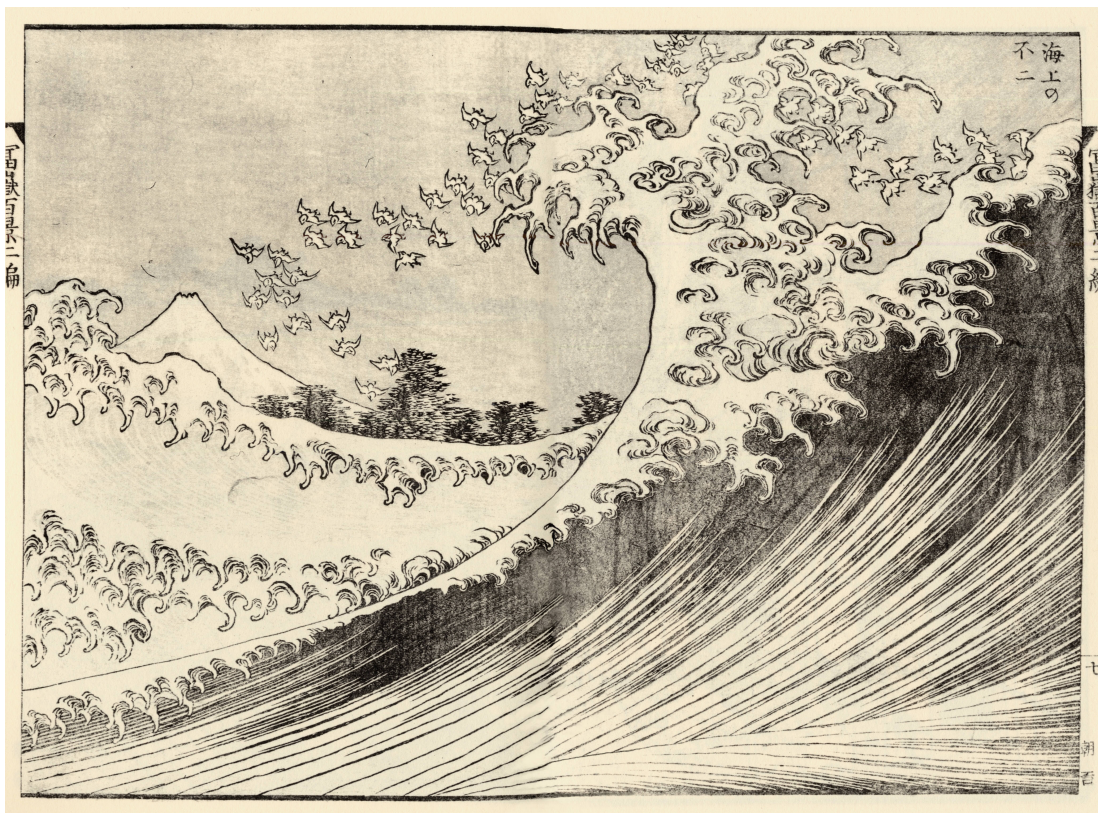
JOHN MINFORD, sinologist and literary translator

*It offers guidance for responding appropriately to shifting life **conditions**.*

IKUJIRO NONAKA and ZHICHANG ZHU, **business** strategists

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Patterns for Success



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Introduction

What is *change*?

Why is it important?

How do you *change successfully*?

THE ART OF **CHANGE** provides timeless answers to these eternal questions. It is a modern reading of *The Book of Changes*, in Chinese *I Ching* or *Yi Jing*,¹ with focus on practical guidance for **actions** and decisions, consciously leaving out the fortune-telling parts.

It is part of a trilogy – *The Art of Change*, *The Art of Leadership*² and *The Art of Strategy*³ – exploring timeless **patterns** for sustainable **success** in turbulent times, helping you to think and act from first principles while being mindful of context.

The Art of Change interprets 64 short sections on how to **successfully** create and respond to **change** in a **volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world** where the rate of **change** is increasing daily. The interpretation gently transforms *The Book of Changes* – first written down around 1,200 BCE in what is now called China and one of the **world's** most influential and enigmatic texts – into modern, crisp English.

Through diverse situations and **patterns**, you will discover new perspectives on people and their behaviours, get **actionable** advice on handling and creating **change strategically** and **effectively**, and, thus, learn how to make a difference.

You will also improve your understanding of China and Chinese ways of transforming, leading and strategising since *The Book of Changes* is deeply ingrained in Chinese thinking, decision-making and **actions**, e.g. as part of civil servant education for over 2,000 years and as a primary influence on Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*.⁴

¹ “The title of the classic *Book of Changes* (Yi Jing), which is the most fundamental book of Chinese thought, could equally well be translated as *The Book of Facility*, as ‘yì’ means both ‘to **change**’ and ‘easy’. This suggests that change always comes about in reality by following the line of least resistance (as **water** does), where it is easiest to move forward.” in

François Jullien. *A Treatise on Efficacy. Between Western and Chinese Thinking*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004

² Lao Tzu. *The Art of Leadership. Purpose and Integrity for Sustainable Success. Interpreted and Compiled by Erik Schöen*. Yokoso Press, 2023. URL <http://yokosopress.se>

³ Sun Tzu, John Boyd and Simon Wardley. *The Art of Strategy. Steps Towards Business Agility. Interpreted and Compiled by Erik Schöen*. Yokoso Press, 2023. URL <http://yokosopress.se>

⁴ Thomas Cleary. *I Ching. The Book of Change. A Complete & Unabridged Translation*. Shambhala Publications, 2017

EACH SECTION describes *change patterns* for a specific situation and includes helpful questions and commentary to complement and clarify the terse, poetic text, turning it into a conversation through the ages. An extensive *Glossary* is also provided since many Chinese concepts are purposefully abstract and ambiguous. I have kept the text as simple as possible but not simpler and recommend reading the sections slowly, in small doses, to give time for reflection. See it as a handy reference where you discover solutions for your current situation by exploring the relevant sections and then considering how you can apply the *change patterns* in your context. Here is a step-by-step guide:

1. Pick one or several sections that are relevant to your current situation.
Or, pick a section at random since the world sometimes moves in mysterious ways.
2. Ponder the *patterns* in these sections and consider how they could be applied in your context.
3. Apply the *change patterns*: behave, *act*, decide.
4. Learn by observing the *consequences* of your behaviours, *actions* and decisions.
5. Repeat from step 1.

THE FOLLOWING is a poetic summary of *The Art of Change*.

*The world moves in cycles:
day follows night, sunshine after rain;
in difficulty lies opportunity;
success hides within failure.*

*Expecting constant change
means knowledge has limits.
Yet, finding agency to decide and act
through patterns and rituals.*

*Using patterns to see
pitfalls, perspectives, possibilities,
turning failure into success.*

*Stop, relax and breathe:
reflecting on past, present, future;
assessing carefully, then shaping or adapting.*

*Harmonising competing conditions
embracing fluidity,
continuously.*

*Balancing timely:
patterns for this situation,
suitable actions and decisions.*

*Developing confidence to
face and create change
with courage, humility, resolve.*

*Being fit for the future
is being aware and alive
in the unknown.*

*Change is natural:
following the line of least resistance,
going with the flow,
just like water does.*

THIS is a reader’s guide visualising how key **capabilities** and sections relate to each other and **stakeholders’ needs** in *The Art of Change*.

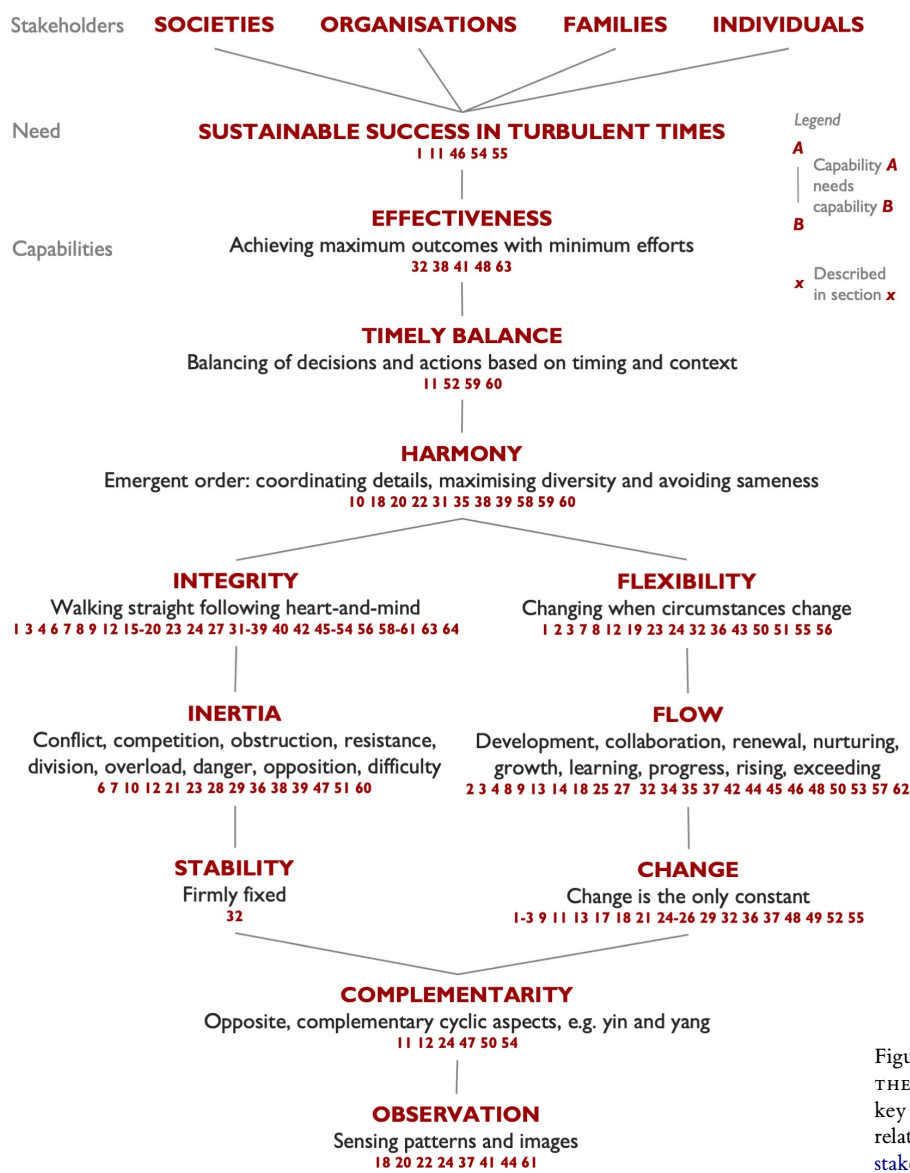


Figure 2: A reader’s guide to THE ART OF CHANGE: how key **capabilities** and sections relate to each other and to **stakeholders’ needs**

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THIS INTERPRETATION stands on the shoulders of the following brilliant scholars, researchers, translators, writers and interpreters who have wrestled with understanding and transforming *The Book of Changes* through time and space: Alan Watts, Chung-Ying Cheng 成中英, David Hawkes, David Hinton, François Jullien, Ikujiro Nonaka 野中郁次郎, James Legge, John Minford, John Rodwell, Margaret Pearson, Mun Kin Chok 閔建蜀, Peter Fritz Walter, Philip K. Dick, Richard Wilhelm, Roel Sterckx, Sarah Dening, Stefan Stenudd, Thomas Cleary, Tze-Ki Hon 韓子奇 and Zhichang Zhu 朱志昌.⁵

And, I remember gratefully:

For embracing *change* and telling the *world* about it:
Kent Beck, Jim Highsmith and Gary Hamel.

For *changing* and learning, together:
Magnus Thornberg, Mårten Pehrson and all *change* makers at Ericsson.⁶

For inspiring conversations on *change patterns* and anti-patterns:
Stephen Denning and the Learning Consortium.

For *How might we* questions: Procter & Gamble and IDEO.

For the Antimatter Principle, *Attend to folks' needs*: Bob Marshall.

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⁵ See *Sources* for references to the translations of *I Ching* used as a starting point for this interpretation. And, remember: “Every sentence in *The Book of Changes* can be read in an almost infinite number of ways! That is the secret of the book. No one will ever know what it really means!”, David Hawkes in John Minford. *I Ching (Yijing). The Book of Change. The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Oracle and Book of Wisdom. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by John Minford.* Penguin Classics, 2014

⁶ Erik Schön. Mental Leaps. More, Faster, Better, Happier, and Innovative! *Cutter Business Technology Journal*, 32(5), 2019. URL <https://www.cutter.com/sites/default/files/itjournal/2019/cbtj1905b.pdf>

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Patterns for Success

*When in turbulence
improve continuously
listen to nature*

1. TURBULENCE

In turbulent times, how might we ...

... prepare before the storm?

While change⁷ is pending, it is time for self-development and building organisational capabilities.

... seek advice?

Seek wisdom and advice from knowledgeable people both inside and outside the organisation. Then, announce adjustments as needed while maintaining your integrity.

... adjust?

Adjust to the situation and beware of your integrity being consumed by ambition.

... decide?

Be prepared for a full range of changes and find suitable times for action, perseverance, or retreat. Remember that standing still is illusory since the world is in constant motion. The only wrong decision is no decision.

... seek alliances?

Form alliances with skilled and experienced people and organisations.

... keep the balance?

Avoid extreme actions since they may introduce undesired consequences. Beware of over-ambition and overestimating your capabilities.

... self-organise?

Spontaneous social and political order emerges through purpose and integrity rather than pressure and control. Purpose entails self-creativity and co-creativity, as well as speed and engagement. This is particularly important in turbulent times when suitable changes need to happen quickly.

⁷ *Change*: the Chinese character 易 (yi) means both “to change” and “easy”. This suggests that change always comes about in reality by following the line of least resistance (as water does), where it is easiest to move forward.

Securing your flow
have a purpose, dare to fail
support your allies

2. FLOW

How might we secure flow by ...

... looking for minor signs of change?

Look for minor changes⁸ that could significantly impact the internal and external **environment**, such as increases in customer complaints, staff turnover, or interest rates.

⁸ *Change*: the Chinese character 易 (yì) means both “to change” and “easy”. This suggests that change always comes about in reality by following the line of least resistance (as **water** does), where it is easiest to move forward.

... going with the flow?

After assessing the **landscape** and your **capabilities**, follow the line of least resistance and go with the flow, just like **water** does.

... succeeding with our stakeholders?

Fulfil your **purpose** by attending to your **stakeholders**’ needs. Their **success** is your **success** and **collaboration** is the hallmark of **success**.

... choosing our conflicts?

Be cautious to stay safe and save your energies.

... keeping the balance?

Keep your balance, stay modest and avoid showing off.

... perseverance?

To fulfil your **purpose**, be flexible, receptive and perseverant.

*When growing quickly
destinations limit us
directions free us*

3. GROWTH

When growing, how might we ...

... stay committed?

Grow together in adversity, keeping your **integrity** to attract suitable **collaborators**.

... be patient and persevere?

Collaborate when the time is right and align using **purpose** and **integrity**; otherwise, wait for or create suitable **conditions**. Try using directions and avoid fixed destinations to secure flexibility to adjust to changing⁹ situations.

... pursue purpose with suitable capabilities?

Go forward after establishing suitable **capabilities** under the current **conditions**, e.g. suitable equipment, suitable training and suitable collaborators with appropriate expertise and behaviours.

... overcome difficulties through collaboration?

Complement your **capabilities** with colleagues and allies with suitable expertise and behaviours.

... take small steps?

Work through the difficulties stepwise and avoid giant leaps to minimise risks.

... stop, think, and start anew when blocked?

When you get stuck in chaos, take a time out to stop and think together. Sometimes, a quick, clean break helps you start anew.

⁹ *Change*: the Chinese character 易 (yì) means both “to change” and “easy”. This suggests that change always comes about in reality by following the line of least resistance (as **water** does), where it is easiest to move forward.

*When seeking answers
first questions receive answers
pushy receive none*

4. LEARNING

When learning, how might we ...

... be clear on expectations initially?

Both as a teacher and student, be clear on **conditions** and expectations from the very beginning.

... handle mistakes with patience?

Be patient and tolerant with people learning, particularly those taking on new responsibilities for the first time.

... seek people with integrity?

Avoid people driven only by opportunism.

... be open and listen?

Be open-minded and listen to others to secure allies and avoid filter bubbles.

... keep a beginner's mind?

Being modest and open-minded, like an innocent child, enables sharing the mission with able people.

... focus on positive feedback?

Never be too severe or aggressive in correcting others. Instead, focus on the positive elements in any situation.

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Glossary

action

Wei (為) means act, to do; change; make; try; practice; reaction; conducting, leading forward; a hand guiding an animal. See also [action—action without pressure and control](#) and [action without pressure and control](#). 9, 10, 17, 29, 35, 37, 41, 45, 46, 51, 55, 57, 59, 61, 75, 77, 79, 85, 87, 89, 99, 101, 105, 107, 109, 112, 113, 115, 117, 119, 121, 123, 124, 129, 131, 135, 137, 138, 141, 143, 151, 152, 154–158, 161, 163, 165, 166, 168, 169, 172

action without pressure and control

The [doctrine](#) of inaction is usually difficult to understand. Interpreted in the light of science, it means making use of the natural forces to achieve one's objective with the greatest economy.³¹

Conscious inaction so we can allow the most natural, effortless [action](#) to emerge; seek mastery through small, incremental [actions](#).³²

Not doing nothing or no-intervention, but doing useful things and intervening wisely so as to allow beneficial outcomes to emerge “naturally”. Non-coercive doing.³³

Doing things non-coercively and [effectively](#) in accordance with [purpose](#).³⁴

We should not hurry to act, since most things in the world take care of themselves if left alone. And when we act, we should do so cautiously, or we might destroy more than we solve.³⁵

Promoted solely in the expectation of tangible benefits purely on the grounds of its [effectiveness](#). It is by refraining from [action](#) that we can best bring about what we desire.³⁶

The favourite example for this is the growth of plants. One must neither pull on plants to hasten their growth (an image of direct [action](#)), nor must one fail to hoe the earth around them so as to encourage their growth (by creating favourable [conditions](#) for it). You cannot force a plant to grow by means of [coercion](#), but neither should you neglect it. What you should do is liberate it from whatever might impede its development. You must *allow it to grow*. Such tactics are equally [effective](#) at the level of politics.

³¹ Lin Yutang. *The Wisdom of Lao-tse. Translated, Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by Lin Yutang*. Random House, 1948

³² Zhen Goh. Cynefin & In Riva Greenberg and Boudewijn Bertsch, editors, *Cynefin. Weaving Sense-Making Into the Fabric of Our World*, pages 77–89. Cognitive Edge, 2021

³³ Ikujiro Nonaka and Zhichang Zhu. *Pragmatic Strategy. Eastern Wisdom, Global Success*. Cambridge University Press, 2012

³⁴ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. *Lao Tzu. Daojing “Making This Life Significant” A Philosophical Translation. Translated and with Commentary by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall*. Ballantine Books, 2003

³⁵ Stefan Stenudd. *Lao Tzu. Tao Te Ching. The Taoism of Lao Tzu Explained by Stefan Stenudd*. CreateSpace, 2nd edition, 2015

³⁶ François Jullien. *A Treatise on Efficacy. Between Western and Chinese Thinking. Translated by Janet Lloyd*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004

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What is change?

Why is it important?

How do you change successfully?

THE ART OF CHANGE provides timeless answers to these eternal questions. It is a modern reading of *The Book of Changes*, in Chinese *I Ching*, with focus on practical guidance for actions and decisions, consciously leaving out the fortune-telling parts.

It is an interpretation of 64 short sections on how to successfully create and respond to change in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world where the rate of change is increasing daily.

Through diverse situations and patterns, you will discover new perspectives on people and their behaviours, get actionable advice on handling and creating change strategically and effectively, and, thus, learn how to make a difference.

You will also improve your understanding of China and Chinese ways of transforming, leading and strategising since *The Book of Changes* is deeply ingrained in Chinese thinking, decision-making and actions, e.g. as part of the civil servant education for over 2,000 years and as a primary influence on Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*.

*"I have read things that I needed to read — right now, in my life.
As usual, the I Ching never fails."*

Rod Leaverton, strategist

ERIK SCHÖN is a change catalyst, executive and strategist who has successfully led global organisations for over 25 years. He is the author of the widely acclaimed **The Art of Leadership** and **The Art of Strategy**.

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