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Abstract

A key aim of change management is to manage processes towards a future that, even when anticipated and planned for, can never be fully foreseen. It is a paradox that continues to generate considerable debate and conceptual and definitional confusion.

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Defining Change Management

There are many different definitions of change management. Simple definitions tend to stress the process of planning, controlling, and managing company change, whereas the more elaborate definitions detail the various cultural and structural elements of change as well as the need to overcome forces of resistance. The term is commonly used to refer to the process of managing a shift from some current state of operation toward some future state. This movement may be either in the form of a proactive strategy or in response to unforeseen changes in internal operations or external business market conditions. Change management is therefore about managing the process of *changing*. Whether this process involves extensive planning or is an unplanned response to unexpected forces will influence how the process is managed. Some commentators, for example, seek to identify best-practice guidelines on how best to manage planned change through drawing on company experience and building on research findings. Improving our abilities to manage change is a reasonable aim, yet the large majority of major change efforts still fail to achieve their stated objectives. It is the unpredictability of change, the complex and messy processes of changing, that makes this a fascinating area and one in which there will never be any sure-fire guidelines on how to make change succeed.

So how should we define change management? Change management is the control and coordination of processes in the transition to new forms of working arrangements and ways of operating. In managing change there is an intention to orchestrate or steer these processes toward some preferred or predefined outcome.

Main Elements and Types of Change Management

Change management centers around planning and directing, monitoring and evaluating, and correcting and adapting change processes. The degree of manageability of these three elements of direction, appraisal, and regulation will be influenced by the scale and type of change. Change may take the form of fine-tuning operating practices through small developmental activities or it may involve a major reconfiguration of structures. Change may be in response to an unanticipated change in business market conditions or as part of a planned proactive strategy to reconceptualize business. If we combine the scale of change with whether change is in response to the unexpected or part of a planned strategy, then we can differentiate four ideal types. First, *reactive small-scale change* initiatives that seek to accommodate and adapt to unforeseen changes in, for example, local business market conditions. Second, *developmental proactive change* programs that seek to gradually improve on current ways of doing things over a planned period of time. Third, *proactive large-scale change* initiatives that seek to reinvent and renew company

business. Fourth, *reactive large-scale change*; for example, the unanticipated need to respond to a change in business or world events that necessitates a major repositioning of a company.

As well as the dimensions of the scale and depth of change, and whether change is reactive or proactive, we can also consider a number of other elements: for example, the essential nature and content of the change (whether new technology or management technique), timeframes of change (whether change is to occur quickly or over a protracted period of time), the triggers to change (whether internal or external), and the effects of change on employee attitudes and perceptions. Internal drivers for change include structural and administrative elements, changes in the nature of products and the delivery of services, technology, and initiatives aimed at the human side of enterprise, whereas external drivers include changes in business market activity, world events, legislation, trade regulations, and advances in technology.

Human Responses to Change Management

If people perceive change as being required in order to ensure business survival and maintain jobs then they are more likely to support change. However, if change is seen by employees as an attempt by management simply to tighten workplace controls in their search for greater levels of productivity in order to raise company profits or their own career profiles, then people are likely to resist change.

Human responses to change vary according to individual and group perceptions and the context within which change is taking place. For some people, change may form a routine part of their daily business activities. For example, they may be working in a highly dynamic business context where change is constant and as such forms part of the culture of the workplace. Within this context, employees may expect certain patterns of change and concerns may be raised over failure to sustain change (change is the norm rather than the exception). Alternatively, people working in an established large public organization may view change less as an ongoing driving dynamic and more as a disruption to daily activities and established ways of working. In this context, change occurs on an irregular basis and is not part of the culture of the organization. Today, the pervasiveness of company change has resulted in a myriad of change initiatives, often in the form of multiple and overlapping programs rather than single change projects, in which employees may become cynical of repeated announcements of the need to change. A lowering of status, disruption to social arrangements, change in job tasks, the threat of unemployment, and change fatigue can all cause people to resist company change initiatives. Their response to a minor change in work tasks to accommodate an ICT systems upgrade will differ to their response to a fundamental shift in the way things are done and organized. It is the manageability of large-scale transitions and transformational change initiatives (also referred to as "first-order change") that has drawn the greatest attention among academic researchers, the media, and the business community, as it is these changes that generally involve large investments in time and money, are highly disruptive to employees, are often viewed as critical to business survival, and may raise issues of job security and employment.

The Changing World of Work: Old Wine in New Bottles

Interest in change is nothing new, as economic, social, legislative, technological, political, and business market forces continue to trigger processes of change in organizations. With the emergence of a new form of factory organization following the industrial revolution, the rise and fall of the textile industry, the mass manufacture of automobiles in the twentieth century, and the shifting fortunes of electronic and telecommunications companies in the twenty-first century, change management remains a central activity for companies that wish to remain in business. Early concerns centered on how to structure an efficient form of organization. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, principles and concepts of organizations and their functioning were developed independently by a number of organization theorists: Henri Fayol, normally associated with administrative theory (an old term, which in the past has been used to refer to the principles of management); Max Weber, who focused his analysis on the emergence of the bureaucratic phenomenon; and Frederick Taylor, who formulated his principles of scientific management.

Division of Labor Under New Factory Regimes

Frederick Taylor advocated the close scrutiny of the way workers worked in order to identify the most efficient way of performing tasks. His time and motion studies were used to collect detailed data on the physical movements and characteristics of employees, the type of material and tools used in their work, and the time taken for them to complete tasks. From the scientific study of work he argued that it would be possible to redesign work processes to improve output while simultaneously ensuring that workers worked to their full capacity. For Taylor, the "variability" of labor is a recurrent managerial problem that needs to be tackled in the redesign of work that enables greater predictability and control in the transformation of a worker's capacity to work into actual work. His theory of change management is based on the assumption that there is one best way to structure an organization (a formalized structure to achieve specific goals) and that people are economic beings (workers are primarily motivated by monetary rewards).

Work as a Complex Social System: People and Change

The human and social side to industry was highlighted in the famous set of studies carried out at the Western Electric Company, Hawthorne Works in Chicago. Their studies found how continuous improvements in employee performance could not simply be accounted for by more favorable conditions of work, but involved the effects of human associations on individual and group feelings of self-worth. Three major findings from these studies were that employees' physical capacities are generally less important than workgroup norms; employee decision-making typically reflects workgroup norms; and informal workgroup leaders have a key role in the motivation of staff and the maintenance of group objectives. By drawing attention to the social organization of work, these studies stimulated interest in the potential development and implementation of "ways of working" that would increase the motivation and efficiency of employees.

Mechanization and Socio-Technical Systems Theory

In Britain, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was established in London in the late 1940s and was concerned with discovering ways of simultaneously improving worker satisfaction and employee productivity. Research on the mechanization of coal mining (assembly-line cutting, known as the longwall method) demonstrated the importance of social and community relations (rather than simply the psychology of individual needs). They concluded that there is a need to reconcile human needs with technical efficiency, and in this case,they proposed a composite method that supported semi-autonomous workgroups. Socio-technical systems (STS) theory thereby evolved, maintaining that change initiatives that focus on either the purely technical or social aspects of work are likely to have limited "success," in producing a situation where the whole is sub-optimized for developments in one dimension.

Strategies and Structures: Contingencies of Change

Up until the 1960s the focus had mainly been on the internal characteristics of organizations and their operation, rather than on business context. Researchers were aware of the importance of external factors (noted in both the Hawthorne studies and the Durham coal-mining studies), but it was the emergence of contingency theory that brought this to the fore. Their basic theoretical tenet is that, while there is no one best way of organizing, it is possible to identify the most appropriate organizational form to fit the context in which a business has to operate. The factors that are deemed to be of primary significance include either single variables, such as technology or the environment, or a range of variables, such as in the ambitious study by the Aston group that examined the relationship between contextual factors and structural variables. Essentially, contingency theorists reject the search for a universal model (a one-best-way approach) and set out to develop useful generalizations about appropriate strategies and structures under different typical conditions.

New Management Techniques and the Rise of the Electronic Organization

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the success of Japanese industry, attention turned to new methods of organizing and working, particularly within the engine of economic growth for the twentieth century, the automotive industry. Western manufacturing supremacy was being called into question by Japan, which had embraced the importance of quality management and employed new manufacturing methods such as Just-In-Time (JIT) management. Throughout the 1990s, organizations embarked on a plethora of change initiatives through a whole range of new production and service concepts that were often combined with developments in new technology. Since the turn of the century, attention continues to focus on developments in communication and information technologies and how these are "revolutionizing" our home and work lives. Debates on the effects of new forms of electronic business, jobs, and employment patterns in the so-called "e-age" combine with issues of globalization, cultural and political change, and the implications of the emergence of new industrial economies such as China.

Competing Perspectives and the Ideology of Change Management

There are a number of competing perspectives on change management and these often reflect the ideological positioning of the protagonists and/or their methodological preferences for conducting research. The positivistic tradition of contingency theorists, for example, has resulted in the design of certain types of studies to identify best strategies for managing change given certain prevailing circumstances. These snapshot studies (typically, quantitative) contrast with the more longitudinal qualitative studies that seek to study change over time. Ideologically, debates over whether change management is ultimately tied up with controlling and exploiting labor in the pursuit of company profits, or whether change management is essentially about improving the lot of workers and employees' experience of work, remain at the hub of many contemporary studies. Two worth reviewing here are the planned organizational development (OD) approach and the processual perspective.

Organizational Development: Planning for Change

The three general steps identified by Kurt Lewin for successful change comprise *unfreezing*, *changing*, and *refreezing*. Unfreezing is the stage in which there is a recognized need for change and action is taken to unfreeze existing attitudes and behavior. This preparatory stage is deemed essential to the generation of employee support and the minimization of employee resistance. Lewin found that in order to minimize worker resistance, employees should be actively encouraged to participate in the process of planning proposed change programs. Managing change through reducing the forces that prevent change, rather than through increasing the forces which are pushing for change, is central to Lewin's approach and his technique of force-field analysis. He maintained that within any social system there are driving and restraining forces which serve to maintain the status quo, and that organizations generally exist in a temporary state of balance (quasi-stationary equilibrium) which is not conducive to change. Consequently, to bring about change you need either to increase the strength of the driving forces or decrease the strength of the resisting forces.

For OD specialists, change management centers on providing data to unfreeze the system through reducing the restraining forces rather than increasing the driving forces. Once an imbalance has been created then the system can be altered and a new set of driving and restraining forces put into place. A planned change program is implemented and only when the desired state has been achieved will the change agent set about "refreezing" the organization. The new state of balance is then appraised and where appropriate methods of positive reinforcement are used to ensure employees "internalize" attitudes and behaviors consistent with new work regimes. The values underpinning this approach are that individuals should be treated with respect and dignity, that hierarchical control mechanisms are not effective, that problems and conflicts should be confronted and reconciled, and that people affected by change should be involved in its implementation.

Processualists and Longitudinal Research on Change Management

Apart from these two perspectives, a more pluralist political process view has been promoted by a group of researchers known as processualists. Andrew Pettigrew's book *The Awakening Giant: Continuity and Change in ICI* (1985) powerfully demonstrates the limitations of theories that view change either as a single event or as a discrete series of episodes that can be decontextualized. In a comparative analysis of five cases of strategic change, the study illustrates how change as a continuous incremental process (evolutionary) can be interspersed with radical periods of change (revolutionary).

This foundational work of Pettigew has been widely referenced in the change management literature and the processual perspective is further developed in the work of Patrick Dawson. The three main factors that are seen to shape change processes comprise the politics, the context, and the substance of change. This perspective is concerned with the voices of employees at all levels within an organization, and with the political arenas in which decisions are made, histories recreated, and strategies rationalized. In this approach, change management is not simply about how managers manage change, but about how individuals and groups seek to make sense of their change experience. It is also concerned with understanding change through taking into account the enabling and constraining characteristics of change, as well as the scale and type of change (substance); and the conditions under which change is taking place in relation to external elements (e.g., business market environment) and internal elements (including the history and culture of an organization).

Ongoing Debates, Future Concerns, and Emerging Issues

For those who view conflict and political process as an essential element of organizations in which a range of different individuals and groups compete, power is central and yet the divisions are not characterized as a dichotomy between management and workers (a criticism leveled at early labor process theories). Although many labor process theorists do take a far more sophisticated position than the one characterized here, the essential element of the need to control workers under capitalist modes of production remains a central tenet. For those in the organizational development camp, conflicts are to be reconciled with democracy being key through a process of employee participation. Between these three characterizations lies a host of other positions and frameworks (for example, we could contrast a technical-bureaucratic with a cultural perspective, or a postmodern approach with a modernist position), and increasingly (if somewhat ironically) the sociological analysis of change management innovations is being more widely researched within business schools than sociology departments.

Current sociological thinking is moving towards a concern with a world of dualities in which the complexity and dynamics of process are recognized. The dualities of change and continuity, innovation and convention, centralization and decentralization, and organizing and strategizing question neat sequential models or simple continua that contrast and compare two dimensions. In the search for a division between dual factors, past studies have focused on definitional and conceptual issues in drawing boundaries to clarify the domain in question. In the case of change

management, the possibility of managing change to improve industrial democracy and enhance employees' experience of work has been contrasted with studies that view change management as ultimately caught up with the exploitation of labor in the capitalist pursuit of ever-greater profits. Increasingly, many of these simple divisions are being called into question, highlighting the need for more detailed sociological studies of change management that are able to critique and inform such debates.

SEE ALSO: Knowledge Management; Organizational Learning; Strategic Decisions

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