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Richard Parsells

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The Challenge of Organizational Change: Before, During, and After

Dr. Richard Parsells
St. Edward's University
richp@stedwards.edu

Abstract

Aligning with the theme of this conference, this paper addresses actions, as reported in the literature, that are purported to assist organizations in successfully accomplishing change initiatives. This paper presents factors related to the development of a robust culture for the handling of change, actions to be taken during a change, and suggestions for action after a change. Implications for practice are explored.

Keywords: change management, organizational culture, organizational change, change initiatives.

Categories; Practice, Literature Review, Management

Change is a commonplace occurrence in today's organizations. In order to survive in an extremely competitive marketplace, organizations and their employees undergo change frequently. The ability to manage change and to learn from this experience is now viewed as a key competency for sustainable competitiveness in most business markets (Burnes, 2009; Connor, 1998). However, while change management processes are employed and followed, a high percentage of change efforts are judged to be unsuccessful (Armenakis, Harris, & Field, 1999; Clegg & Walsh, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to align with the theme of this conference on the challenge of change by reporting on a number of the findings in the literature that address actions needed to be taken before, during, and after a change initiative in the workplace.

A number of scholars address the need to build a capacity for adapting and adjusting to change within an organization's culture and structures, a before focus on the handling of organizational change. Connor (1998) refers to such an organization as one that is "nimble", defining this as an organization that operates as an open system, which contains "unending growth and renewal", along with "overextending adaptation resources" for absorption of the ambiguity that accompanies change in order to further the development of needed capacities within its human resources (p.39). He further postulates the need for a "tolerance of ambiguity and the courage to take action despite uncertainty" (p.49) among teams of workers, which can create tensions that can culminate into energy for finding creative solutions, a social search for the making of meaning. Connor points to three important elements that need to be in place to support such a work environment: leadership that is predisposed to view external factors as opportunities; a clear and focused context of work for all members of the organization, emanating from a well-articulated and linked mission and strategy; and, a culture of beliefs and assumptions that support measured risk taking and learning. Lawler and Worley (2006), as reported in Burke

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(2014), address five organizational dimensions which they assert are critical to developing an “organization...built for change [as] stability is essentially the opposite of effectiveness” (Burke, p.345). These five organizational dimensions are: ongoing external scanning and the development of environmental scenarios; an enacted mission which clearly speaks to the identity of the organization and its working culture, the “how” we do things and are rewarded; an ongoing, and perhaps constantly evolving strategy, in the form of “strategizing”; a design and structure of work with a major focus on responsibilities rather than on job descriptions, along with the use of multidisciplinary project teams; a focus on measurements through the constant gathering of data from the environment and the use of a balanced scorecard approach; and, an human resource emphasis on finding and retaining the right talent with a focus on fit and rewards for learning and development (Burke, pp.345-349).

A number of approaches on actions to be taken during a change have been presented in the literature. Similarly depicting change as the management of a force field (Lewin, 1947), Judson (1991) proposes a five-phase model for the management of change. He theorizes that there are three general areas of effects of change: (a) the operational effects of the work routines of the organization, (b) the psychological effects from the impact of the change on the individual's feelings about the change, and (c) the social effects on the existing relationships of the group. He states that all three effects need to be considered when managing a change in the workplace, and surmises that most of the problems with change management are the lack of consideration of either, or both, the psychological or social effects of the change on the work group. He goes on to suggest that there are eight factors that contribute to employees' attitudes towards any change, and these factors interact with each other in a complex manner. These eight factors

are “(a) predisposed feelings about changes of any kind, (b) feelings of personal insecurity, (c) any prevailing cultural beliefs and behavioral norms that might be in conflict with change, (d) the extent of trust in management, the union and the work group, (e) historical events relevant to the change, (f) the intensity of threat inherent in the change, (g) specific apprehensions and expectations about the particular change, and (h) the manner in which the change is introduced and implemented” (p. 46).

Judson (1991) further maintains that there are two strategies for minimizing resistance to change, “One is to increase the pressure that can overcome resistant behavior. The other is to reduce the very forces that cause resistance” (p.100). Like Lewin (1947) he suggests that reducing the causes of resistance to the change is the better choice of these two strategies. While cautioning against the use of a standard method for the management of change in the workplace Judson (1991) did suggest a number of tactics that could assist with minimizing resistance to change. They include “skill in making use of rewards, bargaining, safeguards or guarantees, discussion and other media for communicating, timing [of the initial discussion and implementation of the change], participation [of the end users of the change], ceremony and building on the past, and trial periods” (p.137). Bridges (2009) maintains that most of the failure in change management efforts is due to the lack of focus on the internal process that the individual employee experiences. He differentiates change from transition, considering transition to be internal to the individual, with no defined demarcation of time. He presents a three-stage model of this transition. The first stage, letting go of the old, involves the feelings of loss. The second stage, the neutral zone, is a stage of transition where employees are attempting to employ new or changed work processes and skills. At this stage individuals will exhibit confusion and uncertainty. The final stage, new beginnings, is associated with employees feeling comfortable of, and competent in, the changed work design, processes,

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skills, and roles.

A number of management actions, specific to each of these stages, are suggested by Bridges (2009). Some of the actions during the letting go stage would be: (a) identify and acknowledge the loss, (b) expect and accept signs of grieving, and, (c) compensate for losses by giving something else that may provide balance from that being taken away. Management actions through the neutral zone should be composed of the following: (a) normalize the zone by helping employees recognize that it is natural to experience these thoughts and feelings during this stage of the transition, (b) create temporary systems to provide structure through the development of new policies or revised goals, and, (c) strengthen intra-group connections through numerous communication channels in order to maintain and build trust. The new beginning stage should include management actions such as: (a) provide a picture of what the change will look like when it is completed in order to address both abstract and concrete ways of viewing events; and (b) reinforce new beginnings through consistent actions and communications, symbolizing the new identity, and celebrating successes.

A different approach to the management of change is advocated by Kotter (2007). He bases his approach on his findings of eight fundamental flaws made by organizations in their management of change. His eight stage process model is associated with addressing each of the eight fundamental flaws. His model is comprised of: (a) establishing a sense of urgency for the change; (b) forming influential coalitions within the organization to champion the change; (c) creating a vision to clarify and guide the change; (d) communicating the vision through a number of communication channels; (e) modifying the environmental structures of the work setting in order to facilitate the implementation of the change; (f) celebrating short-term wins during the change process; (g) restructuring various

systems, procedures and policies when they are identified as impeding progress towards change goals; and (h) institutionalizing the change by communicating the connection between the change and the success of the organization. Kotter argues for the use of focus groups, surveys, and systems to collect suggestions as a means of bringing specific reasons for employee resistance to the surface. There does not appear to be literature that addresses actions needed to be taken after a change initiative. That said, aside from suggestions on closing rituals to mark endings and celebrate achievements, some form of reflective practice, similar to after-action-reviews used in the military may prove worthwhile as a means of intentionally reflecting on, and learning from, these experiences (Jarvis, 1987). Such practice would align with a culture of learning and development as espoused in the literature on building change-ready organizations.

There appear to be a number of implications for practice. First, an approach which would enhance an organization's ability to be highly successful with an organizational change is in its focusing on building a culture for change. Such a culture would emphasize an openness to its environment, with expectations for ongoing adaptation and adjustment for learning and growth; provide for support, encouragement, and reward for calculated risk taking and learning; and, value and expect the ongoing collection and sharing of data and measurements to track trends and achievements. Moreover, certain management actions and foci need to be present during change initiatives, such as a need for clear and constant communication in order to assist with sense-making during times of confusion and uncertainty. Moreover, empathy for the inherent internal processes employees experience during a change and the requisite support and structures required to assist employees in navigating organizational change also appear critical.

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