How Change Efforts in Public Organizations Overlook the Most Important Aspects of the Process

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The basic tenant of this article is dealing with the consequences of bringing about change to particularly public organizations. It argues that change is a must for any organization regardless of its nature due to the fact that everything inside and outside of any organization is in a state of change. Therefore, leaders of the organizations have to determine the direction of the forces that affect their organizations in order to bring meaningful changes to them. The article argues that the literature on organizational change does not realistically embrace the consequences and conditions for bringing about successful changes. Most of the literature deals with certain steps to follow in order to change organizations while the most important part of the change process is usually ignored. This work believes that in studying organizational change more attention has to be given to the organizational culture and attempts to change it. In addition, there has to be more focus on the “change agent” and how he can overcome employee resistance to change. In other words, in order to bring a successful change to an organization, the world of the “change agent” has to be taken into consideration and possible obstacles that he faces need to be studied.

Keywords: organizational change, change process, public sector, change agent, organizational culture, resistance to change

Introduction

Change is an inevitable reality of human existence on this planet and organizations are part of human inventions which are built to respond to our needs. Therefore, both humans and their organizations are part of the nature and they cannot be exempt from the laws of nature. One of the most important realities in nature and the most important principle of nature is constant change. Therefore, lack of change signals the beginning of stagnation and eventual decay for organization. If organizations refuse to change incrementally, they reach to a level that they no longer can function properly and therefore have to seize to exist. Organizations never get better by chance, but get better by change. To maintain a competitive edge in an era of hyper competition, organizations have to deal with changing technology, processes, policies, laws and regulations as well as products and services. Therefore, any organization, in order to stay competitive and relevant, has to learn to become comfortable with continuous change. Unfortunately, most organizations especially in the public sector, ignore this reality and procrastinate their adaptation to change until they are forced to change in a battle for survival. According to Kotter and Rathgeber (2005), ninety percent of organizations either ignore relevant changes, or are not capable of bringing about necessary changes. They argue that too much money and resources are wasted to bring about very little change in most organizations.
In order to bring change(s) to any organization, the first step is development of a strategy for change. An organizational change strategy contains the manner, method, and approach by which changes start and are implemented (Nickols, 2010). Overwhelming majority of organizational changes is evolutionary; this change consists of incremental phases to fix an isolated problem or change a part of the larger organizational system (Burke, 2010). Organizational change is not about creating a new organization, instead its focus is on an existing organization in order to find and terminate the sources of decay. A successful change can be implemented when all information about people, processes, technology as well as societal, economic, and environmental factors are taken into consideration. However, even with taking all those factors into consideration, there is no guarantee that organizational change could be successful if those who work at the organization decide not to change their behavior.

The most popular idea of change management is expressed by Kurt (1947) who identified three distinct stages for change including unfreezing, changing, and re-freezing. This is referred to preparation, implementation, and finally institutionalization of “change”. The best analogy for this process could be of melting a block of ice, and then re-freezing it into a new shape. Later on many other theories are introduced about this phenomenon with different emphasis. For example, Van de Van and Poole (1995) believe that the change process in organizations can be explained with four types of theories: life cycle theory, teleological theory, dialectical theory, and evolutionary theory.

According to some scholars, majority of change efforts usually fail because either the organization is not ready for change or the number of employees who support the change is too low (Kotter, 2007; Weiner, 2009; Petrou, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2016). In a most recent study, employees’ “vigor” was identified as the most important reason for success in bringing about change. It also shows that “vigor” by itself increases if employees are actively involved with the change process (Makikangas, Mauno, Seleko, & Kinnunen, 2019). Another similar study on Chinese public service employees found that employees’ public service motivation has a direct relationship with their psychological reaction to change (Liu & Zhang, 2019). Furthermore, another study shows that forces in bringing about change in organizations are deeply personal and internal to the organization (Thompson, 2019). In other words, success in organizational change in a public setting is related to how individual employees accept the change and are willing to change their own personal behavior.

In general, it can be argued that in bringing change to organizations, it is hard to generalize and develop one successful method because each organization has its own character and reacts differently to change. In addition, the characteristic of intended change is different from one organization to another (Battilana & Casisaro, 2012). The ability to manage and lead a successful organizational change is an essential task that depends on the capabilities of the change agent.

**Challenges of Employee Resistance and Change Agent in the Public Sector**

To prepare for change within an organization, the organization must be ready for its side-effects. Change helps us to reach the organizational goals but like many other successes in life, the organizations often have to make sacrifices to get there (Rusaw, 1998). Difficulties in bringing about change are more pertinent to public organizations. According to Ostroff (2006), there are some reasons that make change in the public sector more difficult including the selection of the change agent that is based on political reasons rather than their expertise. In addition, the prominence of rules and regulations in public organizations makes bringing about change harder. Bringing change to any organization directly affects the condition of employees and therefore, due to
their human nature, the employees innately fear change (O’Toole, 1995). This human fear can emanate from many sources including the feeling of loss of control, fearful past experiences, and feelings of uncertainty that can demonstrate itself by the employees during the change process. In order to express their fear of change, employees usually use different methods including denial, sabotage, criticism, and other negative behavior (Maurer, 1996).

Unfortunately, the critical functions of the change agent are not adequately dealt with in the literature and reduced to some steps that should be taken to accomplish the task. Most of the literature emphasizes the most important stage of bringing change to any organization as gathering as much information as is possible about the sources of problems that an organization is facing. After identification of the areas that are in need of change, the capability of the employees to provide the necessary change will be assessed. This is to determine the level of readiness for change. If the organization can absorb the change, the implementation can begin. In changing organizations, it is of paramount importance that the change agents noodle with what already exists in the organization and avoid starting new structural invention from the scratch. To prevent the negative employee behavior, the rational decision to change must effectively be communicated and show the employees that change is for the greater good. In addition, the employees should agree on the important issues related to change. Further attention and resources should be shifted to those employees who are not committed or are not able to keep pace with those who have adopted change (Tracy, 2001).

According to Hussey (2000), the best way to deal with employee resistance is to involve them either in decision making or in implementation. In addition, organizations that use trust and transparency with their employees have a better chance for overall acceptance of change. It is important to note those who are responsible to bring change to organizations (change agents) to appeal both to emotional as well as rational and intellectual aspects of employees (C. Heath & D. Heath, 2010). If employees feel the organization is being fair with data collection and is being honest throughout the process, they are more likely to go along with the change. In addition, providing an open environment for criticism in regards to employee experience will also facilitate and increase willingness to organizational change (Rusaw, 1998).

As indicated earlier most of the literature on organizational change deals with some aspects of the change process that is safe to deal with and is not so complicated. Some scholars even come up with specific steps to carry out the change process (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). However, the most critical and hardest aspects of the process which is “employee resistance” as well as “organizational politics” are ignored and have not been dealt with as much.

**Relationship Between Organizational Culture and Organizational Change**

Bringing about organizational changes parallel to changing the culture of organizations and replacing them with new cultures. There are many understandings of what an organizational culture really is, but in general it can be argued that it is composed of acceptable norms, behaviors, and the way things are done within an organization. Some believe that an organization’s culture is composed of morals, values, beliefs, and expectations shared within an organization (Gover, Halinski, & Duxbury, 2016). According to Allen (2000), even when two people come together with a shared goal, they develop a culture with its written and unwritten rules.

An organizational culture is the underpinning of an organization’s approach to and view toward work and behavior and is the key to high performance or failure. Kezar (2001) believes that organizational culture has a
determining factor in the ability to bring about change in organizations. According to her the nature of the organizational culture such as collegial, organized anarchy, political, developmental, or managerial, has important effect on the degree of success in accepting changes. Cultural changes should embody the collaboration of values that centrally align with the expectation of those who are the major stakeholder of the organization (Chakravorti, 2011). Beside the organizational culture, personal experiences and perceptions, past experiences, as well as interpretation of the results affect each employee’s view of the decisions that are made to change some aspects of the organization (Hruska, 2015).

In order to bring about change, it is important that high level administrators assign a group or individual who is capable to lead the change process (the change agent). In creating the new culture, the change agent has to be cognizant of the fact that the fate of the new culture depends on how the new ideas and visions are perceived by the organizational members. Creation of a new culture as a social construct, to be maintained, has to address the greater good in the organization (McCalman, 2015). In other words, bringing about new changes means changing the attitudes, behavior, and culture of the organizational members.

**Understanding Employees’ Attitude and Organizational Change**

Employees’ behavior is the result of their attitude and if their attitude can be changed their behavior will change accordingly. In other words, an individual’s attitude can be defined as what regulates that person’s behavior toward an idea in a given environment (Demirci, 2016). Although there are many possible attributes to the failure of change efforts, the attitude of those employees who perceive the change as a threat can cause major problem for the change agent. This negative attitude is often translated to a negative behavior that is often referred to as “resistance” to change and can impede the process of change. In general, it can be argued that those who benefit strongly from the status quo may stage serious resistance toward change because their interests are endangered. In other words, the extent to which the change breaks with organizational status quo, will have an important effect on the degree of resistance and therefore on its success.

According to Chung, Y. F. Su, and S. W. Su (2012), there are three dimensions of resistance which are affective, cognitive, and intentional. Affective resistance deals with feelings; whereas cognitive resistance refers to thoughts, while the intentional dimension is directly related to a behavior that is demonstrated through active negative reaction to change. In other words, resistance starts with the negative attitude by the employee, then it is expressed through a thought or having doubts about the change process. Finally, those feelings and thoughts are communicated and reflected in a series of negative actions or behaviors in order to stifle the process of change. The chain of negativity can easily hinder the success of organizational change if it is not recognized and dealt with on a timely manner. Eliminating all resistance towards organizational change is nearly impossible, however it is possible to limit its influence and effectiveness in the change process.

The first step in dealing with this problem is that the change agent should focus on the employee’s attitude from the beginning of the change process. The change agent has to try to develop a team that thinks similarly and believes that there is an urgency in bringing about change. Therefore, empowering those people who are sympathetic to change rather than unmotivated employees is very essential (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). In addition, there has to be an open line of communication with those who demonstrate negative attitudes towards the change. It is important that their needs be taken into consideration and be recognized as much as possible. In addition, the change agent needs to focus on providing more information concerning the importance and
urgency of bringing about change to those who resist it. The more and positive information is communicated to those who are in doubt, the less resistance will be displayed (Chung et al., 2012).

According to Cohen and Kotter (2005), there are two approaches to pursue in bringing about change of employee behavior. They call them “analysis-thin-change” and “see-feel-change”, and argue that changing behavior, “is less a matter of giving people analysis to influence their thoughts than it is helping to see a truth that will influence their feelings” (p. 6). Other studies show that those change efforts which tap into the emotions of their employees happen to be more successful (Chakravorti, 2011). Similar results reached by another study show that the most successful changes come when change agents speak to employees’ feelings (C. Heath & D. Heath, 2010). In other words, if there is a problem with employees’ morale, from the beginning, it further causes demoralization and resistance later (Elrod & Tippett, 2002).

**Some Functions of the Change Agent and Organizational Leaders**

In order to bring about organizational change, the change agent has to create a new system within the organization to perform differently from the past. They should be able to measure the success through employee productivity, employee feedback, treatment, and interaction between employees, employee motivation, work groups, work space, employee perceptions, etc. (Kotter, 1996). As indicated earlier, to implement successful changes in organizations, the personnel is the most important part of the success and leadership and management should provide an environment that is safe and open for employees to embrace change positively. Management style plays a major role in employee buy-in and motivation within the organization. How employees are motivated can have an effect on the rate at which change is adopted. McGregor et al. (2018) created a change movement called “organizational development” which in return defines the duties of change agent (McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2008). Kurt (1947) takes a holistic approach to organizational change and does not consider changing the behavior or work ethics of each individual employees separately. He suggests that the entire group of employees be redirected to the new ideas for change. As a result of this approach, entire organization will have a unified understanding of its goals and expectations.

In bringing about a successful change, leadership grooms change and transformation while management provides structure, consistency, and order (Hodges, 2016). The leadership and management roles in bringing change are broken down into two different perspectives including long and short. Leaders provide the vision for change and are responsible for motivating and encouraging positive attitudes towards change on the daily basis. However, the management or change agent’s role in organizational change encompasses the short-term perspective in which they facilitate resolution to barriers such as expectations and complexity (Davis, 2017). Managing expectations guides the framework to change. It is important to reemphasize that the most important aspect of both management and leadership is communication. Leaders and managers must work together to communicate the vision and significance of change while creating a plan and infrastructure to foster that change (Davis, 2017). Brook (2016), emphasizes that beside the common principles that are usually discussed in the literature, in a successful change, “team building, listening and communicating”, as well as “building support” are some of the important components that have to be taken into consideration by the change agent to produce success. According to Collarbone (2004), distribution of resources is the most critical part of bringing change. He believes that the allocation of resources for implementation has to be dedicated where they produce the most impressive impact.
The Difficulty of Being the Change Agent and the Aftermath of Implementation

The most critical stage of any change plan is the implementation which determines how the process can go forward. Therefore, the role of first line managers is the most important in this process (Ronningstad, 2018). Unfortunately, very few studies have been done in this area although it is considered the most important part of the whole process of bringing about change to organizations. Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) and few others deal with this issue to some extent, however, their emphasis is more on the resisting role of the staff as a limiting factor in bringing about organization change. More importantly, the concept of “resistance” to change is not taken so seriously and is taken for granted and assumed to be a passing matter that can be overcome easily by higher level managers. This can be true if higher level managers have a stake in bringing about change and are not part of the corrupt echelon that has caused the problems in the first place.

As explained earlier, in the literature we often run into theoretical constructs on how to deal with employee resistance (Johannsdottir, Olafsson, & Davodsdottir, 2015). In most cases, change agent and first-line managers feel that they have limited discretion in their role as change managers and in implementing change and feel that they might endanger their own job security in the change process. In studying the role of change agent, the main focus should be on two categories towards change, they include employees as well as the higher level managers. This can make the dynamics of change very complex and reaching the objectives very difficult to achieve. For the change agent, it feels like being on a suicide mission and indicative of the fact that the cost could be too high for anyone to accept such a role in the organization. This happens only in organizations which are very corrupt or those that higher level managers are not on the same page with the change agent. This is so true in the public organizations that are very political entities and there are so many unwritten alliances and informal relationships that can totally disable the efforts of the change agent.

After the implementation of change in an organization, it means a new culture is established and it has to be maintained. This phase is usually referred to in the literature as sustaining the change. According to Kotter (2005), this is the last stage of change as he calls it, “make it stick.” At this stage the change agent has to make sure that the employees hold on to the new ways of behaving and continue to do so until the new behavior becomes so strong that is able to replace the old habits. To gain full advantage of any change, the change agent, as well as senior executives must understand the transition process and provide the kind of leadership that coaches people through the transition by giving them the individualized assistance that creates new skills and behaviors geared to the organization’s need.

Conclusions

Change is the reality of human existence and organizations are instruments that are invented by us to reach our goals through organized cooperation. In order for organizations to be useful in accomplishing their objectives, they have to stay relevant and therefore have to change through time. However, the degree of change varies according to the nature of the organizations and also the external and internal factors that are present in the life of each unique organization. Organizations do not change by themselves and have to go through a process in order to stay up to date. The private sector organizations, due to their nature as being profit oriented, have to change regularly because otherwise they lose their market share and their profit. Therefore, there is always an urge to change and stay competitive. For them it is a matter of life or death to be profitable. On the other hand this way of life does not exist in the public sector agencies and due to their monopolistic
nature they can escape change on a regular basis, but they eventually have to change as well, because ultimately they have to provide dissent services to their citizens. In general, it can be argued that regardless of the nature of any organization, when things get sluggish and inefficient and in some cases corrupted, the need to bring changes becomes a matter of survival.

The literature on organizational change claims that it provides instructions and pathways to bring about a successful change. This is usually accomplished by introduction of specific steps to be taken into consideration to reach this objective. However, according to the statistics, overwhelming majority of change efforts fail to bring meaningful changes. This work argues that in the practical world, theoretical recommendations mostly miss some important aspects and difficulties in the change process. It believes that one of the most critical aspects of the change process that needs to be under studied further is how to overcome employee resistance to change. In addition, the role of the change agent and his functions has not received proper attention in the literature on organizational change. This is particularly more important in the public sector organizations.

According to this work, in a practical sense, the main goal of bringing change into an organization is to change the culture. In addition, the change process is far from easy to understand at the theoretical level and successful implementation makes considerable demands on the change agent. From its inception and throughout its implementation, it is important to remember that participation of employees is not a choice. Most of the work in organizational change particularly in the public sector does not deal with the realities of the informal relationships that exist in organizations. Due to the nature of those relations which are hard to diagnose and investigate, it makes the change process too complex and is the main cause of many failures.

It can be argued that overall literature on organizational change leaves many unanswered questions about introducing change to needy organizations. Beside planning for change, proper implementation of the plans including the critical role of the change agent and the politics of change are of paramount importance. The ultimate goal of any change effort has to focus on changing the behavior of employees and sustain it in order to change the organizational culture. Without understanding those core issues a meaningful change cannot be introduced to organizations.

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