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Progress report on reflexive practices and change management

Abstract

It has to be accepted that results have just not been forthcoming in the time since conducting change with respect to transformation projects has been a topic for discussion. According to *Making Change Work*, a 2008 IBM study, successful changes remain the exception. Indeed, 60% of projects fail to achieve their initial objectives! The objectives herein aim at questioning the relevance of planned change-management approaches in a highly turbulent and complex context. Moreover, they suggest that the teachings of the leading contributions in this field merit review.

This article begins by presenting the meager success achieved with change-management practices and calling back into question the strategy of planned management of change. After gleaned lessons from these analyses, the second section brings to the forefront the contributions of research that consider learning as a lever for organizational change, mainly with respect to the development of learning routines and the importance of developing reflexivity. Although these contributions shed valuable light on the discipline, the approaches proposed by field practitioners appear to have been rejected by more than one of them due to the scarcity of concrete means for implementing them, on the other.

This article proposes the foundation to guide practitioners and posits that a better understanding of the interpretative processes related to change would help managers achieve greater success in their change projects. It suggests a number of reflective initiatives that make it possible to stimulate experimentation, questioning, and brainstorming, since the idea is not changing once, but on a continual basis.

Keywords: reflexive practices, change management, interpretive processes.

JEL Classification: M10.

Introduction

Today more than ever, chief executive officers must navigate an atypical period of turbulence in which yesterday's approaches hold no guarantee for tomorrow's success.

According to a recent IBM study (2012) based on individual conversations with more than 1700 CEOs from 64 countries, 73% of the top-performing companies in the same sector of activity excel at managing change.

1. But what kind of change?

Compared to the same study conducted in 2010 (IBM, 2010), which brought out a consensus among leaders about increasing worldwide complexity, the data from the 2012 study referred to more meaningful innovation and the need to create a more open and collaborative culture. The CEOs refer to this time period as one of networking, both internal and external. Given the technological advances promoting this connectivity, management methods must adapt to this new openness and to this new way that people have of doing things.

CEOs state the need to create "a more open and collaborative culture, which encourages employees to network, to get to know each other, and to succeed in a rapidly changing world. The spirit of collaboration is the top quality that CEOs look for in their employees; even 75% of them consider it essential" (IBM, 2012).

In order to secure this new openness, businesses need to review their control measures. Relaxing controls, however, entails higher risk. In order to avoid chaos, CEOs bank more than ever on the development of a culture and shared beliefs in guiding decision-making. Moreover, since change is no longer predictable and resource openness is targeted, employees must constantly put themselves into situations of openness and learning in order to reinvent themselves. Above all, employees must therefore be comfortable with change in order to experiment and learn from their experiences and that of others.

The main trait looked for in employees: ability to reinvent themselves continually. Four traits are therefore considered key: collaboration, communication, creativity, and flexibility.

This new hand poses major leadership challenges. Upper management can no longer manage solely based on processes that are rapidly becoming outmoded. But how to go about empowering employees while providing a common orientation and guidance to employees? Their best levers would be shared beliefs and values in which employees had a hand in developing.

2. Did the CEOs understand the message?

Unfortunately, in the interim, it appears that success in managing change hasn't been all that successful. Based on IBM's 2008 study entitled *Making Change Work*, involving 1500 change practitioners in 15 countries, successful changes remain a minority. Indeed, 60% of projects fail to meet initial objectives!

The literature points in two directions in an attempt to account for this pitiful performance:

- ◆ An approach poorly suited to reality.
- ◆ The need to develop capacities related to change.

3. Do planned approaches always result in successful implementation?

In going back over the IBM study, Jorgensen et al. (2009) brought out that CEOs felt that they didn't pay enough attention to the following obstacles:

- ◆ Changing mindset and attitudes (58%);
- ◆ Corporate culture (49%);
- ◆ Project complexity underestimated (35%).

It appears that managers paid the most attention to "hard" factors – such as structure, performance measurement, and incentives – to the detriment of "soft" factors.

Buono and Kerber (2005) confirm that a structured, formal approach is not always the best choice:

“Given the onslaught of changes that a growing number of organizations now face, however, this carefully planned approach is quickly becoming inadequate as success in rapidly changing environments demands experimentation, improvisation and

the ability to cope with unanticipated occurrences and unintended repercussions.”

They claim that a planned, structured approach will only be effective when the problem and solution have been clearly identified. This is the case when the starting point and desired state are known and a roadmap can be drawn between points A and B. This mapping helps stakeholders gain a better understanding of the steps involved while reassuring them about their roles and involvement. It also helps mitigate the various phases of resistance associated with change projects.

Nevertheless, when turbulence, uncertainty, and ambiguity characterize the context and when the change outcome is not predictable, Kerber and Buono (2005) propose using what they refer to as “guided changing”. This approach is more appropriate when improvisation and innovation are called for.

In a similar vein, already back in 1999, Weick and Quinn repositioned Lewin's contribution, dating from the 1950s (1951) by recognizing that organizations didn't experience periods of inertia and that changes were juxtaposed. Consequently, Lewin's three stages of “unfreeze, transition, and refreeze” were more suitable for episodic, infrequent changes.

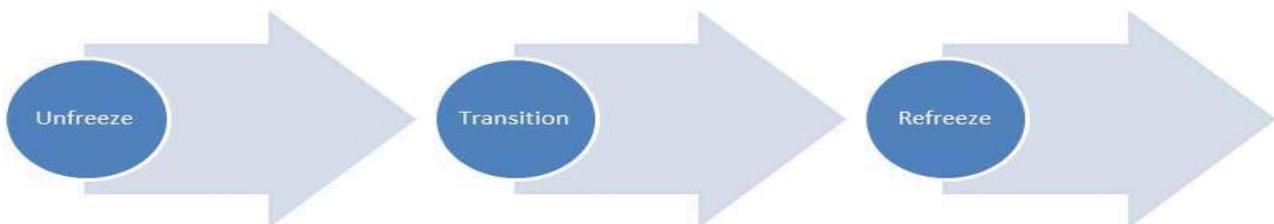


Fig. 1. Stages of change (Lewin, 1951)

In a context of continuous change, Weick and Quinn (1999) posited a need to stop (Freeze) and interrupt the action. In that sense they suggest we should talk more about “changing” rather than of “change”. This interruption enables stakeholders to take account of the variety of changes under way within the organization.

This provides for taking stock of *Where are we at?* by highlighting the dynamic patterns at work within

the organization and to act modify them in order to avoid obstacles. This reflective process is carried out with the various stakeholders, who contribute to the rebalancing. They suggest that the fact that rebalancing is a key process in continuous change implies a revision of the change agent's role who becomes one of managing dialogue. As a result, it makes it possible to put into place a learning organization that innovates.

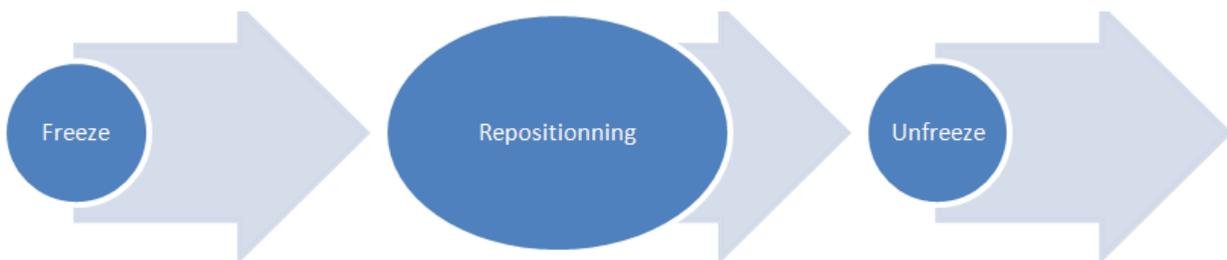


Fig. 2. Stages revisited by Weick and Quinn (1999)

How can a CEO ensure that the organization staff is developing this openness and ability to review the issues and reexamine themselves? Just what are these abilities?

4. Developing the ability to learn how to learn

Increasing the complexity and velocity of change necessarily involves the development of capacities for adaptation and learning, which take precedence of change-management capacities. Sopranot (2005) states that:

“The capacity for change is no longer tied to managing transformation processes but rather to managing learning capacities. In other words, it means building a context that absorbs changes and becomes a powerful leavening for future transformations. In this perspective, the organization changes by itself. By learning to regenerate its responses and its inventory of solutions, the organization grows its capacity for adaptation. ...That’s where capacities for change lie” (p. 40).

There is nothing new in that regard, since as early as 50 years ago, Argyris (1990) brought up the importance organizational learning:

“Cultivation of the capacity to learn in the broadest sense, i.e. the capacity both to acquire knowledge and to develop practical abilities, seems to offer a realistic way of tackling the pressing problems of our time” (Argyris, 1990).

Weick and Quinn (1999) took up the same theme:

“As the pace of change in our business environment continues to accelerate, organizational success will be increasingly dependent on our capacity for continuous adaptation (Weick and Quinn, 1999).”

While far from new, approaches related to organizational learning were especially of considerable interest in the 1990s. Indeed, Senge’s seminal work (1990), *The Fifth Discipline*, sold more than 650,000 copies!

But how to develop this openness to change and a culture of innovation, when the hierarchical structures in place and cultures of control kill innovation and creativity (Argyris, 1998). Argyris (1998) questions how can employees feel empowered when they are always being “sold” a new way of doing things from the top down? Barlett and Ghosal (1997) asserted that hierarchical structures engendered hierarchical behaviors. They suggest decentralization and horizontal communication may be an effective integrative mechanism.

Since, in a context of high velocity of change, yesterday’s solutions cannot work for tomorrow’s problems, organizations must therefore learn to use

mechanisms for collectively reflecting on their experiences in order to grasp their meaning and to determine the next steps to take (Roth and Kleiner, 1998). They propose the learning history approach as a way to help reflect upon, assess and evaluate any type of organizational change initiative.

A review of the underlying concepts is in order before more thoroughly exploring how organizations can stimulate this collective learning.

5. Development of renewal capacities

In our opinion, the definitions of development of capacities proposed in the literature are rather ambiguous. For example, capacities refer to the ability to accomplish the appropriate tasks effectively, efficiently, and sustainably (Grindle and Hilderbrand, 1995). These definitions raise certain issues with respect to operationalization, since they define capacities in terms of near synonyms – ability, potential, or aptitude – so that the capacity assumed based on the outcomes. Management literature offers a more “observable” definition, which we have retained for our analysis. Accordingly, organizational capacities correspond to collections of routines (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003; Winter, 2003) that, with certain inputs or specific resources, make it possible to carry out, integrate, and coordinate the tasks required by the production of outputs (Renard, St-Amand, and Ben Dhaou, 2007).

Based on the resource-based view of organization strategic management, these collections of routines have been defined by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) as dynamic: “firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (1997, p. 516).

With respect to developing these capabilities, Zollo and Winter (2002) underscore the importance for organizations to set up deliberate learning initiatives in order to improve existing routines or develop new ones. These authors define dynamic capabilities as: “routinized activities directed to the development and adaptation of operating routines”.

6. Developing routines to renew routines?

Zollo and Winter (2002) explain that dynamic capabilities help evolve operational routines. They consider that there are two types of routines that represent relatively stable patterns of behavior: the first involves the execution of known procedures, whereas the second aims at introducing changes in the existing operating routines. This second category is a dynamic capability essential to dynamic change in organizations and develops within the framework of organizational learning.

7. How to go about developing routines to renew routines?

The process for managing knowledge normally involves three phases (Zollo and Winter, 2002): knowledge accumulation refers to experience already acquired; knowledge articulation involves questioning existing beliefs and; knowledge codification ensures dissemination and institutionalization. According to Zollo and Winter (2002), knowledge articulation is central and finds the delivery process by which individuals and the group attempt to understand what works and what doesn't. The expression of differing opinions and beliefs is translated by a healthy confrontation, which results in a better understanding of the causal relations that affect organizational dynamics. The group therefore develops a collective competence incorrectly reading the environment and its relation with the company. This type of exercise helps reduce organizational complexity and makes it possible to achieve a more common vision of the issues and actions to undertake, in particular, modifying organizational routines.

Knowledge articulation is related to what Argyris and Schön (1996) termed double-loop learning and involved taking a second look at the hypotheses underlying action, such as objectives and norms.

Nonaka (1994) defines knowledge as belief that is considered true by individuals and groups. Change implies putting a certain number of beliefs and hypotheses into question, which sometimes calls for double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996).

Therefore, first of all, it is required to put into place reflective activities that make it possible to carry out the knowledge-articulation phase. Such initiatives must stimulate experimentation, questioning, and brainstorming, since the idea is not changing once, but on a continual basis.

Now that 30 years have gone by, it is important to call into question the major contribution made by Argyris and Schön as well as Peter Senge's on the topic of learning and organizational change.

8. Classics in review: Argyris and Schön (1974) and Senge (1990)

Argyris and Schön's work in 1974 introduced the concept of mental maps that guide action. These mental maps are supported by underlying assumptions about oneself, others, and the context. Few people are aware of the mental maps that drive them and even fewer of the underlying assumptions. When actors question governing variables to subject them to critical scrutiny, double-loop learning is occurring. Organizational learning involves the

modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives by individual and group interactions.

Taking inspiration from Argyris and Schön, Peter Senge defined a learning organization as an adaptable entity aware of its errors and unceasingly capable of change upon its systems and structures.

According to Peter Senge (1990, p. 3) learning organizations are:

"...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together."

To attain this, an organization must implement five interrelated disciplines. His process invites organizations to challenge the mental schemata that make it possible to reason more quickly. Without going into all of his ideas, Senge drew attention to the importance of systems thinking to introduce complexity. First of all, system thinking brings out the salient nature of interactions between many variables and shows that causes and effects are not often close in time and space. Interventions that might appear direct do not necessarily produce the desired outcomes. He also advocates the use of 'systems maps' or diagrams that show how key elements of systems connect. The value of these two seminal contributions is that they invite organizations to challenge their models so that it can modify their reference frameworks to open up perceptions.

After the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by that of Peter Senge in the 1990s, organizational learning has today taken its place as one of the major organizational-change models and, subsequently, as a major element in defining the strategy.

A number of practitioners have nevertheless considered the theory of systems thinking overly abstract, despite the development of a fieldbook of tools at the end of the 1990s (Senge, 1998).

Why the resistance on the part of senior management?

According to Argyris, most managers are bothered by the collective investigation to bring out underlying problems and show it through defensive resistance that translates into what he calls "skilled incompetency".

We propose three approaches to further our reflection on concrete interventions that can be suggested to senior management.

- ◆ Dialogue
- ◆ Storytelling
- ◆ Framing.

9. Implementing dialogue-based reflective activities

In taking our analysis of challenging shared beliefs further, we have opted for the standpoint of social constructivism (Weick, 1995), which doesn't describe social reality as being objective and external, but rather constructed subjectively and socially through daily interaction. According to Weick (1995) it is through collective sensemaking and reflexivity that people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves.

As a result, we construct our reality individually and collectively based on our experiences, thereby giving meaning to it. In order to facilitate shared reflection therefore, trainers must offer actors learning situations opportunities for dialogue in order to bring the underlying assumptions.

Shaw (2002) noted that:

“When people change the way they talk in organizations, they construct new forms of relationships, and to construct new forms of relationships is to construct new ways of being for ourselves.”

Shaw (2002) asserts that sharing differing perspectives is essential for innovation:

“... construction of new knowledge happens as a dialogical process in which individual perspectives meet, collide, and negotiate new meanings (Engeström, 1995; Holland and Reeves, 1996). This conceptual conflict in social interactions drives reflection on individual perspectives and assumptions and stimulates collective inquiry” (Bakhtin, 1981).

It is up to managers therefore to become builders of meaning and, with their stakeholders, to construct meaning for the change. Moreover, Smircich and Morgan (1982) deem that the essence of leadership corresponds to the process by which “one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others.” To this end, managers must become storytellers (Adamson et al., 2006) and a facilitator of rhetoric.

10. Storytelling to make sense of the past

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly encouraging the use of accounts to help stakeholders recognize past learning and to guide the generation of dialogues with respect to their future actions

(Bradbury and Mainemelis, 2001). Indeed, narrative practice is perceived as a preferred form for constructing and expressing personal stories (Lyotard, 1979).

To better grasp how stories facilitate the construction of meaning in a context of change, Brown (2005) asserts that:

“...stories, written and oral, may be regarded as explicit attempts by individuals and groups to make sense of what are often complicated sets of events with uncertain long-term consequences” (Brown, 2005).

While there is always an “official” corporate discourse explaining the change and it is interesting to observe that the process for constructing interpretations is elicited by contradictions between the official discourse and actual experience. The sharing of differing perspectives enables organizational actors to make sense of how the change confronts established frameworks. Although very divergent and reflecting many alternative interpretations at the outset, interpretations tend to converge on a limited number of interpretations accepted by the group.

“As organizational actors engage in intense story-work at the height of change, alternative interpretations will develop that are often contested, fluid and temporary... In the later stages of change, organizational actors’ storytelling activity will focus on an increasingly narrow and stable repertoire” (Reissner, 2011).

As early as 1990, Isabella described the four phases in which interpretations unfold with respect to a change (anticipation, confirmation, culmination, aftermath). The old frame of reference is gradually giving way to a new one, but passing through a phase of confusion on the way.

Over time, the dominant interpretation emerges and influences the course of the change. Indeed, it is not neutral and represents the result of political pressures from the groups involved:

“The intentionality behind the story is not simply about group sense making but about gaining support for the creation of a dominant narrative that services particular objectives and yet is also plausible as an explanation of the experience of company change” (Reissner, 2011).

The following figure represents how the various interpretations unfold during change and illustrates their distance from the official interpretation often put forward by senior management.

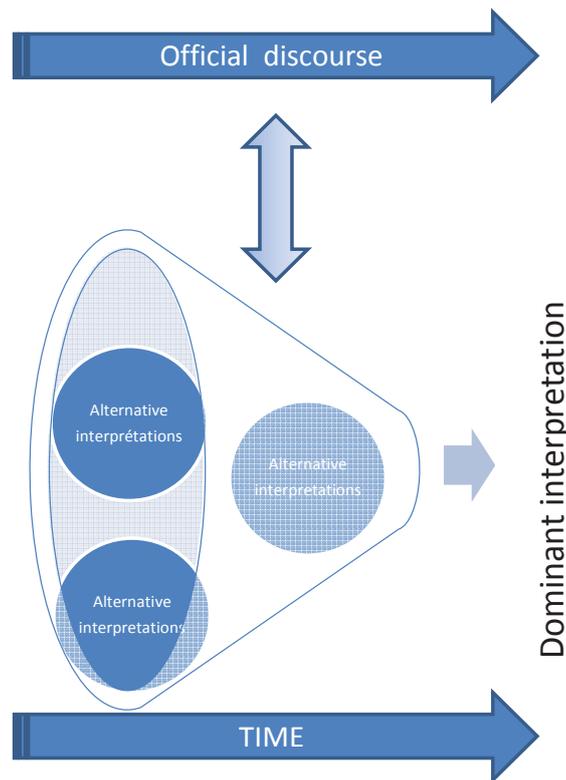


Fig. 3. Evolution of collective interpretations in a context of change

11. Framing

According to Fiss & Hirsch (2005), the framing process is an essentially political process by which actors attempt to influence how the experience of change is organized. By promoting different versions of reality (frames), the actors attempt to guide how the action unfolds.

Bean and Hamilton (2006) underscored that the framing process is first and foremost cognitive in nature since it helps reduce ambiguity. Gioia (1986) described it as a:

“...repertoire of tacit knowledge that is used to impose structure upon, and impart meaning to, otherwise ambiguous social and situational information to facilitate understanding” (Gioia, 1986, p. 56).

A number of terms have been put forward for these cognitive frameworks, such as scripts, mental schemata, and beliefs. They facilitate processing information, problem solving, and decision-making, so that they are more effective and rapid in a context of uncertainty. They provide for establishing casual connections between the model’s variables and they help actors to describe, explain, and anticipate.

It would be mistaken to believe that the collective representations are uniform and shared by the various social groups within the organization. Moreover, Bondarouk et al. (2006) recognize a

certain convergence of the frames of reference with an organization:

“Social cognitive studies show that congruent frames lead to increased team effectiveness ([34] Okhuysen and Eisenhardt, 2002; [39] Rentsch and Klimoski, 2001), collective efficacy ([15] Gibson, 2001) and better organizational performance ([7] Bondarouk, 2006; [37] Reger and Huff, 1993).”

This convergence leans in the direction that managers want their organization to take. Van Vuuren and Elving (2008) proposed various communication approaches to promote second-order changes (double-loop learning). They suggest paying more attention to the relationship between communication and energy levels that follow participant’s interpretation in relation to their autonomy and work meaning in regards of change.

12. Reduce tensions and conflict: concrete approaches

Change initiatives confront established methods and engender an impression of conflict and contradictions. Managers must develop capacities to recognize these contradictions and to propose a different manner of framing new issues. Langer and Thorup (2006) summarized this point:

“Brummans et al. (2008, p. 28) describe how repertoires of conflict framing involve the sensemaking process of discerning what information

is essential and what are side issues: “[Framing] refers to the communicative process through which people foreground and background certain aspects of experience.” A change essentially involves a suggested rearrangement of what should be seen as foreground and what as background.”

Langer and Thorup (2006) propose the organizational-photography approach, which enables actors to visualize (through a visual description or photographs) the organization’s tangible and intangible issues.

Group discussions make it possible to get at the underlying meaning of the photographs. The authors proposed using questions such as:

1. Who or what has been photographed?
2. What value do you intend to depict?
3. Does the photograph contain any hidden values?

This process brings out the organizational issues in a context of change and brings participants back to the fundamental values that must endure during change.

Langer and Thorup (2006) proposed another activity they referred to as the postcard exercise designed to assess the evolution of values during the change process. It leads employees to a type of personal reflection about the organization. Participants are asked to write a postcard to a friend telling him or her why to apply for a vacant position with the company.

With respect to the photography exercise, the postal card exercise makes it possible to measure how perceptions evolve in a context of change.

While these approaches foster sharing and convergence of perspectives with respect to the change among actors, managers must be wary of the challenge to be confronted when agreement is too high.

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Conclusion. Managers: beware of the paradox!

Drawing on the example of the Japanese automobile industry, Leonard-Barton (1992) warned managers against the danger of sticking to their core competencies core because they can ultimately hamper innovation (core rigidities). Consequently, organizations are confronted with a paradox in which they must take advantage of their core competencies without them becoming dysfunctional.

The problem is that the perceptions organizations have of themselves consistently become more narrow and inflexible, which makes them less open and more rigid. They must therefore counter this myopic tendency by learning to “unlearn”. Past successes turn out to be competency traps.

Competency traps are beliefs and underlying assumptions that influence the actors’ perceptions and causal relations. Organizations must therefore find mechanisms for exploration while capitalizing on the strength of their key competencies.

According to Akgün et al. (2007), organizations must unlearn by reinventing themselves (reinventive unlearning). Akgün et al. (2007) assert that organizations can achieve this by focusing on changes in both routines and especially beliefs.

It appears that managing the internal contradictions and tensions within the organization remains at the core of the issues associated with change management. According to Smith and Tushman (2005), one leadership role is balancing contradictions within the organization. In achieving this, leaders must develop interpretative frames that integrate the various priorities proposed internally (sensemaking and sensegiving according to Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) in order to reduce the perception of inconsistency.

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