

Chapter 17

Facing Organizational Change: An Italian Perspective on Six Challenges for Organizational Change Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to present the obstacles both scholars and practitioners must overcome in facing organizational change. Indeed, too often practitioners lack any rigorous evidence-based background and rely on their previous experience and common sense. At the same time, scholars too often work in a very separated academic world, thus ignoring the actual problems that professionals face in actual firms. Being both a scholar and a practitioner, the author highlights the common challenges likely to be faced by change agents when facilitating organizational change: recognizing the readiness of the involved people to change, their skill mismatch, their previous change history, and the level of cynicism. A fully reflective change agent must consider these factors in designing and implementing an evidence-based organizational change and development (EBOCD) initiative and change agency process if he or she wishes to achieve positive outcomes both from the organizational and the involved people's point of view.

INTRODUCTION

EBOCD: The Training and Consulting Process and Change Resistance

As suggested by current literature (see for instance Hamlin in Chapter 1 of this book), the impact of organizational change (OC) pressures have resulted in several undesirable and unwanted outcomes at every organizational level, and not least increasing stress levels at work (see, for example, Hamlin, 2001; Gunnigle, Lavelle & Monaghan, 2013; Shook & Roth, 2011). Facing successfully the impact of OC and, more generally, working with managers of an organization during this change is the real current challenge of both HR managers and practitioners. In fact, continues Hamlin in this book, when top managers initiate programs of organizational change and development (OCD) they tend to rely on lower level managers to facilitate and implement the change processes. Thus, in a very real sense, most

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managers in most organizations are agents of change (Axley, 2000); but regrettably many if not most are not skilled in OCD change agency. Consequently, there is an argument that they need the support of colleague HR functional specialists who happen to be skilled as change agents.

However, as Hamlin (2016) has discussed elsewhere, “one of the major challenges facing contemporary managers and HRD professionals is how best to help people through the transitions of change, and to survive or thrive in working environments that are in a constant state of flux” (p.121). Therefore, to make the organizational change easier to facilitate, management literature should (Hamlin, this book): (i) highlight certain obstacles to OCD; and (ii) describe/illustrate how these may be overcome based on change agents using ‘best evidence’ to inform, shape and critically evaluate their OCD initiatives, such as that resulting from collaborative ‘professional partnership research’ and empirical generalization ‘replication research’ (see Chapter 1).

Regarding the potential obstacles, Miller, Johnson, and Grau (1994) posit that while the failure to successfully implement planned change may be attributed to many factors, few issues are as critical as the employees’ *attitudes toward change*. Rafferty and Restubog (2013) agree with this conclusion and argue that “change readiness is the most prevalent positive attitude toward change that has been studied in the organizational change literature” (p.111). Indeed, in a review of the literature, Bouckennooghe (2010) concluded that over 90% of conceptual work on change attitudes has been conducted on either ‘change readiness’ or ‘resistance to change’. As suggested by several authors (Altman & Iles, 1998; By, 2005; Davidson & De Marco, 1999; Dunphy & Stace, 1999) an organizational change is a continuous learning process (see also Burnes, 1996; 2004). Following this approach, a firm’s specific knowledge and the ability to transfer it is considered a key strategic asset for generating competitive advantage (Spender & Grant, 1996). Knowledge is viewed as the sum of expertise, skills, and abilities applied by individuals in the form of theoretical knowledge and actions taken to solve problems (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Therefore, the field of *Organizational Learning Theories* offers a well-suited theoretical background to better understand the relevance of knowledge preservation during change processes in organizations. In fact, an organizational change can trigger a highly disruptive knowledge process that could in turn lead to skill obsolescence, skill shortage, and/or skill mismatch of the involved employees. However, empirical literature on change management has until now paid scarce attention to the role played by knowledge and skills in change processes (Reed & Vakola, 2006).

Beyond the role played by the training process in ensuring a proper level of skill-based readiness to change, the difficulty of accomplishing this task is highlighted in extensive and expanding literature devoted to the problems of change fatigue and cynicism among personnel (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). Understanding negative employee reactions to change is important: change efforts often fail because organizations and their leaders underestimate the importance of employee reactions to the change process (Choi, 2011; Greenhalgh, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Self, Armenakis, & Schraeder, 2007). As recently suggested by Brown, Kulik, Cregan, and Metz (2017) “Employee change cynicism represents a relatively malleable form of cynicism (i.e., an attitude rather than a trait)” (p.5). Thus, the organization’s approach to change has the potential to influence the level of employee cynicism (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Davis & Gardner, 2004; Wanous et al., 2000).

As suggested by Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, and Callan (2011), change research has largely focused on understanding employee reactions to one particular change episode and overlooked the fact that “past events play an important role in shaping employee reactions to current organizational events” (p.192). In a review of the OCD literature, Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron (2001) noted that research had tended to ignore time and history as important contextual forces that influence the frequency of change

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