Chapter 14
Continuous Change in Educational Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter elaborates on the conceptual and empirical bases of continuous change, a newly developing perspective of organizational change, and brings this new perspective of organizational change to the attention of change scholars and practitioners in educational organizations. Rather than conceptualizing change as a macro-level discrete set of actions, continuous change suggests that change is a micro-level process embedded in daily practices of organizational members. However, continuous change and planned change should not be considered as alternatives to each other in the practice of change, since the former represents the informal, unstructured, and emergent side, and the latter represents the formal, structured, and intentional side of change in organizational context. This chapter argues that the success of change largely depends on the artful interplay between continuous change and planned change rather than focusing on the superiority of one perspective over another.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational change (OC) scholars have developed a rich theoretical background (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Porras & Robertson, 1992; Van de Ven & Poole 1995) and identified content, context, and process factors impacting the effectiveness of change interventions (Armenakis & Bedian, 1999). Nevertheless, conceptualizing and practicing change in organizations is still a controversial topic mainly because of the high failure rate of change interventions and the high human and financial cost that comes along with the failure of change (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Indeed, various scholars agreed that although

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change interventions are common, the majority of these interventions end up with limited or no success (e.g., Cheng & Walker, 2008; Clegg & Walsh, 2004; Payne, 2008). Ineffective change interventions result in a variety of organizational pathologies such as customer dissatisfaction, low morale, loss of motivation, job dissatisfaction, lack of organizational commitment, cynicism, high turnover, interrupted operations, increased stress, and wasted resources (Dahl, 2011; Jansson, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2003; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997) and harm organizational capacity for future change attempts. These problems suggest that there exists an important gap in the current conceptualization and practice of OC.

Different scholars identified different reasons behind the high failure rate of change attempts. In addition to the commonly criticized aspects of traditional change approaches such as the gap between theory and practice (Beer & Nohria, 2000), fragmented change approach rather than a holistic one, and overlooking the human side (George & Jones, 2001), several proponents of continuous change went further to suggest a new ontology of organization and change (Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). That is, continuous change is based on *process* ontology rather than the ontology of *things*. The reality of an organization is that the organization is in a constant state of changing and modifying structural and functional aspects. Hence, an organization is not a given object but "a temporary instantiations of ongoing processes" (Langley et al., 2013, p. 5). In this understanding the context is not surrounded by rigid boundaries but it is a process which is constantly changing. From this perspective the organization is an experiential arena rather than a concrete, fixed, and segregated entity in time and space. Therefore, change is an ordinary practice, not an exceptional period to the stable life of the organization (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Orlikowski, 1996). Besides, continuous change alters the origin of change understanding as well. Rather than conceiving change as a product of managerial plan or program, as in the case of planned change, continuous change suggests that change is a micro-level and small scale process that unfolds in organizational members' daily work practices (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). Traditional change interventions are characterized by top-down, large-scale, planned, elitist, and discontinuous change practices. Hence, bottom-up, emergent, and unplanned nature for the process of change were suggested as a remedy for the problems that we encounter in the practice of change (Orlikowski, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Although the continuous change perspective has been an increasingly intriguing scholarly concern in the last years, the literature still indicated paucity of studies to gain insight on the significance of this new perspective to make sense of the complexity of the change process (Sleegers, van den Berg, & Geijsel, 2000). Another issue in relation to continuous change discussion is related with whether continuous change approach refers to a total theoretical separation from the discontinuous change approach. Based on this brief introduction, the aim of this paper is to (1) trace conceptual and empirical bases of continuous change, identify its dynamics in the organizations, and depict event flow of continuous change, (2) elaborate on the relevance of continuous change in educational settings, and (3) discuss the conceptual ways of fusing continuous and discontinuous changes in schools to respond today's calls for change in school systems.

CONCEPTUAL BASES OF CONTINUOUS CHANGE

Basic Premises of Continuous Change

Weick and Quinn (1999) in their distinction between episodic change (the dominant thinking about change) and continuous change (the emerg-

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