

Chapter 89

Organizational Change and Development: The Case for Evidence-Based Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter first discusses the complexities of change in organizations and why so many OCD programs fail and makes the case for change agents to become evidence-based in their change agency practice. The author then offers a definition of evidence-based organizational change and development (EBOCD) and outlines the types of “best evidence” that can be used to inform and shape the formulation and implementation of OCD strategies and to critically evaluate the associated processes and change agency practices. Various distinctive evidence-based initiatives for OCD are discussed and several case examples from the United Kingdom are presented. The chapter closes with a discussion of the specific merits of “design science,” “professional partnership” research, and “replication” research.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, organizations in all organizational sectors have had to react to huge environmental pressures for change, the main drivers of which have been: *Technology*, particularly IT; *Governments*, which in all parts of the globe have until recent times increasingly embraced notions of deregulation, privatization and free trade; and *Globalization*, where private sector companies have had to compete more aggressively, and public sector organizations have had to deliver more value for money services and products (see Barkema, Baum, & Mannix, 2002; Champy & Nohria, 1996; Dess & Picken, 2000; Smith, Lewis & Tushman, 2016; Yukl, 2006). These pressures have resulted in mergers, acquisitions, amalgamations, decentralization, flatter structures, downsizing, multidimensional restructuring, increased flexible work practices, drives on quality and value, greater emphasis on customer/client/consumer orientation and care, and increasing stress levels at work (see, for example, Hamlin, 2001a; Gunnigle, Lavelle & Monaghan,

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2013; Shook & Roth, 2011). Furthermore, since the early 2000s most organizations have been operating increasingly in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) environments where: *Volatile* refers to the pace of change which is rapid and unrelenting, and the associated challenges which are unexpected or unstable; *Uncertainty* refers to the difficulty in getting clarity and certainty about what is going on in business contexts through incomplete or insufficient information, which is complicated by opposing views and opinions; *Complexity* refers to the many interconnected parts and variables that can have a ‘cause-effect’ impact in a given situation, and to the volume or nature of the available information that can be overwhelming to process thus making diagnosis difficult; and *Ambiguity* refers to causal relationships which are completely unclear because no precedents exist and leaders/managers are faced with ‘unknown unknowns’ (see Bennett & James Lemoine, 2014; Mack, Khare, Kramer & Burgatz, 2016).

In response to these trends of change, most executives in the 21st century recognize that their respective organizations need to adapt continuously to constantly changing environments. However, they tend to struggle with the transformational changes that are necessary for ensuring the survival of their respective organizations, or they fail to raise their game to the higher levels of performance that are required (Rogers, Shannon, & Gent, 2003). Therefore, when they 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 managers in most organizations are agents of change (Axley, 2000). Furthermore, in some organizations where the modern-day conceptualization of human resource development (HRD) is well embedded into the fabric of managerial thinking and management practice, managers proactively use the services of HRD colleagues possessing strong change agency capabilities to help them formulate and implement OCD plans, strategies and interventions. In so doing they treat them as ‘strategic partners’, just as they do with external OD specialists and management consultants whose change agency services they use.

However, as I have 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.” (Hamlin, 2016a, p.121). Hence, this chapter is concerned with: (a) the challenges that confront managers and the various ‘strategic partners’ they turn to for help in bringing about effective and beneficial organizational change, and (b) the practical contribution that management research and specific OCD-related research can make toward improving the efficacy of their respective change agency endeavors. The specific purpose can be summarized as follows:

1. To outline the extent to which organizational change programs fail and why they fail.
2. To argue that managers and their strategic partners should adopt an ‘evidence-based practice’ (EBP) approach to organizational change agency.
3. To highlight certain obstacles to ‘evidence-based’ OCD, and to describe and illustrate how these may be overcome through ‘professional partnership’ research and empirical generalization ‘replication’ research respectively.
4. To highlight and discuss other ‘evidence-based’ initiatives for facilitating effective and beneficial OCD programs.

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