

Organizational change: The messy reality

HRZone.co.uk member Chris Rodgers challenges the mainstream perspective of organizational change by taking a look at the messy reality of it and the illusion of management control.

Stories abound of change efforts that have petered out, failed to deliver the expected benefits or disappointed those who were once their most enthusiastic supporters. All too often, the initial enthusiasm, intense activity and (frequently) large-scale investment are followed by disillusionment, cynicism and a feeling of wasted effort.

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Can we escape from this pattern into something more useful or is it inevitable that events will take this course?

The illusion of management control

Much of the conventional wisdom around organizational change and performance is based upon an idealized model of organizations in which:

People and groups behave rationally, within clearly defined structures, processes and systems;

- Problems and events are explained in terms of linear chains of cause and effect;
- Seamless and identifiable links exist between the various components of the organization and between strategy and operations;
- The hidden, messier and more informal aspects of everyday organizational behaviour are seen as being illegitimate and/or signs of dysfunction that 'proper management' will cure;
- Managers are seen as external, objective observers of what goes on around them; and
- Good leaders/managers are in control of the internal dynamics of the organization and how it relates to its 'external environment' - 'if you're not in control, you're not leading', so to speak

As a result, highly detailed plans and budgets, formal organizational charts, extensive target setting and similar tools dominate managers' agendas, as they attempt to realize this ideal. Such techniques as Kotter's neatly packaged, eight-step change process, Kaplan and Norton's reassuringly detailed Balanced Scorecard, and even Conner's notion of a passive, 'waiting to be done to' Change Target, offer hard-pressed managers the promise of control, predictability and successful change.

When the sought-after benefits fail to materialize, this is most often blamed on poor implementation rather than unsound thinking. By adopting a 'do it better and get it

right' stance, failure is rationalized as a shortfall in execution and the flawed assumptions remain to fight another day.

The messy reality

Despite the common-sense appeal of these approaches, the desired results frequently fail to materialize. So managers need to move beyond their traditional thinking and practice, if they are to get to grips with what's really going on in their organizations and understand how they might influence the dynamics that are determining the success or otherwise of planned changes.

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The informal processes, social relationships and political coalitions that exist in the shadow side of organizations have a major impact on organizational performance and capability. But these form through a process of self-organization; they cannot be mandated by managers. Nor can they be controlled in any meaningful way. Ultimate outcomes emerge from this complex social process of self-organizing interaction, in which managers' formal intentions, strategies and plans play a part - but only a part. In these circumstances, relying on 'common sense' is not always sensible and 'conventional wisdom' is not always wise.

So what can managers do?

Well, this 'messy reality' also means that there are no simple, if-you-do-this-you'll-get-that formulae. Instead, the challenge for managers is to understand and actively engage with the messy (i.e. socially complex) process of everyday interaction. This does not mean abandoning any sense of intention, setting aside all notions of formal leadership practice, or abdicating responsibility for results. But it does mean doing so without any certainty of the outcomes that might ultimately emerge.

And this, in turn, means focusing on the here and now of everyday conversations - their own and others' - through which people make sense of what's going on and decide how they are going to act.

In 'Informal Coalitions', I used the following quote, from Proust, to introduce one of its chapters:

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes."

If managers begin to see their organizations through new eyes, and reflect on their own in-the-moment experience of what's actually happening within them - they might begin to act differently. And if they act differently, they'll get different results.