

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF PSEUDO CHANGE

THOMAS C. HEAD

Walter E. Heller College of Business Administration
Roosevelt University
430 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60605

PETER F. SORENSEN, JR.
Benedictine University

ABSTRACT

Pseudo Change is a common, but ignored, problem faced constantly in organizations. Pseudo Change can be defined as the purposeful or unintentional implementation of a change effort in an organization that does not address the problem it is purported to, and/or does not address an actual organizational problem or need, and/or involves engaging in activities that only give the appearance of change. The concept's definition is explored here, as well as speculation into its possible causes, consequences, and suggestions as to how it might be prevented.

INTRODUCTION

On the surface most organizational changes appear to be "proper and correct". Problems appear to be recognized, some form of diagnosis is performed, and an intervention is clearly implemented. However, as many consultants will testify, with change the truth isn't always entirely what it appears to be, and that creates the possibility of Pseudo Change. The changes are real enough, but the processes driving them are not.

Pseudo Change is not a topic that appears in textbooks or journal articles. Pseudo Change is found in the dark "back alleys" of management consulting. With this in mind the question naturally arises "Why should we explore such a despicable practice?" Pseudo Change must be discussed and studied simply because for some reason a good number of clients gravitate towards Pseudo Change. Clients must be educated as to Pseudo Change's true nature. In this manner they will move towards utilizing "real" change processes, and will learn to avoid those change agents who willingly engage in Pseudo change.

PSEUDO CHANGE DEFINED

Defining Pseudo Change is actually quite difficult. Pseudo Change is a multi-dimensional construct and therefore requires a multi-dimensional definition. As a starting point the following is offered as a working definition, with the knowledge that as more individuals enter the discussion it will no doubt evolve:

Pseudo Change is the purposeful or unintentional implementation of a change effort in an organization:

- *That does not address the problem it is purported to, and/or*
- *Does not address an actual organizational problem or need, and/or*
- *Involves engaging in activities that only give the appearance of change.*

The first possible category of Pseudo Change involves implementing an intervention that simply does not address the problem it has been selected for. Whether consciously or not, management has agreed to an intervention designed to bring about one result that is totally disconnected to the problem it has been selected to solve. This is very similar to the classic construct Steven Kerr identified with his “folly of rewarding A while expecting B” (Kerr, 1975; Kerr, 1995) where organizations design reward systems that discourage the behaviors they state they want while encouraging the very behaviors they which to cease. Kerr provides a number of possible reasons for such clearly contradictory actions. But the actual reason isn’t as important as the consequence – whatever significant problem the organization is facing will not be addressed. There may be some good that arises from the intervention, but solving the problem at hand will not be one of them. A possible analogy would be a physician giving a patient with a broken arm an antibiotic. It might clear up an infection the patient had (and possibly was unaware of) but it sure won’t help with mending the broken bone.

Pseudo Change may also occur when an organization undertakes an intervention that does not address an actual problem or an organizational need. A core principle of organization development is that change must not be made for simply change’s sake. However most consultants can probably share a wealth of stories about being contacted by managers who want to try out something they have heard about or read about somewhere, but with no concrete objective/purpose for the change.

One interesting aspect of this discussion involves the “continuous improvement” philosophy behind Total Quality Management. By definition organization development “... involves planning to diagnose and solve organizational problems, but such plans are flexible and often revised as new information is gathered as the change program progresses (Cummings & Worley, 2008, p. 3)”. Viewed in this light continuous improvement is, by definition, conceptually compatible with organization development, as long as they remain focused upon solving organization problems, and therefore Total Quality Management does not automatically fall into the realm of Pseudo change..

The final category of Pseudo changes are actually not changes at all, simply activities that give the appearance of change. In this dimension organizations will implement processes that involve all sorts of activities that could lead to change, such as diagnostic procedures, but never involve “follow through” to implementation. Admittedly there are situations where once a careful diagnosis is performed it is decided that nothing need be done. This would not be Pseudo Change. However with Pseudo Change there is never an informed decision to not intervene, as there was never an intention to actually implement a change program.

Diagnosis is not the only activity that can create the illusion of change. Taylor and Head (2005) examined several cases of “organizational restructuring” that were published in the popular press. They found that in the majority of the cases there actually were no structural changes, rather the organizations simply engaged in large employee layoffs. Even when it was clear that the structure was inappropriate the organization didn’t alter any of the structural elements such as centralization, decentralization, formalization, standardization, complexity, and the like. A layoff radically changed the financial ratios which gave the appearance the “problem” was solved. This is the equivalent of a patient with a serious infection taking aspirin and concluding that because the fever is gone the infection has been cured.

WHY/HOW PSEUDO CHANGE OCCURS

Because Pseudo Change takes on many forms it should be no surprise that it can occur for a variety of diverse reasons. It is very likely that in most situations Pseudo Change is not the result of any single factor rather it is caused by a combination of reasons, both conscious and subconscious. What follows is a list of some, but not all, possible contributors to organizations adopting Pseudo Change.

Repeating The Past Perhaps one of the most common causes for Pseudo Change is that people often find that repeating the past is much easier than developing an innovative and real solution. Put a group of individuals together to discuss a problem and inevitably somewhere early in the meeting (often right after “we have a problem” but before the problem is described) someone will say something like: “The last time something like this happened we did “X”, and it seemed to work fine.” If the discussion does proceed and someone does offer an innovative solution, inevitably the first response is: “But we’ve never tried that before.”

One Pill Consultants Literally anyone can, with no formal training or relevant experience “hang out a shingle” and start a career as a management consultant. In fact there is an entire industry that supports these individuals, and leads to the next reason behind Pseudo Change, that of the “one pill cures all” consultant. Many consulting companies offer the neophytes training seminars that teach their “tried and true” methods. Often times these seminars are accompanied by the opportunity for participants to become “certified” practitioners. Some “lucky” few might even be granted the right to buy a franchise. These individuals are highly skilled in prescribing one single approach, an approach designed by a company that typically makes more money with their training and certification than they do actually working with clients. When the only tool one knows how to use is a hammer it is amazing that every situation seems to call for a hammer.

Action Is Better Than Analysis Geert Hofstede (1980) found that many highly developed economies maintain a low uncertainty avoidance (risk taking) cultural value. Therefore, not surprisingly, executives socialized into these conditions believe fast action of any kind is always preferable to lengthy analysis and planning. These managers rely on their intuition and instincts to “fill in the blanks” and lead them to determining what should be done. Intuition is a subconscious interpretation of the situation based upon one’s experiences and the known facts. Herein lies the problem. The more unique the problem situation is and/or the less is known about it, the less valuable intuition is likely to prove.

Narrow Functional Focus Another contributing factor in adopting Pseudo Change is the fact that often organizations, particularly large ones, have compartmentalized their structures to such a degree that the employees have become functional specialists with no understanding or appreciation of any perspective other than their own area. While one would hope as these individuals rise to the executive level they would abandon such insulated views it is at these levels where organizational politics might actually reinforce such limited thinking. When one ignores all alternatives except for a very narrow set selected upon irrational biases it is easy to imagine how Pseudo Change can occur.

Stakeholder Pressures It is also entirely likely that the pressures that lead organizations to adopt Pseudo Changes occur from sources other than the executives and consultants. Other

stakeholders, such as boards, unions, and investors, can exert tremendous influences on what takes place. It is important to remember that while these groups are in very powerful positions, they often have the least amount of insight and information into the situation, and they typically suffer from extreme tunnel vision. However these issues don't stop them from exercising their influence on the organization's decision makers. These pressures can also push in many different directions. The simple reality of the situation is that the executive seldom operates in a political, rather than a rational, environment. Pleasing various groups, working out compromises, and weaving in and out of coalitions all can easily lead towards adopting Pseudo Change practices.

Change For Change's Sake The fact that some managers seem to think that constant change is in itself a desirable situation will often lead towards Pseudo Change. These individuals believe that change, even when unnecessary, is a sign of prosperity. After all, the alternative to change is simply maintaining the status quo, never a good idea, even when the status quo is problem free and producing excellent results. Another possibility that leads to change simply for change's sake is a fundamental insecurity that if there isn't a change taking place someone might discover there is no need for a manager. The opposite is also very true, as leading the organization through a completed (notice the term successful was not used) is clear evidence that the executive has proved his/her worth. A final possibility of course is that the executive simply likes to change things around, much like some people are constantly redecorating a house.

Smoke And Mirrors A fundamental part of many magician's tricks involve distracting the audience with a diversion of one hand so that they don't notice the real occurrence taking place in the other, in other words the "flash" of smoke and mirrors focuses attention away from what is desired to remain hidden. In organizational terms this might refer to implementing a highly visible but inconsequential change that will occupy every one's efforts and attentions so that these same individuals don't see what the real problems are.

Lack Of Thought At the other end of the spectrum from "smoke and mirrors" is the possibility that many Pseudo Changes might be the result of a lack of thought and/or understanding of the situation on the part of the executive or the change agent. The parties, separately or together, might simply not see the true scope of the problem.

Desire For Speed The process for authentic change typically involves problem identification, data collection and analysis, planning and implementation – really not an expedient methodology. Pseudo Change can occur when executives simply want to "solve" the problem quickly. For whatever reason, the manager wishes to act quickly even when it is clear that the speed is in lieu of quality change – in essence an "I'd rather be first than right" attitude.

WHERE'S THE HARM IN PSEUDO CHANGE

Pseudo Change is irrational. It is dysfunctional. By definition Pseudo Change is undesirable. But yet it continues to be practiced in organizations for a variety of reasons. Regardless of the motives Pseudo Change results in several harmful consequences.

The most obvious outcome of Pseudo Change is the fact that the real organizational problems don't get addressed. In fact the problem might have even become more serious.

Another consequence of Pseudo Change is that the employees develop apathy towards future changes. When employees observe one misdirected action after another it is easy to see how movement from disillusionment to skepticism to anger and finally to apathy can occur.

Because Pseudo Change is unrelated to the “real” organization’s health and it is being implemented for “illegitimate” reasons there is no predicting exactly what the effort’s outcome will be. It is entirely possible that the Pseudo-Change can end up doing more harm than good.

Change efforts, even those falling under the auspices of Pseudo Change, requires investments of resources. In the case of Pseudo Change these committed resources are by definition “wasted”. They are being expended with little possibility that any good will come from them. What is even worse is the fact that this wasting of valuable resources might occur at the exact point in time when the organization can least afford it.

A final likely consequence of Pseudo Change is that the employees might question the quality of their management. Does management simply “not get it” or are they simply stupid?

METHODS TO PREVENT PSEUDO CHANGE

The use of Pseudo Change is often a subconscious decision. This makes prevention problematic at best. It is ironic that the preventative techniques an organization must adopt to prevent Pseudo Change actually involves fundamental systemic changes. Therefore before any attempt is made to eliminate Pseudo Change, the organization must first realize that it is occurring, it is extremely undesirable, and everyone must be highly motivated to change their ways. Fundamentally the suggested changes all involve creating an organizational culture where planned change is truly valued.

First and foremost the organization must develop reward systems that permit risk taking. True change involves typically innovation, which by definition means trying new solutions. The problem is one cannot be certain of the actual outcomes for something that has never been tried. Therefore true change involves risk – operating under conditions of uncertainty. Managers afraid of making mistakes won’t be bold. But those same individuals knowing that bold moves will be rewarded, even when they fail (assuming there wasn’t negligence or faulty logic) will actively seek to develop new alternatives (Carlzon & Hubin, 1983).

Pseudo Change typically occurs where there are a few powerful decision makers operating (consciously or subconsciously) with little information. Perhaps the greatest “tool” one can have to correct for these shortcomings is bringing more individuals into the process (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985). Simply listening to employees’ ideas is not enough, the involvement must permit active questioning as well. Information must be disseminated freely and throughout the organization in order to ensure the employees’ contributions are potent and their questions are based upon reality and not speculation.

Change is inherently political. When used correctly political processes can facilitate positive change. Just as easily these politics can lead to Pseudo Change. There are at least two political processes that encourage Pseudo Change and therefore need to be eliminated: 1) individual fiefdoms where managers only focus upon their own area and view everything in terms of what they can “get out of it”; 2) the presence of hidden agendas which digress the situation to that of a “game”.

There are two “obvious” preventative measures that need to be mentioned, lest they actually be overlooked by their “hiding in plain sight”. The first is that any change undertaken should be based upon the action research model. There is, of course, no single accepted version

of action research (Reason & Bradberry, 2001). It is the philosophy of action research, rather than any one single set of steps, that is important. The process of a thorough diagnosis, followed by the implementation of a planned intervention, which in turn is followed by evaluation (which serves as a rediagnosis) is still the best way to ensure one is making meaningful change and progressing towards a desired end state.

The second obvious preventative measure is to utilize quality consultants. A good consultant brings objectivity, specialized information, and an understanding of proper techniques, all which are invaluable in preventing Pseudo-Change. Among the abilities to look for is the willingness to tell the client she's wrong. Another trait is the unwillingness to take "short cuts". That is not to say the consultant cannot act quickly, rather it is the ability to act quickly using the correct procedures. The consultant should actually be used for their skills as well, and not simply as "window dressing". This is not to say the client should blindly follow the consultant, but rather permit them the opportunity to do the job for which they were employed. Let them develop suggestions free from political influence and with complete, accurate, and honest information. At least in this manner the organization has one party in the change process that is able to avoid falling into Pseudo Change.

One of the most common causes of Pseudo Change is the blind overreliance upon the organization's history "What did we do the last time?", and "We've never tried that before!" At the same time there's the truth behind the old adage "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it." What is required to prevent Pseudo Change from occurring is to simply embrace the past as a valuable source of information. What "worked" previously, and what didn't, can provide a wealth of insight for those planning today's change, particularly if they understand the reasons for the outcomes. This knowledge of the past shouldn't be blindly superimposed upon the present (or future) but reviewed for relevance, and if found valid, integrated into the discussion just as any other piece of information.

CONCLUSION

Pseudo Change occurs in many organizations, and yet it is generally disregarded in the change management literature. This is not surprising as it is "wrong" way to implement change, and we academics seek to teach the "right" way. However isn't there great value in learning what not to do? Could it actually be that the field's lack of acknowledgement for Pseudo Change is the one of the things that increases its probability of being used?

It is time to take a different approach towards Pseudo Change. First the change management field must bring it out into the open and expose it. As indicated above, the first step in eliminating Pseudo Change is to acknowledge it so that it can be studied managed. Knowledge is the true weapon to use against any false concepts. This knowledge will also lead to the final requirement, the management consulting profession must "attack" Pseudo Change. The attack will be in the form of education. Both consultants and clients must be educated as to the true nature and dangers of Pseudo Change. This will permit individuals to become sensitive to its possibility and actively searching for its use in their own organizations and practices. As any management consultant knows a true problem will not go away by ignoring it, action must be taken.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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