MANAGING MULTIPLE CHANGE PROCESSES:
CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an alternative perspective on change management. We argue that while many organizations today pursue multiple and interrelated changes, existing change theories present change as isolated events and processes in the organization. As a consequence, some of our most common intervention models insufficiently reflect the challenges faced by organizations that pursue multiple changes. We propose five change management techniques which span beyond isolated and single change perspectives. Some of these techniques contradict common prescriptions for change management.

INTRODUCTION

Rapidly changing environments demand that organizations generate equally fast responses in order to survive and prosper. In the last decades, the rate of globalization and technological innovation has continued to increase, and organizations often have to implement a number of strategic and organizational changes at the same time or over a relatively short time frame. Pettigrew and Whipp (1991: 20) describe one of the main challenges in change management as *"...the ability to manage a series of interrelated and emergent changes (often in parallel and in sequence)"*. We argue that there is a need for a new intervention framework which explicitly takes into account the challenges of managing multiple change processes over time in organizations. In this paper we examine the challenges in pursuing multiple and interrelated changes over time and the implications for change management.

Based on a study of the Norwegian financial sector, which has gone through dramatic changes in the last fifteen years we present five techniques for change

management which take into account the need to balance (1) change and daily operations and (2) current and future change.

EPISODIC AND CONTINUOUS CHANGE

Existing research on change tends to view organizational change either from the perspective of planned, large-scale change occurring episodically (Anderson and Tushman, 1990) or from the perspective of change as a continuous organizational phenomenon, and then often with a focus on smaller scale incremental changes in routines and practices (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Dunphy, 1996; Orlikowski, 1996; Weick and Quinn, 1999). When change occurs episodically, then relative stability is the "normal" situation and the key challenge is to mobilize the organization and create an understanding for the need to change (Lewin, 1951). The challenges related to continuous change on the other hand, are tied to reflecting about the direction the organization is heading towards (Weick and Quinn, 1999). While episodic versus continuous change situations involve different challenges which call for different intervention techniques, many organizations face situations where they pursue a number of changes in parallel – some radical and frame-breaking, while others remain more limited in scope and degree. Recently, several researchers have attempted to bridge insights from episodic perspectives with more continuous perspectives (Langley and Denis, 2006), but current knowledge about how to manage multiple changes in organizations remains limited.

Organizations pursue multiple changes when they implement a number of changes at the same time or when they initiate new changes before previous changes have been completed. The changes can be large-scale or incremental, of an episodic or continuous nature, they can be more or less related, but they will nevertheless likely affect each other. This perspective is conducive with a situated view of change (Langley and Denis, 2006; Orlikowski, 1996) which integrates the episodic and continuous conceptions of change by viewing organizations as "in a constant process of becoming, but that major deliberate change interventions disturb existing patterns of evolution, stimulating further continuous change" (Langley and Denis, 2006:142). Hence when organizations pursue planned change, major interventions must be integrated into an ongoing and evolving pattern of interactions.

CHALLENGES IN MULTIPLE CHANGE PROCESSES

Our findings indicate that organizations that pursue multiple changes face two main challenges which differ substantially from the challenges addressed in the literature on episodic and continuous change management. Key challenges in multiple change processes are not tied to mobilizing the organization for change, nor are they related to reflecting on the direction of the firm. Instead the challenges in multiple challenges have to do with running daily operations *while* continuously implementing changes and completing change initiatives and producing visible change results. Because new changes are continuously launched, the focus tends to be on new initiatives rather than existing ones, and some employees question the effects of making so many changes.

Adverse effect on daily operations

One of the challenges in multiple change processes is that the organization's resources are *continuously* stretched in two directions. Because change is not a limited event or activity in the organization and change does not happen in isolation, balancing change-related tasks with daily operations is a crucial matter. The question of how resources should be allocated in a long-term perspective to secure realization of continuous change projects, and without negatively affecting daily operations, therefore becomes even more important in a context of multiple changes.

When large-scale changes are implemented, internal matters dominate and customers, suppliers, and alliance partners receive less attention. Strategic business opportunities may also suffer from an internal focus. Large-scale changes lead to a number of internal decisions and activities. New organisational solutions have to be decided, positions must be allocated, product programs must be adjusted, routines and policies must be revised, employees need training, and so on. Moreover, internal politicking, network building, and jockeying for positions escalate sharply during change processes. When organizations pursue multiple changes this becomes a "normal" activity. In the organizations we studied, the adverse effect on daily operations manifested itself particularly at the middle management level. In a context of continuous change projects, middle managers were described as preoccupied with future changes instead of daily operations, employees, and customers. Hence, when middle management get tied up in trying to influence decision makers and are involved in internal power struggles, it is not only the external focus that is diverted, but managerial resources that should be allocated to implement change and to support employees in this process are also wasted.

Unsuccessful implementation of change

When organizations implement a series of overlapping changes, many change initiatives fail to produce the expected results. Management tend to shift their attention to new projects before the current ones are completed. Oftentimes, top managers seem to be far ahead of the employees, and employees experience this as a problem because they are not provided with the necessary time and management support to implement the changes properly. Moreover, employees may also deliberately choose to allocate their resources to daily operations instead of implementing change. This reaction to change is particularly a problem when employees experience that change projects are disrupted time after time.

TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING MULTIPLE CHANGES

In this section we describe how managers respond to and handle the two challenges described above. Based upon interview data from a study of the Norwegian financial sector, we have identified five change management techniques: emphasizing organizational memory and forgetting; thinking in the present and the future tense; creating flexible change routines; selectively including people; and alternating temporary and permanent human resources. We concentrate on describing each of the techniques below and refer to the full paper for empirical illustrations and evidence.

Emphasizing organizational memory and forgetting. Actively drawing on organizational memory means to be attentive to the history and previous change projects in the organization. This is particularly important when an organization pursues many overlapping and interlinked changes, as managers and employees tend to question the logic between different change projects. The purpose of securing the organizational memory is to avoid that new managers, perhaps with no past history in the organization, introduce changes which do not take into account the changes that have been implemented in the past and/or which dominate the focus of current change projects. Hence, purposefully drawing on organizational memory creates clearer linkages between past and present change projects. Moreover, it can contribute in clarifying what were the results and effects of previous change processes.

Organizational forgetting implies that organizational members are told explicitly which routines and tasks can be left behind and forgotten. The purpose is to avoid that new tasks are just added on to a full work load and that the individual's priority of tasks takes place in an ad hoc manner which risks being in conflict with the organization's overall goals.

Thinking in the present and the future tense. This technique stresses the importance of keeping full attention on current change projects, while simultaneously thinking about future projects. Current projects have to be completed before letting other priorities take over. To avoid disruption of change processes, managers need to consider how the content of future change projects relates to current change projects. This implies deliberately linking new projects onto current projects and making sure that any conflicting purposes and implications are carefully explained. Without clear linkages, employees are more apt to refrain from implementing current changes and instead allocate their attention to daily operations or simply move on to newer change projects.

Employees however, should not always have to think both about the current and the future. We found that successful managers protected their subordinates and provided pockets of time, where they were allowed to focus only on daily operations, and more incremental improvements in routines and practices, but without any responsibilities for implementing planned change.

Managers also need to be aware of the way in which current change processes might affect future changes. Individuals remember how they have been treated in change processes, and attitudes and reactions to change are often based on previous experience with change. If the employees are treated fairly and with respect, then they are more likely to welcome change in the future. On the other hand, if the employees are worn out from previous processes, and have bad experiences from previous change processes, then they are not likely to be positive towards a new change process.

Developing flexible change routines. Multiple changes require routines for streamlining change processes over time. Typical issues included in such routines are how to cooperate with the unions, how to communicate with employees, whom to involve, and how to conduct downsizing. In organizations with extensive change experience, we found that such routines were well developed. Process routines can contribute in balancing between a focus on change and daily operations because routinized processes creates more tacit knowledge than non-routine processes, which can become a source of competitive advantage.

However, managers also need to be aware of the potential danger of being too focused on routines. Hence there is a need to strike a balance between routines and flexibility. Different change goals and content sometimes require different approaches with other routines. The change processes and routines for implementing business process engineering may for example be fundamentally different from those related to downsizing. Within the same type of change there must also be a certain flexibility to adjust to different cultures and entities within the same organization.

Selectively including people. Although involvement is important and necessary, extensive involvement in multiple changes over time increases the pressure on employees and intensifies the tradeoff between change and daily operations. In our study, managers and employees argued for the need to be more selective in involving organizational members in the process. By distinguishing more clearly between different purposes for involvement, managers *selectively* included organizational members in the change processes. This involved thinking carefully about *when* organizational members should be involved, *what* they should be involved in and *how* organizational members could be involved most effectively. Selective inclusion, if accepted and agreed upon by employees, can contribute in limiting potential adverse effects on daily operations.

Alternating temporary and permanent human resourcing. Capacity for making multiple changes can, at least temporarily, be increased by hiring more people. External content and process consultants can be brought in to facilitate changes. We found that managers who successfully pursued multiple changes relied primarily on internal resources, as they needed to develop internal competencies on change. They also brought in external and temporary employees, but instead of hiring process consultants and change experts, they hired temporary help to perform daily operations. This practice gives employees at lower levels time to adapt to changing practises, such as learning new programs and systems. By hiring temporary employees, the organization can also reduce the time needed to implement change, which is important to complete the current change before new changes are introduced. A third reason for hiring temporary help for daily operations, rather than implementing change, is that change agents need to know the business. In addition, managers in our study argued that it was viewed as important that change agents were themselves affected by the results of the changes as this would ensure a fair process. We therefore observed that while managers protected their employees in terms of involvement, they also made deliberate attempts to use people in operative functions to plan and implement changes.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that organizations that pursue multiple interrelated changes face implementation challenges which require new ways of thinking about change management. Existing change theories are often separated into episodic versus continuous models, reflecting different perspectives and prescriptions for change. In line with several recent change researchers, we argue that this separation is not always fruitful, as many organizations implement a number of changes in parallel and over time - some are of an episodic nature, others more continuous. The relevant question then becomes how to manage multiple changes. Based on our study of the Norwegian financial sector, which has experienced continuous overlapping large-scale changes in the

last fifteen years, we show that the challenges related to managing multiple changes are different from those that are often presented in change literature. Our findings indicate that key challenges in organizations that pursue multiple changes include (1) continuous adverse effects on daily operations and (2) too little focus on change results. This results in managers who focus more on positioning themselves for future changes than attending to daily operations and subordinates and employees who perceive that change is futile as they see few results from continuous large-scale changes.

Successful managers attended to these challenges by applying five change management techniques: emphasizing organizational memory and forgetting; thinking in the present and the future tense; creating flexible change routines; selectively including people; and alternating temporary and permanent human resources. In contrast to most change management prescriptions, this implies that managers need to protect subordinates from too much involvement in change related activities. They also need to facilitate the trade-off between change and daily operations and thereby secure a long-term capacity for change in the organization and among the individuals in the organization.

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