

Chapter 9

Employee Participation in Change Programs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to assist those responsible for implementing change to think more about how employee participation or involvement is undertaken during the change process. The chapter starts by providing an overview of the theoretical explanations as to why employee participation in change management is important. The authors then examine the nature of employee participation in three organizations undertaking major culture change programs, each using a different change intervention. They present three case studies that show how the context surrounding the change (comprising drivers, intervention, approach to change, and change levers) influenced the characteristics of employee participation in the change process. They conclude by emphasizing the significance of examining change agents' intervention methodology as a contextual factor to understand better the experience of culture change programs. The key message is that employees' experiences of participation influence their perceptions on the effectiveness of this type of change.

INTRODUCTION

As Hamlin (chapter 1) and Stanford (2015) emphasise, managers and HR professionals often fail to fully appreciate the complexity of what change management entails. However, contributing in no small part to this is that many of the models available to guide change management tend to underplay this complexity. Guidance and models often suggest change can be successfully achieved through sequentially following a number of action based steps that tend to be thin on detail. Nearly ubiquitous in all these models can be found a step or phase where managers should secure the commitment of employees to change, through their involvement or participation (See Hamlin 2001a). However, what does employee participation or involvement in the change process actually mean? For those of us who have been involved in any major

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change initiative in an organisation we are only too aware of the differences we feel when we are treated as mere passive bystanders in the process. i.e. when change is “done” to us, compared to how we feel when we are actively involved in shaping the change. But there has been little research to date that has looked at these differences in any detail, nor how differences in how employees participate in change influence change outcomes. One of the intriguing questions this poses, is whether the failure of change programmes in a number of circumstances, might not in part at least be due to differences in how employees participate in the change process. This chapter aims to help those responsible for implementing change think about this very question, through offering new insights into our understanding of how employee participation was enacted and experienced in three organisations attempting culture change. Each of these organisations utilised very different culture change interventions that differed significantly in how they involved employees in securing the changes outcomes they desired. Our focus here is not to prescribe what participation should look like during change management initiatives. The data we show based upon our case studies does not enable us to do this. But our case studies do suggest that the differences between the change management methodologies techniques used by these organisations were associated with differing notions of employee participation. This in turn meant that how change was perceived and satisfaction with the change process varied in these cases. We attempt to achieve three aims in this chapter. First, we offer descriptions of new methods being used by organisations in pursuing culture change strategies that have not been previously compared in the literature. Second, we introduce the notion that different culture change methodologies have differential effects on change processes, and are therefore an important contextual factor deserving consideration by those responsible for managing change. Finally, we show how the nature of employee participation in culture change differed in each of these three cases, and that this was shaped by the context surrounding the change. Specifically, the type of culture change intervention (or methodology) that was employed.

Why Involve Employees in Change Management?

There are alternative perspectives as to whether the experience of the change process rather than the actual change itself, influences an individual’s response to change. It is of course likely that both are important. In terms of the actual change itself, an employee’s reaction will be dependent on that individual’s assessment of the impact of the proposed change on their own personal goals (Guth & MacMillan 1986). This is why a number of change management frameworks stress that change managers should help employees to answer the question, “what’s in it for me?” This is based on sound evidence drawn from research on employee motivation. Expectancy theory for example, would suggest that where outcomes of change are assessed as having a negative value to the employee, then resistance behaviour is far more likely (Hope & Pate, 1988).

However, there are a number of theoretical explanations posited also to support the notion that the *change process* itself influences employees’ reactions to it. Drawing upon the theory of procedural justice (Colquitt, 2001) for example, the extent to which an employee feels they have been treated fairly by the organisation will influence their response to the change (Korsgaard et al., 1995). The extent to which individuals are given a say in the decision-making process will therefore influence whether fairness is perceived by them in relation to change (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). Another evidence-based theory, affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), posits that individuals appraise the favourability of

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