Chapter 12
Observations on the Derailment of Organizational Change in Large Organizations

Ciarán Patrick Anthony Martin
Ciaran Martin Associates, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores key experiences of the author working within large organizations as a change leader and also as a change consultant. The focus is on five key change situations from which the author gained great insight into change and organizational development; how it is initiated, deployed, and managed; and how it can influence organizational success. The learning gained through these experiences is explored, as is how that shaped the author's thinking and practice. Additionally, and where possible and appropriate, guidance has been offered to other practitioners on key points of learning which may aid them with their professional development and, consequently, their change practice.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is written from the perspective of someone who has been responsible for leading major change initiatives inside a large organisation as a functional director and member of a business lead team. Later, as a corporate director, the author has also acted in the role of (internal) strategic change consultant as part of a larger talent management remit. In that latter role, he continued to lead major change within his own area of responsibility but also consulted with businesses within the enterprise on the implementation of change within their organisations. More recently, the author set up his own management consultancy which includes as part of its service offering, the provision of organisational change and development consultancy support.

The objectives of this chapter are to share the insights and learning gained by the author in the course of his work. The chapter has a recurring theme of the need for comprehensive preparation, for professionalism and a strong ethical approach. These are in turn linked to the use of best practice and the need for self-assessment and on-going development by change practitioners as well as prompting thought as to how good practice may look.

In doing so, it is hoped that others may also learn from the experience of the author. As a consequence, they may be able to use that learning to refine their own evidence-based organizational change and development (EBOCD) practice.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT TO THE AUTHOR'S EBOCD EXPERIENCE

On returning to learning in the early 90s, the author's exposure to organisational change and development was already quite significant although perhaps not too much thought had gone into it at that time. Reflecting now, it seems that the changes experienced in the 70s and 80s were, to a large extent, quite linear and singular in nature and thus could be well planned and executed based on well-developed approaches that had hard evidential underpinning.

It seemed that, at least in the early days of a career in maintenance engineering and operations, these changes went relatively smoothly. Moreover, although far removed from the planning and development of these major changes, there was a feeling of being energised by them. There was also genuine enjoyment of the sense of excitement and purpose that accompanied them and being able to feel that buzz of excitement around the full extent of the operation. It is clear now that those early changes were well-resourced, well-led and well-thought through. Furthermore, there was an air of confidence that they would be implemented on time, on budget and with people well-prepared to operate in the new environment that was to follow. That this is what came to pass was not at all surprising.

Fast forward to the early 90s and now in a more senior role alongside other hard-pressed colleagues, trying to implement a major change involving significant OD effort. Lacking a clear project charter, a senior sponsor, local top level support and sufficient knowledge of change management, it was difficult to make progress. As if that was not enough, other people, whose help was desperately needed, were busy with their own concerns and had little interest in ours. The project team had yet to learn of Elop's "Burning Platform" (Management Today, 2011, para. 1), were still waiting for the arrival of Kotter's 8 step approach, (Kotter, 2012, p. 23) and the author had yet to study change management as part of a return to learning, so the outcome was predictable. Fortunately the burning platform emerged as the project floundered, senior management finally took a leadership role and the initiative was saved from failure at the last minute.

Fast forward again to the 00s – now fully trained and more experienced – and along came promotion to a corporate role with responsibility for change management (and OD), functional leadership and support provision. From early in the decade, it was widely acknowledged amongst practitioners that 70% - 75% of change initiatives were failing to achieve all of their objectives. Nohria and Beer writing in the Harvard Business Review (2000, para. 1) were even more blunt in their assessment, stating that "about 70% of all change initiatives fail."

During the 00s, the author collaborated with other change practitioner colleagues from around the world to address change problems and as a consequence, conclusions were drawn as to why these problems were occurring. In many cases, it seemed that the time to implement changes was underestimated, steps were being missed in the change process and, just as in the 70s, change was assumed to be linear, distinct and did not overlap or interfere with other initiatives. Of course the new reality was that change was now multi-dimensional and ran concurrently, often in many directions. Was it any wonder that approximately three-quarters of initiatives were failing to meet expectations?

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