Chapter 46

Manager Hopefulness When Seeking to Acquire Change Solutions:
Buyer Beware! Critical Reflections on "Best Practice" Change Management Consultancy in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Within this case history, the authors identify and critically reflect upon the problems of commonly used "best practice" OCD-related perspectives and change management approaches that are sold to managers by many outside-management consultancy firms. These approaches are myopically copied from one organization to another based on their initial success, but often lead to the failure of many OCD initiatives. Based on their experiences as evidence-based change consultants in the Netherlands, the authors subsequently present the advantages and drawbacks of "best practice" change agency and argue the case for EBOCD.

INTRODUCTION

Managers are obsessed with performance, not only in the classic company setting but also in contexts such as not-for-profits. Every day they have to deal with enormous amounts of information, claims and needs from colleagues, 'bosses', customers, patients or students, and other interested parties. Not only are they expected to have opinions, they must also act. Decisions, performance, intelligence and determination are expected of managers.

Such expectations can have a stimulating and positive effect. They can also have a blocking and negative effect. In the latter, the manager does not experience a challenge but an acute problem. When that is the case, two types of feelings usually prevail: either anxiety and fear, or desperation and depression (Cullberg, 2003).

Managers are fallible just like other human beings. Managers who face an acute problem can also feel like giving up, procrastinate or decide to take a mental or physical exit. They can also try to find solutions, new perspectives or a way out. They often do this through a consultant, by seeking advice from someone or something. They might ask for advice, direction or a new perspective in their search for validation, alleviation and wisdom. Or they look for words of compassion by reading, in old or new books, about classic insights or new ideas.

Managers often try to get a grip on reality or – less ambitiously – on their work field and responsibilities. In more abstract terms, they seek action control to expand their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). They seek to strengthen the confidence in their own competence, the conviction of actually influencing their own environment, to complete tasks successfully and solve problems.

Psychology teaches us that several aspects can be helpful, such as an overall view, insight, frameworks, security and social support. Psychology offers perspective when it comes to things that can be provided through channels like transfer of knowledge, structure, leadership and fellowship. We see managers who are open and searching, who are not passive but active. Such managers have overcome lethargy, face confrontations head on, and take responsibility. But these proactive managers, who can be obsessed with performance, are vulnerable. In their search they can fall victim to false prophets and may be willing to try anything, including quackery and shady treatment methods. This is why it is good that in our spheres, those of management and organizations, there are scholars and professionals who concern themselves with and are critical about what is on offer, not least within the field of organizational change and development (OCD) and change management practice.

Our 'reflective case history' is different than others presented in this section of the book because it does not describe or discuss an evidence-based OCD initiative carried out within a specific organization. Instead, based on our experience and observations over many years as professional management consultants and change agents of practices and interventions within larger complex organizations in both the public sector (health care, education) and larger companies (financial sector, professional services) of the Netherlands, we discuss the problems of the all-too-common 'best practice' approaches to OCD adopted by organizations that use services of outside-management consultancy firms. In the context of OCD and the management of change, we critically reflect upon (i) the 'misuse' by managers of management ideas, theoretical concepts, models and frameworks as offered in OCD-related academic and practitioner books and journals, and (ii) the approaches of many management consultants who sell change management services to managers seeking quick fixes to address urgent organizational change (OC) issues – which is one of the five 'failings of managers' and an underlying root cause of failure of many OCD programmes, as discussed by Hamlin in Chapter 1 of this book (see also Hamlin, 2016).

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