


Chapter 8

Factors Contributing to Organizational Change Success or Failure: A Qualitative Meta-Analysis of 200 Reflective Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Change, and changing, exercise the minds of most managers most of the time. In consequence, leadership development and change management tend to be top priorities for many human resource development (HRD) professionals today. Despite this, much academic and practitioner literature suggests that 70% of all change programs fail. Through analyzing 200 organizational change case studies, this chapter examines this high failure rate, investigates leadership styles and their relationship to change, and explores the key factors that either enable or hinder successful change. The key findings of this examination were that the majority of the 200 studied change initiatives were considered successful and that using Kotter's change model, which has been long established, does not necessarily mean success; nor does the use of a democratic/participative leadership style. The most significant hindering factors and the key critical success factors are also acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Bawany (2016) “we live in a world where ‘business as usual’ IS change” (p. 32). Change is a normal, natural response to variable, uncertain, internal and/or external conditions (Leifer, 1989). Change is complex, constant, ever-present, increasing in pace, and open-ended and comes in many shapes and sizes. This is true for both change within individuals and change within organizations. Change is something that exists in all individuals, in all organizations, and in all sectors (Todnem By, 2005). We are living and working in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015).

Due to globalisation, the fast pace of technological and digital changes, the developing and differing expectations of the workforce, shifting demographics and increasing competition to survive in the workplace, organizations need to recognise the uncertain and unpredictable environment in which they operate. They need to find ways to successfully navigate through the complexity and ambiguity brought about by ongoing change. In short, the rate of change is accelerating, and so organizations must demonstrate that they are up the challenge of moving quickly and adapting continuously and successfully to keep up.

Much is written about organizational change, leadership, and the popular frameworks and models to consider in times of change. We are aware through a plethora of change management books and journals that change is constant (Coleman & Thomas, 2017), that change is complex (Senior & Swailes, 2016) and that change is inevitable (Daft, 2018). Furthermore, numerous leadership models and change management models have been offered as ways to best lead and manage change (Senior & Swailes, 2016). However, there are still gaps in understanding how to better ensure successful organizational change in today’s VUCA world, not least because the validity of widely held assumptions about the scale of change programme failure, the best change leadership style to adopt, and the sufficiency of empirical evidence supporting many change management models, have been questioned.

The purpose of the study reported in this chapter was to generate empirical evidence that could contribute to current debates concerning the above assumptions by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the ‘reality’ of change programme failure compared to the 70% failure rate ‘rhetoric’?
2. What are the most frequently used leadership styles in times of change?
3. What are the key factors that enable or inhibit the effective application of change management models and the achievement of successful change?

The chapter starts with a review of organizational change and development (OCD) related literature which reports why over 70% of change initiatives fail. It then provides a brief discussion of current models of change with a focus on Kotter and a brief overview of leadership in the context of change. This is followed by details of the selected methodology and methods adopted for the current study, the results of the data analysis, and a discussion of the key findings. The chapter closes with consideration of the research limitations and implications for evidence-based OCD practitioners.

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