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## American experiences in organizational change

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## American experiences in organizational change

### Abstract

Though change has been with us since the beginning of humanity, consciously seeking changes has been a major organizational process in America for only about five decades (Benne, Bennis, & Chin, 1976). What is unique about change as an organizational process in America is its level of self-consciousness and the serious efforts undertaken to study change process on the part of the organization and academe. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the notable American efforts in the study and practice of change.

# AMERICAN EXPERIENCES IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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Though change has been with us since the beginning of humanity, consciously seeking changes has been a major organizational process in America for only about five decades (Benne, Bennis, & Chin, 1976). What is unique about change as an organizational process in America is its level of self-consciousness and the serious efforts undertaken to study change process on the part of the organization and academe. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the notable American efforts in the study and practice of change.

The paper consists of three sections. The first section gives some background for organizational change: Those societal forces which provided momentum for and influenced the development of the thinking and practice of organizational change are identified. Such an understanding enables one to see beyond the limits of a particular time and event, thus providing a historical perspective. The second section reviews organizational change literature: Resistance to change, perspectives on the change process, and change strategies proposed by authorities in the area are discussed. Based on this review the author proposes, in section three, that organizational change is best understood when viewed from personal, system, and

cultural perspectives. Change at the personal level initiates the change; system change adopts the change and makes it work; cultural change makes the change endure.

### **Historical Background**

The concept of organizational change is a relatively recent development. The formal idea of "change" had almost no place in the American organizational literature until the 1930's (Benne, et al., 1976). What prevailed until that time was the laissez-faire doctrine. As a reaction to earlier European governmental and religious suppression, this doctrine suggested that human intervention in social affairs was a violation of the natural law and that less government was better government. However, the economic breakdown and the resulting social crisis during the Great Depression of the early 1930's demonstrated the failure of the doctrine.

At issue was an ideological controversy: Should or should not Man play an active role in planning and shaping the future of human beings? With the success of government intervention in social and economic affairs during the New Deal Administration, there emerged in the twentieth century a new awareness, a new

belief that human beings, human organizations, and society were all improvable, if not perfectible, and that to achieve such improvement active human intervention was both possible and necessary. Such were the dynamics that prompted a series of conscious efforts to generate organizational change (Benne, et al., 1976; Owens, 1981).

However, this enthusiasm was not universal and many change attempts around 1950 were actively resisted by a variety of organizational members. The basic question then shifted from ideology to technology: How does one make change happen (Benne, et al., 1976)? Strategies for organizational change were subsequently formulated, tried, classified, and packaged. and varied kinds of resistance to change were formally recognized.

In the last two decades, technological advancements, social progress in civil rights, government regulations, and competition from domestic sources and from abroad all exerted an immense pressure for change. The economic success of non-western countries, with Japan as the most frequently mentioned example, aroused American interest in cultural aspects of organizations. Investigations into successful organizations revealed that one of the few common

characteristics they shared was a sound organizational climate or culture, which seemed somehow responsible for their continued success (Kilmann, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985; Schwartz & Davis, 1981; Sergiovanni, 1984). The work of Peters and Waterman (1982) provided forceful descriptions about what matter most, including organizational climate, in successful organizations. At the same time social scientists experienced frustration in their efforts to apply scientific principles in solving problems in human affairs. Clearly, then, there has been a trend toward a more interpretive and explanatory approach (Smith, 1987), from which two themes have emerged: the irrationality of Man and the role of organizational culture in change. They were largely the result of the three sets of interacting forces described above: environmental pressure, empirical support, and intellectual impetus.

### **Change Theories**

This section summarizes some of the authoritative thinking about change resistance, change process, change strategies, and new developments in



organizational theory. These will provide the basis for a suggested synthesis presented in section three.

### **Resistance to Change**

Human beings are the sole creatures on earth that consciously seek and are capable of changes. What is ironic about it is that human beings are also notorious for their resistance to change. Obviously, a knowledge of why people resist change is necessary for understanding change.

Staw (1982) identified three factors which determined human persistence in a course of action and refusal to change:

**Motivation to justify previous decision.** There are two kinds of justification: First, the need of the individual to maintain his/her feeling of self-worth and self-esteem is internal justification for refusal to change. Second, when an individual is threatened by others' evaluation and judgment, he/she may feel compelled to prove to others that he/she was not wrong by escalating commitment to the earlier decision, which is external justification.

**Norms for Consistency.** Being consistent is widely perceived as an essential characteristic of

high-quality leadership. Such a social norm presents, in effect, another obstacle to change.

**Possible Future Outcomes.** The probability of, and the value of, future benefits of current practice may also keep people from change. The more probable and valuable the future outcomes are, the more resistance to change one can expect from those who believe in current practice.

Staw offered a comprehensive analysis about human beings' motives to resist change. However, people resist change not only because of motivational factors; human emotion also plays a role in resisting change. Deal (1985) provided another enlightening explanation of why people resist change. He first observed that human beings have a basic need for meaning, purpose, and control, and to achieve them, individuals form attachments to many things that create meaning and stability. To change often is to break old attachments and cause individual and collective loss, grief, alienation, and subsequently, resistance. "... death and life without meaning are fundamental fears of human species." Organizational changes, especially those

related to values and beliefs, can "tap into both" (Deal, 1985, p. 296).

Deal called our attention to one of the most fundamental aspects of human life, one that has been largely ignored in previous change efforts, that is, the pain of life's transitions. The implication is that old beliefs, values, and anything else that people have come to feel attached to, give meaning to human existence and should be treated with extreme care and sensitivity, and when possible they should be memorized and transformed rather than discarded, if one hopes to introduce a change which will meet the least resistance.

Though only motivational and emotional sources of change resistance are discussed in this section, it by no means suggests that only human emotion and motivation are important. Lack of cognition and adaptive ability are also impediments to change. What is important to note is the relative significance of human emotion and motivation in resisting change.

### **Strategies**

The above discussion of various obstacles to change provides a basis from which to examine change strategies proposed to overcome resistance. The work

of three theorists is particularly valuable for one who hopes to gain a good perspective of change strategies. The first of them, Robert Chin (1976), classified change strategies into three types: The first type was what he called "empirical-rational" strategies. It assumed that human beings were rational and if a change were reasonably proposed and justified, people would understand its benefit and act. Members of the organization therefore required knowledge, information, and intellectual rationales for the change. Some of the strategies that fell into this category were: (a) Basic research, development, and diffusion; (b) Personnel selection and replacement (the right person with the right knowledge and skill); (c) System analysis; and (d) The projection of utopias as guidance.

The second type of strategy was labeled "normative-reeducative." This strategy included the assumption that people's commitment to the organization's sociocultural norms was a central factor in the change process. Effective change resulted only from the organizational members' commitment to the change. Change efforts should therefore focus on changes in attitudes, values, skills, and significant

relationships that gained the commitment of the individual and fostered an organizational capacity to change. "Organizational development" and "sensitivity training" are two contemporary examples of this category.

The third strategy was called "power-coercive." The approach places heavy emphasis on the exercise of power. Political, financial, and moral sanctions are major methods on which this strategy relies. Change by law, regulation, and command are examples of the power-coercive approach.

Chin's taxonomy is a useful one. It was based on the two concepts of (a) identifying the chief initiators and actors of change and (b) understanding how to implement the change. In his three strategies people who have knowledge and skills, people who are affected by the change, and/or people who have power are the main actors in the drama of change. The "empirical-rational" approach seems best suited for changes that have easily-demonstrated benefits and are less threatening to human interest and emotion. "Power-coercive" strategy can be used when the change is relatively simple and easy to evaluate, and when the change initiator has the power to do so.

"Normative-reeducative" strategy should be employed when success requires commitment from the members of the organization, and/or the change is complex and does not lend itself to easy evaluation.

A second theorist, Lindquist, identified four different approaches to change (Lindquist, 1978; Votruba, 1985). The "rational planning" approach, the first of the four, shared a similar assumption with Chin's "empirical-rational" strategies that human beings were rational. Consequently, change was achieved by reason and by evidence that showed the desirability of the change. The way to change is to "let the logic speak for itself" (Votruba, 1985, p. 3705). The problem with that approach is that human beings and human organization do not always act rationally. "Rationality is based on perspective rather than on reason and evidence" (Votruba, 1985, p. 3705). The "social interaction" approach, the second of his approaches, assumed that humans were basically social beings, and regarded the organization's opinion leaders and reference groups (formal and informal) as the keys to promoting change. The best strategy for change was to identify the influential members in the organization and involve

them in the change process. The third approach, "human problem-solving," put great emphasis on overcoming psychological obstacles to change, such as fears, habits, anxieties, and prejudices. The final approach, the "political" approach, was based on the argument that organizational change was basically political in the sense that vested human interest was often involved, thus suggesting that the change initiator should deal with conflicts of interest by coalition and compromise. Lindquist suggested that effective change required the wise use of all four approaches. He provided a useful synthesis of change strategies, with prime attention to the initiation of change--the promotion of the awareness of the need for, and willingness to, change.

What remained to be further explored, however, were the implementation process and the endurance of change. The above four approaches directly or indirectly addressed the individual's psychological processes: cognition, motivation, emotion, and ability, with little consideration for the norms and values of the organization, or for the sequential aspects of change.

It is difficult to understand any process until the different stages, aspects, or dimensions of it can be meaningfully discerned. A third theorist, Kurt Lewin (Owens, 1981), provided a force-field analysis of organizations which finally led to a three-stage conceptualization of organizational change. Lewin said that two groups of forces existed in all organizations: the forces for change and the forces for stability. When these two groups of forces were in balance, the organization was in a state of equilibrium; only when the two groups of forces were in imbalance, could change start. The logical development of Lewin's analysis was that planned change should begin by breaking the existing equilibrium, "unfreezing" the organization. Only then could the second stage be undertaken: to move the organization to a new state. The third step of the change process was the establishment of a new equilibrium, the "refreezing" of the new practice.

Two important implications can be drawn from Lewin's analysis: First, for change to be effective, the organization had to be shaken, people in the organization had to get somehow dissatisfied with existing practices. This notion seemed to be common



sense, but many change initiators conducted change in a way that implied that as long as they saw the desirability of change, everybody else ought to feel the same. What they forgot was that people did not change simply because somebody pointed a different direction. People changed because they felt a way of doing business was no longer valid. This was why change by command from the top has proven to be so ineffective, especially in complex organizations.

The second important implication from Lewin's analysis was that change did not end when people began to behave in new ways. The new practice had to provide continuing satisfaction that served to "refreeze" the organization, otherwise the change would not endure.

Lewin provided a useful metaphor for those who hoped to understand change and formulate and organize change strategies in a way that was both conceptual and practical. But it was still a metaphor.

### **New Directions in Organizational Change Theory**

As suggested earlier, two related concepts eventually developed in organizational theory: the notion of the irrationality of Man and the recognition of organizational culture as a key to understanding and changing organizations. The second of these has

received substantial attention from contemporary theorists. Cultural perspectives view administrative activity as a cultural artifact and emphasize the importance of uniquely shared meanings and values, symbols, understanding, sense-making, and consciousness (Sergiovanni, 1984).

"Culture" is such an often-used term that it is seldom thought about. When asked, people often utter something about "behavior patterns," "habits," "philosophy," "values," and the like. These things do, in the judgment of Schein (1985), reflect a culture, but they are not the essence of culture. He proposed a definition that was not only insightful in touching the essence of culture, but also powerful in explaining how a culture evolves, develops, changes, and influences. Schein believed a culture consisted of a set of solutions that, by having successfully solved the survival problems facing an organization, have become the organization's learned, taken-for-granted, and often unconscious assumptions about itself, others, and how the world works. Behaviors, values, and artifacts were but the manifestations of the culture's underlying assumptions. Organizational culture was to an

organization what personality/character was to an individual.

Schein also provided a framework to analyze culture. He said that the problems any group of people faced were of two kinds, namely, the problems of internal integration and the problems of external adaptation. In the process of problem solving, assumptions about nature, truth, human nature, human activity, and human relationship were established. Around these assumptions, a culture paradigm formed and the organization operated within the culture paradigm.

Dyer (1986) provided another analysis. He argued that two types of organizational changes must be distinguished: system change and culture change. System change involved changes in several subsystems of the organization, including the goals and objectives, and the social, administrative, technical and operational systems. Dyer then identified four components of an organization's culture: artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions. Dyer concluded that system change was problem-oriented and incremental. Culture change was value-oriented and fundamental. Whether culture change can be best achieved by "starting with some artifact change and

slowly moving toward the core (assumptions)" (Dyer, 1986, p. 20) or by focusing directly on the core assumptions remains unclear, but Dyer suggested that leadership change was necessary before cultural change could happen.

One of the traps associated with cultural change is the temptation for the leadership to believe that the behavioral changes of the organization's members are signals of successful cultural change. Sathe (1985) warned that behavioral change could well be conformity to command rather than a changed belief about reality--the result of cultural change. People changed their behavior because they rationalized that they had to do so in order to avoid punishment and receive rewards. There was no new commitment resulting from genuine cultural change. Sathe suggested that if one wished to generate genuine cultural change, one needed to limit the opportunity for undesirable rationalization by appealing to intrinsic motivation and the inherent value of the change rather than relying on extrinsic forms of motivation, such as rewards and punishments.

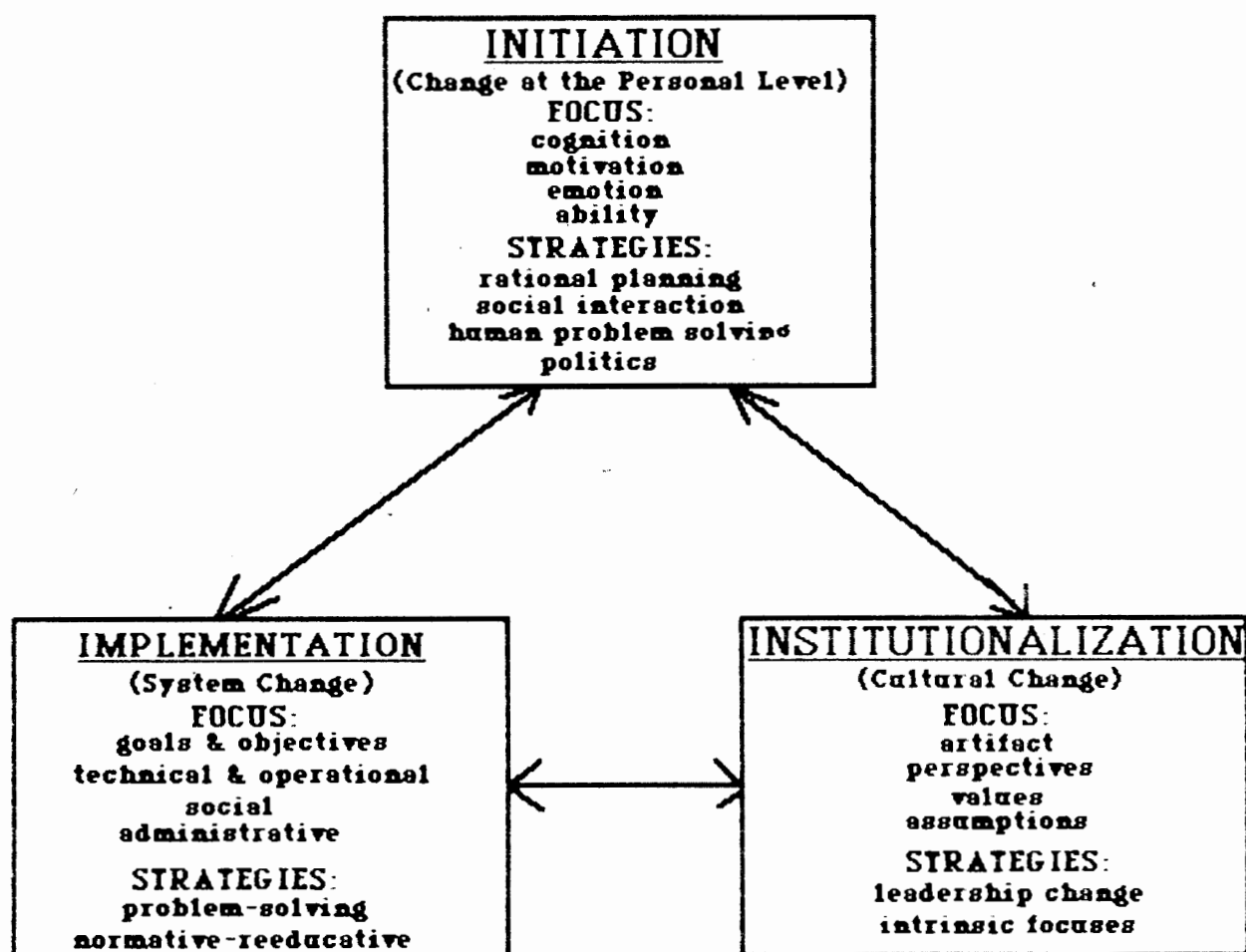
### **A Suggested Synthesis**

Although there are differences in the focuses, perspectives, and assumptions among the theories of change discussed above, they need not be exclusive of each other. These theories should be viewed as supplementary thoughts all contributing to an understanding of change. While it is easy to make such a graceful comment, the perplexing question still remains: How do these thoughts supplement each other in a way that helps one understand change? This section attempts to answer that question by proposing a three dimensional change model (see Figure 1). Modified from Lewin's analysis, the model conceptualizes change as an integral process that may include the following three domains which change can address: **Initiation**--change at the personal level, **Implementation**--change at the system level, and **Institutionalization**--change at the cultural level.

#### **Initiation: Change at the Personal Level**

Organizational change may have various focuses. The focus may be the organization's procedures, methods, strategies, structures, values, or anything within the organization that significantly affects the effectiveness of the organization in achieving its

Figure 1. A Three-Dimension Model of Change process.



goals. It is obvious that before any change can happen, those who need to change must first develop a recognition of the "need" for the change.

Initiation is the promotion of the need for, and willingness to, change. Change happens in organizations in a fashion which reflects different levels of preparedness. In some organizations there may be many people who want to change. In that situation, there is really no need to "initiate" change in the sense discussed here. All one needs to do is to go ahead and start the change process.

In other organizations only a few members (sometimes only one person), who may have the power and/or the foresight (or whim), want to change. In those organizations in which the majority of the members (or those who need to change) either have not realized that change should be made, or may have realized the need for change but are unwilling to make it for various reasons, change is difficult.

Because the "need" for change is, after all, a personal thing, this analysis of the change initiation process is organized by what determine the individual's action. Human beings' actions are influenced by factors that can be classified into two categories: the

internal psychological processes and the external environmental forces. But external influences have to be mediated by internal processes to have any effect on individual behavior.

The model proposed here uses internal psychological processes as the basis for the discussion of initiating change. Thus, initiation is actually the change at the personal level, involving such psychological processes related to an individual's action as cognition, motivation, emotion, and native ability (People's values and attitudes, which are also psychological processes, are important to change, but they are qualities that can not be easily changed in a short period of time. Often the organization, and sometimes society at large, have to change first). These psychological processes collectively influence human behavior. For example, people may recognize the need for change but resist it motivationally because the change may endanger vested interest. They may resist change emotionally because of the general fear of uncertainty and the loss of meaningful life orientations, or they may resist change because they are simply incapable of making it and don't want to demonstrate their weaknesses. What makes the matter



even more complex is that these processes are interrelated and interactive; for example, human cognition tends to be distorted by human emotion and motivation.

The four approaches to change identified by Lindquist are well suited to the concept of initiating change: "rational planning" attends to the cognitive aspect of human behavior; "social interaction," "human problems solving," and "political" approaches take care of the emotional and motivational aspects of human behavior; they all contribute to the development of the individual's capacity to change.

#### **Implementation: System Change**

Implementation is a problem-solving process that involves system change: the goals and objectives of the organization, its technical and operational dimensions, its social dynamics, and its administrative subsystems are all included. Once the change is set in motion through successful initiation, those affected by the change should be involved, in one way or another, as actors and actresses in the drama of change. The "normative-reeducative" strategies summarized by Chin are at the heart of the appropriate approaches for implementing change in the organization.

### **Institutionalization: Culture Change**

Although system changes make the change happen and cause it to work well at the time, after a period of time, many changes become disorganized and the organizational members' commitment to it diminished. The reason for this is that the change has not become an integral part of the organization's character or personality--the organization's culture. Researchers have long noted the importance of institutionalizing change, the step that makes the change endure. It seems clear that cultural change is what the institutionalization should really focus on, since organizational culture usually shapes, reinforces, and determines individuals' values, attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors. It is the process that makes the change endure by changing the more pervasive and fundamental aspects of the organization and providing new meaning, sense of purpose and stability, thus eventually gaining the commitment of the individual, which is finally required to sustain change.

As mentioned earlier, Dyer (1986) suggested that cultural change might require dramatic change in leadership. But the approach proposed here mainly concerns itself with how leadership (whether changed or

continuing) goes about changing the organization's culture. Little is known in this regard. Some writers (Sathe, 1985; Tunstall, 1985) have suggested that the organization's official statements, speeches made by key members of the leadership, rearrangement of the organization's artifact (the design and location of headquarters offices, for example), and the personal behaviors of key members of the leadership (the way they allocate their time, for example), all signal what the organization's values and beliefs are, and are all effective in creating cultural change.

However, it seems that the first condition of cultural change is that key leadership figures must have a clear picture of the new cultural paradigm they hope to establish. The leadership should use the paradigm to orchestrate system changes in the implementation stage by signaling what is believed and valued by the organization. In doing that, the leadership should be able to appeal to the intrinsic values of the new cultural paradigm, thus minimizing the use of extrinsic forms of motivation which create improper rationalizations. Eventually the elevation of organizational members' vision should be the product of these efforts. Official statements and speeches will

serve to help members of the organization to articulate new cultural meaning and purpose.

A final note should be made about the integral nature of the three levels of organizational change distinguished in this section. While these three levels--personal, system, and cultural--of organizational change are discussed separately for the purpose of conceptualization, they should not be regarded as separated when one conducts change in practice. One should understand that they are different aspects of an integral whole. Cultural change has to be initiated at the personal level and be achieved by implementation at the system level. And for change to be meaningful, effective, and endure, one must keep the cultural paradigm in mind when changing the organization.

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