Critical Perceptions of Organisational Change

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ABSTRACT
The literature on change management and organisation development contains several established typologies of change. These categories are primarily important to change theorists to understand change processes and to explain various types of change. This paper describes two dimensions of change that are major concerns to change participants: Appeal and Likelihood. These dimensions shape conditions and four scenarios under which change managers must operate. Each of these scenarios is described along with their theoretical and practical implications.

KEY WORDS: Change interpretation, change management, change agents

Introduction
Organisational change has been conceptualized, studied, and analyzed in a wide variety of ways. Some researchers look at how change occurs and focus on the development of process theory; others consider the nature of change and the development of content theory. Either way, much of the change management and organisation development (OD) literature is written from the perspective of those who seek to understand how organisations or organisational behaviour (whether micro or macro) can be changed in some way for the better. Presumably, such insight guides change managers and practitioners on how to move an organisation, or the people who work in them, towards meeting its mission, however that is measured or known.

This paper considers how the nature of change is perceived by change participants; its aim is to examine a set of categories that highlights critical characteristics affecting the relative success of change efforts. The more we can...
differentiate between types of change, the more robust and universal will be our theories and the more practical our advice to practitioners. The paper builds on prior literature that emphasizes the need to understand change from the perspective of those engaged in its implementation (Duck, 1993; Lau and Woodman, 1995; Weber and Manning, 2001; Smollan, 2006). Categories that have meaning to change recipients and participants, as opposed to those who study change, can help practitioners more thoroughly understand the barriers and facilitators to change implementation.

This paper first examines a dominant set of categories that have been described in the OD literature. It then presents two dimensions of change that reflect critical participant perceptions – Appeal and Likelihood – and considers their implications in terms of a two-by-two matrix. The matrix is then applied to a case of change. The paper concludes with possible research directions and practical implications.

How Change has been Described and Explained

Some traditional approaches to describe or classify change relate to the nature of the change itself. Such efforts have been helpful in understanding change cognitively and developing theoretical categories of change and change processes. Over time, a common language for typing organisational change has been established, including change that is incremental or transformative (Nadler, 1988; Mohrman, 1989), first-order versus second order (Bartunek and Moch, 1987; Nadler and Tushman, 1995), transformational, transitional or transactional (Ackerman, 1984; Burke, 1994), and episodic versus continuous (Weick and Quinn, 1999). These terms generally pertain to the scale, scope, or magnitude of change and whether the change is superficial (as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic) or substantive as changing core technology (from sailing ships to motorized ones or from one mode of transportation to another, e.g., sea to air).

These categories of change have been refined to demarcate further distinctions representing finer and finer levels of detail. For example, Flamholz and Randle (1998) distinguish between three types of transformational change. Type 1 represents the transition from an entrepreneurial to a formal organisation structure; Type 2 is the revitalization of an existing business; and Type 3 is the fundamental re-thinking of what industry or business the organisation is in. Reger (1994) uses the label mid-range to represent a change that is larger than incremental but not as substantive as transformational. This gradient or continuum of the scale of change is also explored by Neal and Tromley (1995). These change categories all pertain to the essence of the change itself and how it can be typed, in effect, by scale or scope.

A second major way change has been categorized pertains to the cause of change. The two major types here are change that stems from the impetus of internal or external factors. Nadler and Tushman (1995) label the former anticipatory and the latter reactive. These categories differentiate between types of change that stem from internal, developmental pressures and those that are pursued due to the need for organisations to adapt to or respond to changes in their external environments. The causes of change have also been looked at in terms of time
How Change is Perceived and Experienced

As the interpretive or cognitive view of organisational phenomenon has taken hold (Daft and Weick, 1984), the focus of many researchers has become how organisational reality and change itself is viewed or perceived (Bartunek, 1984; Quinn and Kimberly, 1984). The relative success of a change process is not determined or dictated by how change is described, explained, or understood by scholars, but by how it is experienced and what it means to those directly affected (Isabella, 1990; Lau and Woodman, 1995; Smollan, 2006). The same change may be viewed and appreciated by different organisational actors in quite diverse ways.

When participants view change, it is filtered through their preferences and appreciated and accepted, or resisted accordingly. Some (Bartunek, Lacey and Wood, 1992; Stubbard, Meindl and Porac, 1994; Weber and Manning, 2001) claim that such preferences are a function of social cognition or sense-making (Weick, 1999). Change unfolds based on how participants communicate and converse about the transition they are experiencing (Ford and Ford, 1995). For example, change seen as consistent with personal values or self-interests (the proverbial ‘what’s in it for me’) is more apt to be welcomed than change viewed as detrimental to personal welfare. When organisational participants value the greater good, then change regarded as beneficial to one’s colleagues, employer, or society-at-large is considered more favourably.

The key perception or cognition is whether some planned or intentional change is considered Desirable or Undesirable. This distinction is a key factor for a member of an organisation to decide whether to engage productively in a change initiative. This perception provides a foundation upon which resistance or participation ultimately rests. Anyone who views change as undesirable is unlikely to help bring it about or worse may sabotage the efforts of those trying to do so.

Change advocates and managers get into difficulty when they project their own perceptions of the desirability of some change onto others. A change perceived as desirable by some participants or set of stakeholders is often perceived as undesirable by others. Of course, perceptions do shift. Looking at some change initiative
along a continuum, one might say that its Appeal is neither all bad (Undesirable) nor good (Desirable). However, the more perceptions slide towards the latter, the more engaged participants will be and the greater the chance for successful change implementation. OD principles (French and Bell, 1998) presume that the more participants are involved in the change process, the more appealing the change itself. Appeal is one factor that contributes to a larger construct ‘readiness for change’ (By, 2007; Jones, 2005).

A second key distinction for change participants or recipients is the Likelihood that the change will be realized. Certain changes are Inevitable; others are Impossible, or regarded as such. For example, the aging process and all the changes that accompany it are inevitable. Over time, markets mature, customers become more sophisticated, technology improves, employees seek better benefits, and there is turnover among management staff.

Conversely, some changes may be desirable but are unlikely to occur. Doubling staff salaries without affecting net income is impossible (at least in the short-term), as is changing a company’s culture without changing its core assumptions (Schein, 1999). Here, again, perceptions and reality can shift. A change or innovation initially considered impossible can become viewed as improbable, then plausible, and finally inevitable. Such was the evolving experience of the human species in landing a man on the moon. Changes in technology made such a task once viewed as impossible an inevitable achievement.

**Understanding and Managing Change under Different Conditions**

These two ways or dimensions in which change is perceived shape four distinct conditions or scenarios under which change may be understood or managed. Figure 1 shows the four scenarios as a function of the two factors (Appeal – desirable/undesirable, and Likelihood – inevitable/impossible). Each of these scenarios is considered in terms of the perceptions held by participants or stakeholders and the managerial implications. These scenarios could be examined from the perspective of change managers. Indeed, the perceptions of those responsible for managing or
implementing change are often orthogonal to those who are subject to the change or affected by it. The focus of this discussion will be on how best to understand and manage the perceptions of participants or recipients (Jick, 2003).

**Scenario 1 (High Appeal, High Likelihood): Expedite**

For a change manager functioning in Scenario 1, the task is relatively clear. Participants view the change as desirable and consider it inevitable. To the extent this view is shared, minimal, if any, resistance will be encountered. The focus of change managers should be the development and execution of an implementation plan that lays out critical tasks and timeframes.

If change is viewed as inevitable, there is a danger that it may be taken for granted and the tasks and behaviours required to enact the change may be dismissed or overlooked. No organisation can experience change without some kind of involvement of its members. By laying out a plan-of-action, managers can avoid any diffusion of responsibility and expedite the change process.

**Scenario 2 (High Appeal, Low Likelihood): Encourage and Empower**

A change manager functioning under this scenario must work with willing but sceptical participants. The scepticism comes from a sense of not being able to realize a desirable change like improving employee benefits or working conditions. However, a change advocate working under these conditions has the benefit of the goodwill of change recipients. The key is to increase conviction that the change is likely to occur. The classical emphasis on early success by focusing on small victories or ‘low hanging fruit’, as the saying goes, applies here. Small, early successes can gain momentum and build credibility.

The aim of change managers in this scenario is to facilitate the evolution of change reactions (Jick, 2003). Doing so means shifting perceptions – in this case, from perceiving change as impossible to seeing it as inevitable. Change agents must advocate and champion the cause. As perceptions shift, so too will reality. The more participants view change as anything but impossible, especially if it is desirable, the more they will work for its realization. Under this scenario, the key role of the change manager is to cheerlead so as to encourage and motivate change participants to believe they can accomplish something desirable.

**Scenario 3 (Low Appeal, High Likelihood): Reframe**

Of the four scenarios, this one probably best meets the stereotypical conditions where resistance to change is expected. When participants must engage in a change they perceive as undesirable, they are unlikely to do so willingly or constructively and will often work at cross purposes with change advocates or stakeholders who view the change in more positive terms. Overtly or covertly, participants who view a change as undesirable will strive to alter the conditions and decrease its Likelihood. A typical reaction among participants in this scenario is to reduce their engagement and thereby lower the Likelihood of the change.
That may mean social loafing or the use of delay tactics until the impetus of the change has passed or been eclipsed by a crisis or some other initiative. Change managers may benefit from the perception that the change is inevitable and work to make it more desirable. Perhaps there are characteristics of the change that can be modified to make the overall change plan more appealing. The despair participants feel about realizing the undesirable must be countered with images of the change that will increase its perceived desirability. This challenge pertains to the need for change managers to communicate a compelling vision such that negative aspects of the change are de-emphasized (Kotter, 1996). The key for change managers is addressing the emotional state of participants who are confronting change that has little or no appeal.

Scenario 4 (Low Appeal, Low Likelihood): Revitalize or Retrench

This scenario presents a change manager with the greatest challenge. Not only is the change viewed as undesirable but impossible as well. Under these conditions there is no clear incentive for participants to engage in the change. Participants are apt to be defiant, if not outright belligerent, to change advocates whose credibility will be tested and questioned.

In this scenario a change manager has several tactical and strategic options to consider. A change manager could work to shift perceptions regarding the low appeal of a change or its improbability. Alternatively, a determination could be made that change recipient perceptions are so extreme that shifting them is too difficult. In that case, one option is to encourage recipients to avoid the change altogether by removing themselves from the process. Another option is to recruit into the process a set of champions or advocates who view the change in more positive terms (greater appeal and less sceptical) than incumbents.

Participant Perceptions as Barriers and Facilitators of Change

Knowing how change recipients perceive change will aid an OD practitioner in determining his or her best strategy for implementation. In a force field analysis, perceptions may be barriers or facilitators to change (Lewin, 1951). Shifting them and strengthening or weakening their valence can move the balance of forces in the favour of realizing change goals and outcomes.

Participant perceptions of change are more critical to successful change implementation than the nature of the change itself. Without the willing or active involvement of participants, change initiatives do not succeed, or they may lead to unintended or counter-productive consequences. Managing participant perceptions is a fundamental element of managing the change itself.

Change Perceptions and Other Typologies of Change

Perceptions held by participants about some change are interesting in and of themselves, but they take on added meaning when looked at in light of other typologies as noted earlier in this paper. The scale or scope of a change has no inherent value except that ascribed to it by change participants. The same can be said for the
potential contribution of an OD consultant regardless of the formal role he or she plays in the change process. The juxtaposition of typologies lays out implications for which several propositions that link perceptions of change with other typologies may be offered.

Proposition 1: The more incremental the change, the more it will be perceived as inevitable.

Incremental changes, like those generated through continuous improvement processes, are more clearly defined and better understood than transformative change. When a system or process is merely adjusted, as opposed to redesigned or reconceptualized, as is the case with transformative change, there are fewer unknowns, fewer uncertainties, and fewer disruptions. These conditions are apt to lead participants to view a change as having greater Likelihood since it is more easily grasped and offers less a threat to existing interests or ways of behaving and acting. Incremental change usually requires few resources to implement and often has fewer unintended consequences. These characteristics of incremental change further reduce participant scepticism about the Likelihood of some change.

Proposition 2: The more transformative a change, the more it will be perceived as undesirable and impossible.

Transformative change requires the examination and shifting of long-standing assumptions, values, and beliefs. The broader or more transformative the scope of the change, the greater the number of assumptions or values to be changed and the greater the degree of difficulty in effecting change. Furthermore, to be successfully implemented, transformative change involves major changes in behaviours and attitudes. Such changes can be traumatic in the short-term and are rarely seen in favourable terms. Short-term disruptions of transformative change jaundice participants against whatever long-term advantages they may perceive.

Proposition 3: The more a change is perceived as desirable but impossible, the more valued the role of the OD consultant/change manager.

Participants will readily accept and work towards changes that are in their perceived self-interest. Change perceived as desirable but impossible creates an unsettling dissonance. What you want is something you cannot (or perceive you cannot) get. In that context, any help to make inevitable what seems impossible is welcomed. OD consultants and change managers, who utilize process skills and tools to expedite change, will be valued and find their services in high demand. In Scenario 3, change agents have a clear responsibility to make participant believers out of non-believers or sceptics. The fact that the change is perceived as desirable makes that task easy compared to the challenges in Scenario 4 where change is viewed as undesirable.
Proposition 4: The more undesirable the change, the less appreciated are OD interventions by recipients.

When change is undesirable, it is bound to be resisted, if not avoided, circumvented, or rejected outright. Consultants brought into the process often become lightning rods for the projection of participant anxiety and discontent. A change management consultant faced with facilitating an unpopular change, like re-engineering that leads to reductions in staff, is apt to face hostility. That reception and attitude can test a consultant’s loyalty to the client, who presumably perceives the change in some favourable light. That loyalty test can be especially problematic to consultants who identify with the historical values of the OD profession (French and Bell, 1998). In the latter, OD consultants more often identify with change participants than their employers who may be perceived as initiating an undesirable change and yet are the consultant’s chief client. What follows is a case of change examined in terms of its Appeal and Likelihood.

A Case of Change

Considering the perceived Appeal and Likelihood of some change, as part of an after-action review or learning process, can help practitioners understand the relative success of change initiatives. For example, in one intensively-studied, longitudinal change project, an international organisation reacted to increasing complexity in its internal and external environments by transitioning to a regional structure, thereby adding a layer to its hierarchy (DiBella, 1992a, 1992b, 1996; McPeak, 2001). This change was perceived in different ways by different organisational stakeholders leading to significant conflict and implementation challenges.

Different stakeholders, constituting different sub-cultures, had different views of the intended impact of the structural change that were each in their own way self-serving. Consequently, the perceived Appeal of the change was high, and that facilitated its adoption and early implementation. High Appeal led to a groundswell of support for the change and raised its Likelihood. As implementation went forward, the different views and interpretations of the change, among them those of a new CEO, became explicit, Appeal decreased, and resistance increased. When the CEO questioned the nature and viability of the change, the Board of Directors affirmed that the change would go forward. That formal action increased the perceived Likelihood of the change.

Perceptions of the change varied at different levels of analysis and across the organisation’s department-based sub-cultures (DiBella, 1996). Headquarters staff were very much in the Expedite mode of Scenario 1 of Figure 1 and worked diligently to orient the perceptions of change recipients to a similar point-of-view. Despite widespread efforts to communicate the change plan and monitor its implementation, the new organisational structure was initially embraced much more openly in some parts of the organisation than in others. However, as first one and then other regional offices were opened, the inevitability of the change became institutionally shared. With credibility about the change
established, the main focus of change recipients became how elements of the new structure could be shaped to make it more desirable.

**Research Directions**

Much as change is ongoing, so too do perceptions about change vary over time – as exemplified by the case described above. Indeed, for change in Scenarios 2, 3, and 4 to be ultimately achieved and beneficial, participant perceptions must shift. Research that looked at the shifting of perceptions over time in change projects would help us better understand how and under what conditions perceptions change. Such an approach should incorporate some focus on where and how perceptions about change emanate and whether they are socially constructed or a function of individual preferences. For example, what managerial behaviours or change management practices, such as building trust and credibility, most directly impact the perceived Appeal and Likelihood of some change? Also, exactly how critical are participant perceptions of change in terms of their impact on the realization of change outcomes?

Presumably, we want all participants to view change as desirable, but how essential is that and how widespread must that view be? For change outcomes to be realized is there a critical point of acceptance that must first be reached? Also, whose perceptions of change are critical to implementation? If informal leaders view change as desirable, are they apt to sway others to likewise see the change in favourable terms? If that is true, then what should be important to change managers is how key stakeholders and those of influence see the change, rather than some mean score of desirability among all participants. Monitoring change perceptions of key stakeholders over time can offer assurance whether change outcomes are being realized.

Research would also help clarify the relationships between perceptions of change and the typologies of change mentioned at the outset of this paper. For example, under what circumstances is incremental change more appealing than transformative change? To look at a relationship that on the surface appears counter-intuitive, are there any conditions under which transformative change is perceived as more inevitable than incremental change?

Grounded research could validate the criticality of other categories of change perceptions. Another category that has surfaced in my research is how or if a change is viewed as Worthwhile. Is the effort required to make some change happen perceived as worth the outcome and benefits to be realized once the change is enacted? This category is distinct from Appeal or Likelihood; it captures the relative cost-benefit of change effort to outcome. Presumably, the more a change is viewed as Worthwhile, the more commitment could be expected of participants and the greater the allocation of resources towards its implementation.

These perceptions of change (Appeal, Likelihood, Worth, and possible others) together shape images of change that can be compared to images of managing change. Palmer et al. (2006) distinguish between two images of managing change – controlling versus shaping. For change that is relatively unambiguous and uncontroversial (Scenario 1: desirable and inevitable), one can envision that the change manager’s role is one of controlling. In the other three scenarios,
where perceptions need to be modified to achieve change, the change manager needs to shape perceptions. Researching the roles and images of change managers given participant perceptions would increase our understanding of the complexities of the change process.

**Implications and Challenges for Practice**

Participant and stakeholder perceptions of change can serve as indicators of the relative success or progress of change implementation. The more widespread the view that change is desirable and inevitable, the more progress can be presumed to have been made towards reaching the change goal or outcome. That suggests that change managers must manage or shape participant perceptions even as they manage the change itself. Doing so, given the classical OD model of moving from current state to desired state (Burke, 1994), means monitoring and shifting participant perceptions throughout the transition phase.

If too many participants, stakeholders, recipients, or presumed beneficiaries of some change see it as undesirable, the political pressure against change will create a major force restraining implementation. Change managers and OD consultants should possess skills and tactics to shift participant perceptions to make change more appealing and seemingly more likely. Different scenarios will require different types of shifts and different types of tactics and roles. In Scenario 1 (*desirable, inevitable*), the change manager is merely an enabler to facilitate the realization of a change that is credible and desirable. In Scenario 2 (*desirable, impossible*), the change manager must build conviction, promote faith and hope, and give participants more reason to believe that the inevitable can and will happen. In Scenario 3 (*undesirable, inevitable*), the change manager must effectively get participants to accept something they hoped could be avoided.

Finally, in Scenario 4 (*undesirable, impossible*) the change manager faces the most daunting of tasks. Options include modifying the change to make it more appealing or altering the environment to make it seem more inevitable. Otherwise, a change manager might just act in accordance with the axiom ‘change what you can, accept what you can’t’. If the latter is the wisest course of action, retrenchment is the result until such time as the force field of change is reconfigured and other opportunities emerge.

Any phenomenon can be looked at from various perspectives. To examine change and name its characteristics from a researcher’s or outsider’s point of view provides us with only a partial view of the change experience. By incorporating perspectives from change participants, we can develop a richer understanding of the change experience and of the tools and tactics needed to implement change successfully.

**References**


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