Working with emergent change

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Introduction

Nowadays, people tend to speak of living in a " fast-moving and unpredictable world" (Burnes, 2004, p. 886), in a " turbulent, dynamic and unpredictable environment" (Burnes, 2000, p. 300) in which the frequency, dimensions and unpredictability of changes are higher than ever before (e. g. Kotter, 1996). Hammer and Champsy even go so far as to say that because of its ubiquity and endurance change " is the norm" (2001, p. 25). Thus, the Heraclitean dictum that " everything changes and nothing abides" seems more topical than ever. Nonetheless, you have to take notice of the fact that " about 70% of all change initiatives fail" (Beer & Nohria, 2000, p. 133). How can this phenomenon be explained? What approaches of change exist and what enables organisations to manage changes successfully?

In the following essay, I will first outline the traditional approach of planned change, its critics and, out of these, the evolving Emergent Change

approach. Subsequently, I will question if a sheer focus on the apparent predominant processual approach is sufficient. I will do so by outlining case studies of two organisations that successfully implemented changes by paying attention to both planned and emerging changes. These results and Burne's analysis of a further organisational change initiative will lead to my conclusion that the consideration of both perspectives is necessary for successful organisational changes. Then, I will briefly analyse possible reasons that might lead to the previously discussed one-sided perspectives before I end the essay with a conclusion.

Planned Change

The Planned Change approach seemed to prevail in the theory as well as the practice of change management " from the late 1940s to the early 1980s" (Burnes, 2000, p. 281) and is often referred to as the " best developed, documented and supported approach to change" (Ibid.).

Its roots mainly lie in the work of Kurt Lewin (Bamford and Forrester, 2003, p. 547) who is called by Schein the " intellectual father of (…) planned change" (1994, p. 239). Many planned change attempts are based on his three-stage model of unfreezing, moving and refreezing (Livne-Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009). Nevertheless, it has to be noted that Lewin himself believed that a successful change considered his concepts about " Field Theory", " Group Dynamics" and " Action Research" in addition to his famous three-stage model (Burnes, 2004, p. 887). However, in regard to his latter model, the three steps can be outlined as followed: Unfreezing describes the destabilization of a " quasi-stationary equilibrium" that exists in a compount field of driving and inhibiting forces (Ibid.). It is postulated that this

equilibrium has to be unsettled to overcome old stable human behaviour. Moving refers to the process of transmission to a " new way of being" (http://www. change-management-coach. com/kurt_lewin. html). To lead to an enduring change this process requires reinforcement. Thus, the last step, refreezing, covers the stabilization of the new behaviour (Burnes, 2004, p. 887). Bamford and Forrester state that this perspective is grounded on the assumption that organisational change is a process that " moves from one ' fixed state' to another through a series of pre-planned steps" (2003, p. 547). Consequently, it is to be systematically analysable and can be intentionally designed, initiated, and realized (Livne-Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009).

The importance of Lewin's work on organisational change is indisbutable. Accordingly, several authors have developed resembling approaches, such as Cummings' and Huse's (1989) eight-phase model or Bullock's and Batten's (1985) four phase model of planned change (Bamford & Forrester, 2003, p. 547).

Nonetheless, the weaknesses of the planned change approach at a time in which the environment becomes more and more unpredictable and turbulent seem obvious. Thus, many critical voices arouse especially in the early 1980s following the oil shocks of the 1970s, the expanding Japanese competitive power and the " apparent eclipse of Western industry" (Burnes, 2000, p. 281). These events raised questions regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of the established approaches. The main points of criticism, that mainly came from the culture-excellence school, the postmodernists and the processualists are outlined in the following (Burnes, 2004).

First, the Planned Change perspective is reproached to neglect environmental factors that might be incompatible with the planned change. For instance, Stickland, who draws on systems theory, emphasises the role of internal and external influences as " drivers" for organisational change (Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009, p. 4). A further point of criticism, that is especially brought out by the processualists, is that a change is not a series of " pre-identified discrete and self-contained events", but a more " open-ended" and " continuous process" where it is often unfeasible or unwanted to define a precise end state (Livne-Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009, p. 5). Furthermore, critics, such as Pfeffer (1992), blame the approach for ignoring the role of power and politics. They claim, in addition, that the advocated assumption of easily recognizable and resolvable conflicts is unrealistic in most organisational settings (Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009, p. 5).

Emergent Change

Taking these points of criticism into account, a different perspective on organisational change has evolved, namely an emergent, processual approach. According to Weick, emergent changes comprise " ongoing accommodations, adaptions, and alterations that produce fundamental change without a priori intention to do so" (2000, p. 237) and although Bamford and Forrester argue that its followers seem to be " more united in their stance against planned change than their agreement on a specific alternative" (2003, p. 547), you can still highlight certain characteristics that are typical for the Emergent Change approach.

Peculiar to the approach is the assumption that organisational change occurs as a " continuous process of experiment and adaption" with the goal of

adjusting the organisational processes and competences to a continuously changing environment. The idea of a turbulent environment, that prevails in today's societies and makes exclusive planned change programmes insufficient, is supported by several authors. Dawson (1994) and Wilson (1992), for example, emphasize the demands for a higher employee flexibility and constant structural adjustment that are associated with an " increasingly dynamic and uncertain" business environment (Burnes, 2000, p. 283). This constant structural adaption is brought about through a great number of " small- to medium-scale incremental changes" which might give rise to a " major re-configuration and transformation of an organisation" (p. 299).

Related to this assumption is a further characteristic of the Emergend Change Approach, that is to say, the belief in the " iterative and messy fashion" of change processes (p. 300). Thus, Pettigrew stresses the multi-causal, non-linear and unpredictable nature of change that develops through the " interplay of multiple variables (…) within an organisation" (p. 284). These variables involve different contexts, political processes and consultation. Similarly, Dawson states that " disruption, confusion and unforeseen events that emerge over long time-frames" determine change processes (Dawson, 1994, cited in Burnes, 2000, p. 285).

Furthermore, the Emergent Change perspective sees organisational change as a " political-social process" and does not narrow it down to a sheer " analytical-rational" routine (p. 300). Hence, it is assumed that during a change various parties will seek to preserve or amend their own interests. This can lead to conflicts and intrigues. Accordingly, Burnes argues that the

successful management of power and politics is a prerequisite for effective

change (p. 292). These power struggles are not limited to the upper

professions of an organisation. Thus, Burnes continues that it is beneficial

not only to possess the support of senior and local managers, but also of

trade unions and workplace employees.

Summing up, you can say that the Emergent Change approach stems from

the idea that change is " continuous, unpredictable, and essentially political

in nature" (Livne-Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009, p. 5). It evolved in response

to the traditional Planned Change approach that rooted in the works of Kurt

Lewin, but seemed insufficient in a time characterized by a dynamic and

unpredictable environment. However, although the declination of the

Planned Change approach appeared predominant and the literature provided

increasing support for the Emergent Change approach, it has to be

questioned if a sheer focus on the lauded processual approach is adequate.

Or would organisations profit from a combinational perspective paying

attention to both approaches? Several authors, in fact, suggest combining

varying approaches to change (e. g. Burnes, 2004; Beer and Nohria, 2000) or

have developed " connection frames" to link planned and emergent change

over time (Livne-Tarandach & Bartunek, 2009, p. 3). In the following I will

present two examples of organisational changes to underpin my opinion that

neither a solely planned nor a sheer emergent change approach is likely to

lead to successful changes. On the contrary, I argue for a combination of

both approaches.

Example 1

A first example of the insufficiency of a perspective that would solely focus on planned or emergent changes is provided by Orlikowski and Hofman (2003) who studied the introduction of a new technology and the accompanied changes in a software company. They even go one step further and assume not just planned and emergent changes in organisations, but also " opportunity-based" changes.

Zeta is one of the Top 50 software companies in the USA and produces several " powerful software products" enabling decision support, executive information and marketing (p. 269). Furthermore, it has a revenue of $100 million, and employs approximately 1000 people in its offices around the world.

In 1992, a new groupware technology was introduced in the Customer Service Department (CSD) within which a new Incident Tracking Support System (ITSS) was developed. The CSD consisted of specialists who technically advised clients, consultants and other Zeta employees and stakeholders via telephone. The aim of the new ITSS was to facilitate the minuting of customer calls and of the respective resolving progress of customers' problems. In the course of this process some planned organisational changes were executed. These changes are referred to as " planned changes" because they were predicted prior to the introduction of the new technology. For instance, the specialists were now to provide an additional " work-in-progress documentation" and the managers controled the department's recources more precisely through the " real-time access to workload information" (p. 271).

Nevertheless, while using of the new technology, several emergent changes could be noted as well. The specialists, for example, worked out a body of " informal quality indicators" to ascertain the " quality and value of prior resolutions" (p. 270) and managers considered documentation skills as decisive factors in hiring and evaluation processes. In the course of time further changes were introduced which Orlikowski and Hofman reference to as " opportunity-based changes". In contrast to the beforehand mentioned, these changes were neither anticipated before the introduction of the new technology nor did they " simply emerge spontaneously". Opportunity-based changes occur when an emergent change is observed and actors " deliberatley decide to reinforce (or undercut) that change" (http://icd. si. umich. edu/~cknobel/? q= node/41). Thus, they are enforced " in situ" and responding to arising chances and problems. An example of such an opportunity-based change appeared along the invention of partnerships between less expert junior specialists and more experienced senior specialists to redistribute call loads which lead to unforeseen problems. For instance, the junior specialists refused to cede calls that were too difficult to their senior partners because they wanted to appear competent and didn't want their senior partners to be overloaded. On the other hand, the senior specialists were too engaged to monitor their junior partners. Thus, the new role of an " intermediary" was introduced to prevent the collapse of the system. This intermediary was seen as a buffer to facilitate the information flow between the junior and the senior partner. A range of opportunity-based changes arouse during the usage of the new technology that demonstrated the importance of ongoing learning and change in practice in organizations.

Thus, the example showed that although planned changes occur in organisations, they are usually accompanied by emergent and opportunity-based changes. This means that the planned change of the introduction of the new technology in the CSD was followed by other planned changes as the additional work tasks of the employees on the one hand. Nevertheless, further ongoing changes emerged that made a continuous adaption of the organization essential.

Example 2

Wikström (2004) presents another vivid example of an organisation that has to deal with planned as well as emergent changes that arise at environmental, organisational and individual levels. His case study of the company Tieto-X discusses a successful customer relationship marketing (CRM) implementation and illustrates diverse ongoing changes to which the company had to respond.

Tieto-X is Finland's leading contract work solutions company that specializes in Information Technology. In 2002 employed about 270 people. The structure of the organisation and the collaboration with its clients made it necessary that the customer could have recourse to Tieto-X's operational system. This allowed the client, for example, to follow up the progress of an IT project.

To cope with its rapid growth, Tieto-X decided to start a " total systems renewal process" in 2002 (p. 6) and to change its business strategy from " product/service-oriented to a customer-oriented one" (p. 8). In addition to this planned change event the company was exposed to several further

planned as well as emerging changes that took place on an environmental, organisational and individual level (p. 6).

On an environmental level of observation, Tieto-X faced, for instance, the socalled " Year 2000 phenomen" and Finland's accession to the EMU that both lead to increased business chances through higher demands for IT services. Another emergent change event that affected the company from the environment was the enlarged entry of foreign firms into the Finish market and the accompanied sharpened competetion.

On an organisational level several planned change events could be observed in addition to the beforehand mentioned fundamental change of Tieto-X's business strategy to a more customer-oriented perspective and the final CRM implementation. For instance, there were multiple company mergers during the years 2000 and 2002 and the associated merging of disparate organisational cultures. Furthermore, a new product and service portfolio was elaborated and an altered reward system was invented. However, even on this organisational level of observation, Tieto-X had to cope with an emergent change event, namely the turnover of top management.

Moreover, you could observe different planned and emergent change events on an individual level. Thus, changes in occupational descriptions and " new divisions of tasks" represented planned change events and the rise in " turnover of salespeople" as well as the request for " new competencies" consituted emergent changes to which the company had to respond.

The example illustrates that organisational change is a " multifaceted phenomenon" (p. 9) with planned and emergent changes happening on an

environmental, organisational and individual level. Tieto-X's CRM implementation was successful because the organisation managed to deal with both the anticipated as well as the ongoing and unforeseen changes.

Complementing the two discussed cases that clearly demonstrate the need for organisations to pay attention to both planned and emergent changes, Burnes is a decisive advocate of the combinational perspective. For instance, he draws on the case of XYZ construction, a multi-national enterprise that used planned as well as emergent changes between 1996 and 2000 to transform itself, illustrating that planned and emergent changes are not to be seen as " competitors" and that they are neither " mutually exclusive" nor " incapable" (Burnes, 2004, p. 899). In addition to spotting the right moment when an organisation is ready for a change, he identifies the ability to understand the organisational context as a key competency of management to ensure successful organisational changes. Thus, the management has to comprehend the organisation's nature and its circumstances that determine what and how changes have to occur (Ibid.).

Possible reasons for a onesided perspective

Regarding this discussion one might ask why people solely considered a planned or emergent change approach in the first place. The reasons for managers to consider planned change initiatives seem obvious. First, planned change programmes communicate a sense of security and control (e. g. Nutt, 1993). The idea of a change initiative starting at a certain point, running through a series of predetermined stages and ending at a predefined endpoint might appear riskless and especially appealing to managers who face the pressure of conducting a change programme while keeping up the "

business as usual". Furthermore, people perceive uncertainness as strongly aversive in general (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois and Callan, 2004). Even if one could argue that this promised predictability might be illusionary when conducting change problems in real dynamic business environments with people who are, at least partly, led by their own desires, fears, perceptions and assumptions, one has to take into account that some situations certainly require a planned, systematic approach. Consider for example the introduction of a new IT-sytem. On the other hand, advocates of the emergend change approach might argue that planned changes are useless because of the unpredictable nature of the organisation's business environment and the change process in general. Thus, they might ask why attempt a planned change anyway if you assume that plan A does not lead to anticipated result B. Here you see a problem that is often associated with approaches that arise out of a backblash from an apparent devaluated one. Although the main ideas themselves seem totally reasonable and appropriate, a sheer focus on the newly originated aspects might turn out to be as insufficient as the initially criticised approach.

Conclusion

This essay critcally discussed the statement that " as the environment becomes more unpredictable, OD will have to help organisations learn to work with emergent change (in addition to planned change)". Therefore, I introduced the traditional approach of planned change and the critical review that faced it especially during the 1980s. The Emergent Change approach that arouse out of the outlined points of cristicsm was presented subsequently. Afterwards, I challenged the appropriateness of the Emergent

Change approach and raised the question if it might be necessary to consider both approaches to set the conditions for successful organisational changes. Hence, I analysed this question by presenting two case studies of organisations that faced planned and emergent change events during their organisational changes. Both companies succeed due to their attention paid to both approaches. This fact and Burke's case study strengthened my belief in the beforehand raised question and led to my conclusion that an organisation must to be able to deal with planned and emergent changes to survive in the dynamic and unpredictable environment of the 21st century.