

Theory to Practice

Commentary

Article

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Fernandez and Rainey: Managing Successful Organizational Change in the Public Sector: An Agenda for Research and Practice

Sergio Fernandez and Hal Rainey have provided a wonderfully eclectic review of the organizational change literature as it pertains to the public sector. Our intent here is to offer a few thoughts prompted by their review. Those thoughts fall into two categories, positive and normative. Our positive thoughts go to their description of organizational change, the roles that players perform in a change process, and the phases of the change process. Our normative thoughts go to the effects of organizational change on those upon whom it is visited.

Modeling Planned Change
In summarizing the vast literature on organizational change, Fernandez and Rainey conclude that there are eight determinants

of success: ensure the need, provide a plan, build internal support and overcome resistance, ensure top management support and commitment, build external support, provide resources, institutionalize the change, and pursue comprehensive change. Nearly every student of organizational change has a similar list. Three examples that are not cited in the article, but also will be valuable to *PAR* readers are:

- Kotter and Cohen (2002): Increase urgency, build the guiding team, get the vision right, communicate for buy-in, empower action, create short-term wins, don't let up, make change stick.
- Connor, Lake, and Stackman (2003): Initiate the processes of analysis, envision the desired future state and how to get there, craft the plan for getting to that

future state, carry out the strategies and tactics called for by the plan, evaluate/monitor and institutionalize the change.

- Cummings and Worley (2005): Motivate change, create a vision for change, develop political support, manage the transition, sustain momentum.

What is missing from all these lists is some important detail that *PAR* readers need to consider. For example, the second proposition in Table 1 in the Fernandez and Rainey article says (simply) "provide a plan. . . a course of action. . . a strategy [with] milestones. . ." and offers some subpropositions for doing so. These, however, prompt additional questions. What does it mean to provide a plan? At a minimum it means answering the following questions (Connor et al. 2003): What are the *objects* of change; i.e., what needs to be changed—tasks or activities that individuals perform, routines and procedures, mechanisms and processes such as how decisions get made, how information flows, how control is exercised? What *methods* will be employed in carrying out a particular large-scale change? There are several that are available, ranging from technological to structural. What *strategies* are most appropriate under the circumstances—providing the participants with a new script, developing their capacity to perform their assigned roles, coerce them into doing so?

These questions, in turn, suggest a number of research lines of inquiry:

- How do the members of organizations¹ reliably identify the "objects" on which change-energy should be spent?
- What governance mechanisms should the members of organizations use to choose change methods?

- If different circumstances call for different strategies, what distinguishes one "circumstance" from another? And how does that translate into a choice of strategy?

Who's Who?

Fernandez and Rainey identify some important actors in any change process. Their text, propositions, and sub-propositions speak specifically to "managerial leaders," "top management," "change agents," and "idea champions" (although the latter two seem to be treated as if they are roughly the same) and more generally to a number of other roles that must be performed to accomplish social change. *PAR* readers would do well to conceptualize these as follows (see Connor et al. 2003, 140-43 for an elaboration): *Catalysts* acknowledge, sometimes encourage, dissatisfaction with the status quo. They might be thought of as *agents provocateurs*, leading others to feel sufficiently frustrated or perturbed to call for change. *Solution givers* offer suggestions about what can be done to solve problems or take advantage of opportunities. *Process helpers* assist change managers and organization members in understanding how the process of change should work—both generally, as with the models referred to above, and in the specific case at hand. *Resource linkers* bring together various financial, people, and knowledge resources. These are, of course, all leadership roles. We don't deny the need for leadership in the organizational change process. Rather, we prefer to think of leadership in terms of roles rather than positions.

These roles are important enough to deserve serious inquiry. First, it seems likely that they call for different capabilities on the part of those who play them. Second, it also seems reasonable to expect that the effectiveness with which they are performed will

depend upon identifiable circumstances. Finally, Fernandez and Rainey observe that organizational change can be fruitfully thought of as taking place in identifiable phases. Accordingly, the roles identified above suggest the following avenues for research:

- What knowledge, skills, and attributes of individuals are associated with success in performing each role?
- What contextual—i.e., organizational, environmental—conditions are associated with success in performing each role?
- Which roles are critical to each phase of a successful change process?
- How do the roles differ in relative importance, by phase?

Transition Phase

The authors allude to one of the most useful devices for thinking about the conduct of organizational change. In endnote 10 they refer to "forces in the desired direction [and] opposing forces." The reference, as they note, is to Kurt Lewin's (1947; 1951) conceptualization of a change process as taking place within a sort of force-field. The idea is that the organization is in a state of momentary equilibrium. For it to move from its current state to some desired end state, one or both of two things are required: either facilitating forces need to be increased (amplified or added to) or opposing forces need to be reduced (decreased or deleted).

There is a key piece that is missing in this formulation, however. As an executive friend of ours is fond of saying, in talking about moving from the current state to the end state, "Meanwhile, we have a business to run." The phase to which "meanwhile" refers is known in the literature as the *transition* phase. Bridges (2003) argues that this

phase consists of the following sequence: first, members of the organization let go of the past; second, they endure a kind of limbo between the old and new, in which they experience a certain level of disorientation—a confused feeling of "what in the world is going on here?"; and then finally they reorient themselves, so that things make sense again. Successful management of the transition phase requires three timing questions to be answered: where should the first change action occur, when must the change be essentially complete, and what are the optimal sequence and timing for applying whatever strategies and tactics have been decided upon?² In turn, these suggest some intriguing research questions pertaining to the key variables integral to transition management:

- In successful change efforts, how do organizations help their members to "let go"? What—empirically, not anecdotally—works and what does not?
- In successful change efforts, what decision rules govern the staging—the sequence and timing—of strategies and tactics?
- Are there activities at each stage that the participants must get absolutely right?

Change Recipients: Targets?

If we have any concern with the authors' otherwise broad-minded examination of the organizational change literature, it is with their implicit attitude toward the recipients of change—the organization members upon whom a particular change is visited. Consider the language in Table 1's several propositions and sub-propositions: "convince organizational members," "craft a compelling vision," "employ communication [to] disseminate the need for change," "build internal support and *overcome resistance*," "encourage participation and open discussion *to reduce resistance* to change" (emphasis added in both cases). To us, there is a

clear contradiction between these words: *employ... active participation, encourage... open discussion*, and these words: *overcome, convince, disseminate, manage participation*. The language of the propositions and sub-propositions is altogether consistent with a top-down, managed perspective on effecting organizational change. Management knows, it's the employees' job to follow.

Well, this is a time-honored normative perspective. But there is an alternative one. This alternative perspective argues that organizational change occurs most successfully when organization members are truly engaged, when they actually care about the outcome, and when they "have the necessary ownership, commitment, and will to implement" change strategies (Axelrod 2000, 2). From this perspective, engagement, caring, ownership, and commitment are not the result of being overcome, convinced, disseminated to, or, we daresay, "managed." Rather, they come about by virtue of organization members' views in fact being taken into account and considered; by *many*—read, most—members being involved in the design and implementation of a change process;³ by members' ideas and information being systematically shared widely; and by the formation of "communities" of members who share interests, knowledge, and abilities.

This point of view, popular among academics and consultants (see, for instance, the Society for Organizational Learning and *Systems Thinker*), yields such interesting research questions as:

- How does one measure the costs and benefits of participatory versus hierarchical approaches to organizational governance? Over what period should costs and benefits be measured?

- What is the evidence that engaging organization members ("widen the circle of involvement," advocates Axelrod [2000]) increases the success of a given change effort?

- Under what conditions is success proportional to the resources expended?

- Should the "circle of involvement" be maximally wide in all cases; if not, what are the conditioning variables?

- Is the success of a change process related to the degree to which information is widely shared? And a corollary: what information is relevant and what does "widely" mean?

As noted at the outset, our intent in this commentary was to suggest a few supplements to Fernandez and Rainey's review for *PAR* readers to consider. We have suggested incorporating some more detail in the phase models that most students of change employ, attending to the fact that different actors play different roles in an organizational-change process, and adding the transition phase to the research agenda. Finally, we have suggested that there is a competing perspective to the one that the authors implicitly adopt, commonly described as the participatory approach (Roberts 2004; Thompson and Miller 2003). Greater attention should be given to the notion that organizational change efforts are more likely to be successful where they reflect team-based collaborative governance mechanisms that mobilize the collective intelligence of their members. Certainly, participation should be easier to achieve in the workplace than in society. Work is central to our lives; government and its functions are not, which implies an important relational distinction. In society writ large, participation in governance is largely a cost; at work, it is a benefit.

Notes

1. We develop below our reasons for talking about the members of organizations, rather than managers.
2. Bridges (2003) has much to say about such questions as these. Connor et al. (2003, 182-86) elaborate on the idea of transition management by suggesting the "transition profile," a method for staging the application of change strategies and tactics so as to take full advantage of resource availability.
3. This is why we say, above, that the members of organizations—rather than managers—identify objects of change, employ decision rules, and the like.

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