

Revisiting the Concept of Change Management

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For the past several years I have been uneasy about some of the assumptions that people seem to make when they talk about “change management.” Change management practitioners have, over the past decade, done some solid thinking, and some of them have created a disciplined practice around the term. But change management efforts are known to be too frequently unsuccessful. I believe that the fundamental approach to organizational change that is often taken both by change management professionals and executives in their client organizations may be inherently problematic, particularly in today’s complex world.

- Change management seems to be approached as if it were a one-time transition process intended to take the organization from one steady state to another steady state.
- It is often an “afterthought” practice, applied after the change has been decided on by senior management in response to urgent needs, and when planning for change is already underway. (At that stage, the application of change management techniques is often too late to be fully effective.)
- It is thought of as an “extra” expense that has to be in the budget because of anticipated “resistance” by employees and others to the change. (Its cost is, therefore, a major consideration for management, and is particularly closely watched, because it looks like icing on the cake. After all, people should simply do their jobs.)
- It is frequently “completed” or ended long before its effects can be durable, partly because of the fiscal and time costs involved in continuing.

I believe that traditional approaches to change management should be considered a special case of a broader process (described below), and that the special cases in which it can be successfully applied are increasingly rare. “Steady states” are infrequent; recurrent, disruptive change is more and more common in businesses, governmental agencies, and other organizations. The proper task of the change management professional, therefore, is to help prepare client organizations for periodic change, and to help them through instances that may be especially difficult for them.

Heitger and Doujak¹ make an excellent case both for the major disruptions that are common to change efforts, and for the enormous complexity involved in change management. Unfortunately, the Heitger/Doujak book has not yet been translated from the original German to English. It is the most thoughtful, comprehensive, and useful piece that has been written on the subject. The authors’ work goes far beyond the model-based approaches to change management common in the U.S. It explains and takes fully into account the inherent uncertainties and unpredictability in change processes, the vicissitudes and power of the emotional states of employees and other stakeholders, and the many other factors that contribute to the complexity and the struggles of a changing system.

I prefer to think of change management, then, as preparation for *major changes in the present and the future* -- as a means of strengthening the *agility, the internal resilience, and the*

peripheral vision of the organization. If we assume that steady states are, in most cases, temporary and illusory, a serious investment in long-term preparation for changing conditions is essential to the survival of companies. Even apparently simple organization changes, such as a government agency's adaptation to new IT technologies, are far more complex (and more frequent) than they appear. While a defined change problem in the present can be a stimulus for more permanent organizational enhancement, the preparation for the particular change should be thought of as an investment in longevity. It should be thought of also as enhancing the organization's present and future capacity to adapt successfully to (and eventually create) market, mission, and environmental conditions.

ⁱ Heitger, B and Doujak, A. (2004) *Harte Schnitte, Neues Wachstum: Die Logik der Gefühle und die Macht der Zahlen*. Frankfurt/Wien: Redline Wirtschaft beu Ueberreuter.