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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE PROCESSES IN ORGANISATIONS: HOW CAN LEADERS CONTRIBUTE TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION?

Judith Marx

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies

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Abstract: *Organisations are forced to continuously adapt to their organisational environment, which regularly takes place within the framework of change processes. Leaders play a key role in this process. The article is based on a literature review of books, journals and online articles and refers to a study on this topic. It examines the terminology used in change management and three existing scientific models on this topic. The focus is on the willingness to change and the emotional component of the people affected by change. It explores in depth the question of why announcements of planned changes by leaders often trigger negative feelings and, as a result, resistance among employees. Therefore, the psychological mechanisms associated with change are analysed and the role of leaders in dealing constructively with the psychological thought and behaviour patterns of their employees is examined. It can be concluded that change management can only be successful if employees are allowed to express their fears, concerns and reservations to their leaders and these are taken into account.*

Keywords: *organizations; change management; leadership; emotions; resistance*

INTRODUCTION

The current decade has been marked by some radical changes and upheavals: the COVID-19 pandemic is a key event in this regard, bringing about fundamental changes for people within an extremely short period of time (Held/Geißler 2020, p. 22). This has also led to serious disruptions for people in their roles as employees and leaders (Bruch/Berenbold 2020, p. 44). In view of today's VUCA world, which is characterised by rapid change (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 101–104; Mattes 2022), effective change management is more important than ever (hr works 2025). This makes it all the more alarming that only 4% of those surveyed in the Change Fitness Study 2020/2021 currently rate their organisation as 'change-fit' (Mutaree 2022). The fact that, according to this study, around three quarters of all change projects fail also confirms the need for change capability in organisations (hr works 2025).

In order for changes to be successfully implemented and sustained, leaders in particular must gain a theoretical awareness of these important organisational processes. In doing so, it is important to attach great importance to the psychological dimensions of change processes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This publication is based on a literature review that first deals with terminology related to change management and classifies it according to its historical development. It then analyses and distinguishes between existing models of change management. Based on this analysis, the psychological dimensions relevant to change processes are identified and the role of leaders in dealing with these dimensions appropriately is examined. This literature review includes books, journals, online articles and a study on the topic of change management.

RESULTS

Terminology: Organisational development, change management and transformation management

Even though the term change management is used today as an umbrella term for all change processes, from a chronological perspective, organisational development should be mentioned first.

The term organisational development, which originated in the 1970s, is based on a humanistic

view of humanity: People were no longer seen as merely subordinate parts of work or production processes, but rather as essential resources that contribute significantly to the success or failure of such processes. The idea behind organisational development was to involve people in the processes of the working world, i.e. organisational development is based on a democratic understanding. In other words, work and its processes should no longer be determined over people's heads, but with their heads (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 304–305, 312–313; Walde 2014, p. 27).

This paradigm shift, which now places people at the centre of work processes, ties in with the humanistic approaches that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which were founded by researchers such as Abraham Harold Maslow, Frederick Herzberg and Clayton P. Alderfer (Bartscher/Nissen 2017, p. 85; Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 32–33).

Based on this newly developed view of humanity and self-image, it was essential for the founders of organisational development that people be 'taken along' and involved in change processes so that the respective organisational members could ultimately identify with the decisions made during the change processes (French/Bell 1994; Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, p. 305).

Since participation plays a major role in organisational development processes and the social needs of people must be harmoniously aligned with the goals of the organisation, these are inevitably long-term processes (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, p. 313; Walde 2014, p. 27).

Recognising that organisational development processes require such a long period of time and the resulting desire to shorten or streamline change processes, the concept of change management developed in the 1990s, which – as mentioned at the beginning – now functions as an umbrella term or synonym for all change processes.

In contrast to organisational development, where changes can arise and grow organically in line with the humanistic and idealistic approach, change management processes take a much more objective and goal-oriented approach (Vahs 2003, p. 252; Walde 2014, p. 18).

It is not absolutely necessary for everyone in the organisation to be mentally involved in the change processes; rather, it is sufficient for change management processes if the attitudes and behaviours of certain key individuals, who act as multipliers, change. A key feature of change management processes is their top-down orientation (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, p. 312; Walde 2014, p. 20–21).

The term transformation management, which emerged in 2010, aims to combine the aforementioned problem-solving capabilities of change management with development-oriented and systemic approaches. A key feature here is radical change that goes to the root of the problem (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 313–314; Scharmer 2016).

Furthermore, transformation management anticipates potential future crises and prepares in advance for impending imbalances so that, when the unfavourable situation actually arises, the organisation is more resilient and therefore better able to respond. Unlike change management processes, the organisation no longer reacts exclusively to disharmonious situations, but acts in advance, thus moving from a previously passive or wait-and-see role to an active role. Transformation management involves strong participatory elements and initiates learning and reflection processes that raise the level of awareness of those involved (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 313–314).

In summary, it can be said that all three terms relating to change management still exist, although, as explained above, they originated in different historical eras or movements and therefore have different focuses.

Kurt Lewin's model of change

To ensure that change processes can proceed in a meaningful and orderly manner, models have been created that can be used to describe and systematise the respective phases.

Kurt Lewin is considered the 'founding father of organisational development' (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, p. 302) and, in the 1940s, created a model within the framework of pioneering theory (Walde 2014, p. 14) that describes change in three phases. These are: unfreezing, moving and freezing (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, p. 302).

In the first phase of unfreezing, it is first established that the existing situation no longer meets people's expectations. This means that an awareness of change is created and it is clear that the sta-

tus quo should be abolished or changed. In line with the English term unfreezing, the current equilibrium must be “thawed”. The aim here is to pool and mobilise the forces of those who recognise the need for change. The habits and behaviours that exist at this point are now being questioned.

After this initial phase comes the moving phase. As the term implies, this phase is about the people involved gradually moving towards a new equilibrium. This is a kind of ‘trial phase’ in which new behaviours are tested and various solutions are tried out in smaller projects. Lewin pursues the humane goal of involving those affected in the planning process through conversations, analyses and discussions and, if necessary, providing them with psychological support. With these newly implemented and practised behaviours, steps are now taken to achieve the new equilibrium. In other words, the changes are implemented and the previous status quo is abandoned.

The final phase is freezing, i.e. the new equilibrium is “frozen”. As this metaphorical image suggests, the aim now is to stabilise the changes implemented in the second phase and thus make them a permanent part of the organisation. In other words, this phase is intended to guarantee the long-term nature of the changes that have been made, so that old and familiar behaviour patterns are not fallen back into, which would undo the success of the changes that have been made. The aim here is to sustainably implement and establish the new behaviour from the moving phase (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 302–303; Lewin 1947, Walde 2014, pp. 65–67).

The model developed by Lewin is of a rather trivial nature, used to illustrate social changes in organisations and societies. Incidentally, it assumes that the process of change within a group is much more efficient than when only a single individual is involved, due to group dynamics (Walde 2014, p. 22–23). By dividing the process into just three phases, the model is quite clear and easy to apply; however, it seems less suitable for more complex change processes, such as those involved in transformation management.

John Kotter’s model of the change process

Building on the model described above, John Kotter created his 8-step model of organisational change, in which he further differentiated the three phases of Kurt Lewin’s model. According to Kotter, it is essential for the success of change that all eight steps are intensively followed in the order specified (Kotter 1996, pp. 23–24).

First of all, it should be noted that the first three phases of Kotter’s model correspond to the first phase of Lewin’s model, unfreezing. The next three phases correspond to the second phase of Lewin’s model, moving, and the last two phases correspond to the third phase of Lewin’s model, freezing.

In the following description, the eight phases of Kotter’s model are subdivided into three different phases in accordance with the previously described phases of Lewin’s model, which form the headings for the following three and two phases, respectively.

Phase 1: Creating a climate for change

Kotter believes it is necessary to create a sense of urgency and importance in the first phase. This means that, in addition to objectively highlighting the problem or the reason why the company needs to change, people must also be addressed on an emotional level, which Kotter believes is essential in order to motivate them to take action.

The second phase is about building a powerful (leadership) coalition. This is based on Kotter’s idea that individuals alone are weak and that the probability of achieving change is significantly higher when several people are involved.

According to Kotter, the third phase is about creating a vision, i.e. a picture of what the future role of a company should look like. This vision should be developed jointly by the people involved in the change process and the organisation’s management. For Kotter, creating a vision is essential in order to motivate people to embrace change and give them a perspective on what the future holds for them and the organisation (Kotter 1996, pp. 35–83).

Phase 2: Inspire and empower the organisation

In the fourth phase, the vision created in phase three must now be communicated to the people. This means that everyone in the organisation should know where the change is heading, why it is being made and – very importantly – what the members of the organisation will ultimately

gain from it. It is therefore necessary to communicate the benefits that the change will bring to the organisation.

The fifth phase is about empowering the broad base for change, i.e. giving it strength and making it powerful. This means that the framework conditions must now be created to actually implement the change.

The sixth phase is about making the initial successes that have been achieved so far visible, i.e. highlighting the so-called quick wins: After a certain period of time, the members of the organisation should see that progress has been made and that the work done so far is paying off, so that this has a positive effect on their motivation for further work. The successes can be made visible, for example, through communication platforms or homepages (Kotter 1996, p. 85–130).

Phase 3: Implementing and maintaining changes

In the seventh phase, the measures that have been adopted are now to be implemented. This is done by publishing the new requirements in a manner that is binding for everyone. This could be, for example, a new internal agreement that has been developed and is now published via email or on the organisation's intranet. It should be clear to everyone that the new requirements or regulations are now in force.

The eighth and final phase is about ensuring that the new measures are firmly established. In line with the final phase of freezing in Lewin's model, the aim is to ensure that what has been newly created remains in place and is firmly established in the organisation (Kotter 1996, pp. 131–158).

The model of 'transformation from within' according to Janes et al.

The first phase of this model involves clarifying why and how a transformation is necessary in the first place, i.e. identifying the need for transformation and pinpointing problems. To this end, interviews are conducted with the organisation's employees and leaders. It is important that all situations and perspectives of the people in the organisation are taken into account so that a comprehensive insight into the mental and emotional views of the people affected is guaranteed. The need for change is then derived from this.

The top priority in this model is therefore that all those involved work together and that no individual perspectives are left out. According to Janes et al., it is completely unrealistic to suggest a single reason or cause for an action as the basis for change projects. Rather, it is necessary for all individuals to be able to identify with the transformation and thus feel committed to its success (Janes et al. 2001, p. 16, 61–71).

The first phase of the 'transformation from within' corresponds to the first phase of Kotter's model described above, in which a sense of urgency is created.

The second phase of the model is about establishing a clear vision, i.e. a desired image of the future. It is therefore a matter of the organisation answering the question of what a future target state should look like. For the transformation, goals and criteria for success are identified, to which the members should commit themselves. The transformation project is mapped out in various sub-projects and a project organisation. This shows that greater importance is attached to the topic of project organisation (Janes et al. 2001, pp. 71–79). The degree of openness/closedness of the processes should also be agreed upon in this phase (Janes et al. 2001, p. 16).

The second phase is comparable to phases three and four of Kotter's model, in which he also deals with the vision that needs to be developed and communicated.

In the third phase, the transformation projects created previously are implemented. For a successful transformation, it is important that the project teams are constantly adapted and reviewed. The responsibilities between the different actors are divided accordingly. During the implementation of the transformation in this phase, it is important that the transformation process is continuously evaluated for its effectiveness. This gives the organisation the opportunity to intervene and take appropriate countermeasures at any time if developments arise that run counter to the goals and vision (Janes et al. 2001, p. 79 – 117).

This phase is comparable to the second phase in Kotter's model, in which a (leadership) coalition is formed.

The fourth phase deals with the changes that are initiated through projects. This phase is about

anchoring the changes that have been made in the organisation for the long term, i.e. ensuring that they are implemented permanently. It is also important that the consultants participate actively and do not withdraw, which Janes et al. consider to be very fundamental. In this phase, particular attention should be paid to resistance, which should be addressed in dialogue. The aim here is not simply to resolve resistance, but rather to use it as an opportunity to incorporate critical considerations into the changes (Janes et al. 2001, pp. 117–130).

This fourth phase is comparable to phases five, six and seven of Kotter's model, in which implementation in line with the vision takes place, successes are communicated and developments are built upon.

The fifth and final phase of the 'transformation from within' involves a comprehensive evaluation of the transformation itself: the results and effects of the transformation are identified and the outcomes achieved are evaluated. It is important that this final phase also defines follow-up projects that build organically on the changes already made and preserves the newly acquired knowledge. In addition, the changes achieved and the success achieved so far should be built upon (Janes et al. 2001, pp. 130–143).

This phase is congruent with the eighth phase of Kotter's model, in which the sustainability of change is postulated.

Comparative overview of Kotter's model and the model developed by Janes et al.

First of all, it should be noted that the model of 'transformation from within' described above is not based on Kotter's model and does not follow the same chronological sequence of phases. Rather, Kotter's basic ideas are very clearly reflected in the model developed by Janes et al. As described above, Kotter's model focuses heavily on the emotional level: he calls on those involved in change processes to create a sense of urgency and to empower employees on a broad basis to participate in the implementation of change. Kotter's call is based on the view that change can only be successfully implemented if people are not only addressed cognitively, but if change processes are also emotionally grounded. He therefore links these two areas – the cognitive and emotional levels – in order to achieve the greatest possible mobilisation of the people involved in change processes.

Kotter's fundamental idea that people need to understand and also grasp emotionally why the transformation should take place is retained in the model developed by Janes et al., meaning that addressing the emotional level is common to both models. The difference in the 'transformation from within' model, however, is that it takes the perspective of management consulting; the authors are also external consultants (Janes et al. 2001, p. XIII) who accompany the transformation process in this capacity. This position results in a different perspective than is the case with Kotter's model.

The psychological dimension of change processes and the role of the leader

'Change is what people fear most' (Stuttgarter Zeitung 2012) – this quote from Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky aptly describes how humans are, on the one hand, naturally averse to change and, on the other hand, often very fearful of change. In this respect, this observation corresponds with the deficits identified in the Change Fitness Study 2020/2021 with regard to the implementation of change processes and provides insight into the reasons for this (Mutaree 2022).

As an outward sign of these basic psychological attitudes, leaders in particular are inevitably confronted with people's resistance to change of any kind during change processes. To make matters worse, the reasons for and necessity of change processes are often not communicated clearly and in a way that is relevant to the target audience. Managed employees then only perceive that something is supposed to change for them, but they are often uncertain about what this change will ultimately mean for them. The announced change triggers the fear described in the above quote, as those affected assume, in a kind of pessimistic attitude, that the desired change will be to their disadvantage. In other situations, however, it can be observed that although the people affected have understood what the goal of the change is, they harbour a certain mistrust of these change plans because they do not know whether their leader is actually telling them the truth or whether this is a whitewashing of what is actually a negative consequence for them (Glatz/Graf-Götz 2018, pp. 292–293).

This resistance to organisational change can manifest itself in the form of vague rejection, barely comprehensible concerns or, for example, employees withdrawing from their leaders or displaying demonstratively passive behaviour towards them (Doppler/Lauterburg 2002, p. 323).

There is consensus in the literature and academia that resistance to change processes is always present. Of course, it must be taken into account that the intensity and severity of the resistance described may vary greatly from person to person. Not everyone reacts to change with the same defensive attitude as everyone else. The experiences of the individuals concerned certainly also play a role in the pessimistic attitude described above. If an employee has had negative experiences in the past with communication and the implementation of change processes, these are likely to shape their future attitude. Based on this experience, resistance to new announcements of change would certainly be greater in a person who has already had negative experiences than in someone who has not yet had such experiences.

The fact that change generally causes resistance and that not every member of an organisation supports these changes from the outset is evident from the fact that roles within an organisation are very heterogeneous and that hierarchies are understood to be an essential structural feature (Kühl 2020, p. 8). This in turn means that members of organisations have very different expectations, as expressed in the following statement:

‘Simply because organisational members are in contact with different segments of the environment and occupy different positions within the organisation, they develop different, often conflicting perspectives’ (Kühl 2020, p. 128).

When implementing change processes, it is therefore necessary for leaders to develop an awareness that people can develop varying degrees of resistance. Leaders must take this into account and integrate it into the planning of change processes from the outset (Walde 2014, p. 33).

The following sentence clearly illustrates that simply ignoring resistance or responding to it with repressive behaviour is unlikely to be successful:

‘If it is not possible to identify the causes of resistance or respond to them appropriately, in particular by involving those who are resisting, the project is doomed to failure’ (Walde 2014, p. 33).

In other words, according to the physical principle that pressure causes counterpressure, such pressure exerted by leaders on employees also results in them resisting even more and attempting to boycott and sabotage the change processes imposed on them. That means, such a repressive and ignorant approach to the resistance of the employees being managed creates a negative reciprocity in such a way that the existing resistance is further intensified and is used exclusively for further oppositional action and not – as actually desired by the leader – for constructive cooperation in the very processes that have been initiated.

Emotions often form the basis of this resistance. These can be rooted in the personality of those affected, for example because they have an anxious basic structure and therefore view all changes with great scepticism and defensiveness, or because they have already had negative experiences with change processes in the past.

With the first stage in Kotter’s model, which creates a sense of urgency and importance, leaders can therefore address precisely this emotional level and give those affected by change processes the opportunity to deal with their own feelings and to articulate them. It is therefore legitimate and even expressly desirable to verbalise concerns and controversial views and not to ‘silence’ or taboo them, as expressed in the following sentence: ‘Whenever smart and well-intentioned people avoid confronting obstacles, they disempower employees and undermine change’ (Kotter 1996, p. 11). According to Kotter, employees are weakened and the chances of change are undermined if leaders – with good intentions – avoid confronting obstacles, i.e. resistance.

For such an open approach to resistance, Kotter also considers it essential that leaders practise honest and credible communication in order to reach people on a mental and emotional level (Kotter 1996, p. 9).

The failure of change management processes is not seen as being caused by resistance or as the original problem, but rather by feelings or, more precisely, by a failure to take them into account (Janes et al. 2001, p. 14).

CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be said that change processes are subject to a structural sequence that takes place in the stages and phases described in the models presented by Lewin, Kotter and Janes et al. It should be noted that it is essential for leaders to address the emotional level in change processes in order to achieve a willingness to change among employees. It is also important that employees are given an idea of what the future will look like for them after the change has been implemented, i.e. that they are presented with a vision that motivates them. From a psychological point of view, it is also essential that leaders take all feelings associated with change processes, particularly those expressed as worries or fears, seriously and respond to them in a way that resonates with their employees. Only if these negative emotions are taken into account by leaders from the outset is it possible to minimise or even eliminate resistance to change. Successful change management can ultimately be achieved if the changes initiated in line with the models developed by Lewin, Kotter and Janes et al. are implemented permanently and thus sustainably anchored in the organisational unit of the respective leader.

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ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВОТО НА ПРОЦЕСИТЕ НА ПРОМЯНА В ОРГАНИЗАЦИИТЕ: КАК МОГАТ ЛИДЕРИТЕ ДА ДОПРИНЕСАТ ЗА УСПЕШНОТО ИМ ПРИЛАГАНЕ?

Резюме: Организацията са принудени да се адаптират непрекъснато към своята организационна среда, което редовно се случва в рамките на процесите на промяна. Лидерите играят ключова роля в този процес. Статията се основава на преглед на литературата от книги, списания и он-лайн статии и се позовава на проучване по тази тема. Тя разглежда терминологията, използвана в управлението на промените, и три съществуващи научни модела по тази тема. Акцентът

е върху готовността за промяна и емоционалния елемент на хората, засегнати от промяната. Тя разглежда в дълбочина въпроса защо обявяването на планирани промени от лидерите често предизвиква негативни чувства и в резултат на това – съпротива сред служителите. Затова се анализират психологическите механизми, свързани с промяната, и се разглежда ролята на лидерите в конструктивното справяне с психологическите модели на мислене и поведение на техните служители. Може да се заключи, че управлението на промяната може да бъде успешно само ако на служителите се даде възможност да изразят своите страхове, опасения и резерви пред своите лидери, и те бъдат взети под внимание.

Ключови думи: организации; управление на промените; лидерство; емоции; съпротива

Юдит Маркс, докторант

Университет по библиотекознание и информационни технологии

София, България

E-mail: judithma@web.de