UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFICULTIES OF LEADING CHANGE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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Abstract

Change is complex process riddled with obstacles, barriers, and resistance. Leading changerequires a comprehensive understanding of the change process and an effective application of managerial skills. The present study focuses on analyzing the difficulties that emerge during change process in an organization through an experiential exercise 'The Change Game' developed by Lewis & Grosser (2012). It also attempts to study the effectiveness of the exercise in simulating the complexities of leading change in a classroom setting. The experiential exercise was conducted on a sample of 17 post-graduate students of University of Delhi. The data that emerged from the activity and post-activity discussion reflects that a lack of clear communication, trust, transparency, perspective taking, and accountability between the management and the workers are the major difficulties in a change process. The negotiation of power between the managers and workers and the influence of group norms were the strongest barriers. The findings of the present study are based on a single conduction of one experiential exercise.

Keywords: change process, experiential exercise, difficulties in leading change, power, group norms

Introduction

Greenberg (1997) defines "organizational change as the planned or unplanned transformation in an organization's structure, technology and/or people." It is useful to note that more than 62% of start-ups fail within the first five years and rarely 2% make it more than 50 years. Hence, 'change' is imminent but a failure to adjust might lead to competitive failures, and thus the failure of the organization itself (Singh, Tucker & House, 1986). The nature of change is either first-order change wherein change occurs in small and incremental way thus requiring no sudden major transformation in the operations of the organization, or second-order change in which major radical shifts at different levels in the organization are made.

Previous literature demonstrates that the implementation of any organizational initiative or program and its success is significantly linked to change management initiative headed by the top-leadership of the organization. Effective change initiatives and leadership more often than not leads to the successful implementation of organizational projects (Gilley et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2005; Standish Group, 2013; Turner & Müller, 2005). Effective communication is one of the most vital strategy of change management (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). Organizational change essentially requires employee participation and cooperation without which any change initiative would fail (Porras & Robertson, 1992). Thus, it is important to communicate the need and process of change in an effective and constructive fashion so as to mobilize the employees to embrace change. Kotter (1995) argues that many change initiatives fail due to poor communication between the parties involved. In a study conducted by Stasser, Vaughn, and Stewart (2000) it was found that in hidden profile problems there were difficulties in understanding the problem fully. It is also understood that speakers often overestimate how they speak hence, they place all the onus of reception on the listeners and perhaps this is linked to the poor perspective taking skills and ability in individuals.

Furthermore, resistance is perhaps one of the most initial and the most important reaction to change as it is grounded in our cognitive schematas and to disrupt a stable script is often challenging to individuals. Moreover, Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) argues that change initiates and evokes a sense of uncertainty and there are individual differences in reacting to that type of uncertainty. Moreover, individual resistance to change emerges due to change involving economic instability, cultural change, and anything that threatens the status-quo. Group norms and organizational norms make change harder to implement such as there might be strong regulations in place, the organization culture is not such to accommodate such changes.

In Kotter's (1995) 8 step model for leading change, power dynamic forms a crucial element for change. According to Foucault power is inherent in the system and thus, power is placed attributed. 'Power influences' can be both in terms of positive reinforcement (rewards) or negative reinforcement. Moreover, power is based on knowledge base of the people and the position one occupies. Tjosvold(1989) argued that workers perceive managers as cooperative when the employees are able to interact with seniors in a positive and productive manner. French and Raven (1959) focused on the unidirectional relationship of power such that they considered legitimate power as a strong indicator alongside expert power and coercive power

of that of a leader or manager. However, he failed to understand the power workers hold in an organization and this is not only in the form of unionizing but it is also in the form of adaptability and accountancy for the change. As Franz (1998) identified that for any successful change to occur the workers must cooperate and since cooperation is an actively engaging process workers do hold a certain power over the management. Lastly, the creation of different groups such as in the Tajfel's Minimum group identity paradigm leads to fostering of in-group and out-group sentiments and the out-group more often than not is looked with suspicion, viewed negatively and not trusted (Chambers & Melnyk, 2006). Hence, organizational trust and organization commitment become important variables to understand change .

Experiential learning has been found to be quite effective in training potential managers and leaders. Since this type of learning is based in concrete experiences it facilitates the learning process resulting in a greater skill development and an active understanding of the applicability of skills (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Smart & Csapo, 2007). The change simulations gives students an insight into structural and procedural change (e.g., Rollag & Parise, 2005). Students are required deal with intangibles such as emotions, trust, communication etc. when solving problems which gives them a peek into the complexity of organizational change (McDonald and Mansour-Cole, 2000).

Leading change is a complex process requiring effective application of managerial skills. Change is a process that is riddled with obstacles, barriers, and resistance. The Change Game is an experiential exercise designed "to help students to gain an appreciation for the difficulty of leading change, to recognize individual barriers to change, and to analyze and evaluate their behaviors in order to develop effective strategies for future change efforts" (Lewis and Grosser, 2012). The present study focuses on analysing the process of change and the difficulties that emerge when leading change in an organization through an experiential exercise developed by Lewis & Grosser (2012). The present study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are the difficulties that arise during change process when leading a change?
- Is The Change Game (Lewis and Grosser, 2012) effective in simulating the complexities of leading change in a classroom setting?

Method

Sample

The participants (n=17, 12 females and 5 males) of the study were postgraduate students studying in University of Delhi. The average sample age was 22.4 years.

Materials

The Change Game by Lewis & Grosser (2012) requires game cards. The cards were labelled with the letter M (manager), CEO, and W(worker). Since there were 17 participants, there were four M cards and one CEO card. The remaining 12 cards were marked as W. The participants were asked to bring in cash (20 rupees) beforehand. The instructors also brought in cash for the payoff in case the class succeeds at the game. Since there were 17 participants, the total money collected from participants was 340 rupees. The instructors provided 170 rupees, so in total if the class succeeds at the game, the instructors would have to give a total of 510 rupees as winnings to the CEO. The activity also requires a hard of copy instructions for the workers, a hard copy of the instructions for the CEO, and a hard copy of the classroom seating chart for the CEO.

Process

At the start of the session, participants each bought a game card for 20 rupees each. Students with M or CEO on their card were asked to leave the classroom and await further instruction; they became the management. Students who got W in their cards were asked to sit according to the number on their cards. The workers were then told that if they remain in their seats without shifting for the entire exercise they will be able to trade their game card back for their money. Thus, the exercise builds in resistance to change to mimic individual sources such as fear of the unknown or inertia. Workers were then told that they will receive further instructions from their managers. One of the instructors went to the group of managers and CEO outside. The CEO was given the sheet of manager instructions and seating chart. The management group was told that if they can successfully complete the task of moving workers into the prescribed seating chart so that every worker is in the correct seat with no empty seats, the CEO will receive 510 rupees (that is, 150% of the money put in by the students and additional money provided by the instructor). The CEO was also informed that she can distribute the money according to her discretion provided the team accomplishes the task in 60 minutes. The exercise was then turned over to the managers, with the instructor serving as an observer for the remainder of the activity. In the end, the management team was unsuccessful in persuading the workers to shift from their seats and thus, failed in achieving the task. The money taken from the participants was returned back. In the debriefing session, the strong emotions generated from the activity were defused and the participants were explained the rationale behind the activity.. A long discussion of about 80-90 minutes ensued on the difficulties faced by both the managers and the workers, the emotions generated in

both the parties, the strategies used, and the practices that would be beneficial in leading change.

Data generation

From the activity and the debriefing session certain prominent themes emerged that illuminated the process of change and the strain that arises between the management and workers.

Nature of activity

There were some concerns raised over whether the artificial tension created by the experimenters during the activity was truly reflective of the natural tensions that would form in an organisation between the managers and the workers. One of the major concerns was that by telling the workers that they would lose their money if they vacated their seats, the experimenters robbed the managers of their power to truly be able to persuade the workers, since both groups placed the ultimate power with the experimenters because they held all the information and were running the activity. The participants felt that the workers and managers were pitted against each other in a manner that would not be present in a real organisation. However, this disregards the fact that in an organisation, there always exists in the workers a certain sense of suspicion of the managers, due to the asymmetry of information between the two groups. Thus, the managers have to work actively to ease this feeling of mistrust. It was observed that during the activity this acquired information was in fact exacerbated by the managers, when they came in and made it very clear to the workers that they were in fact not being given complete information by the experimenters. *"tum workers ho, obviously tumhe puri information nahi hai about the game, hume pata hai. Trust us."* While the attempt was to create a sense of intergroup unity by giving both groups an identifiable other to distrust, it might have backfired by highlighting to the workers that were in fact at an informational disadvantage, with the managers holding more information.

Power Dynamic: Lack of self-criticism amongst the managers

This was one of the most surprising and unexpected findings from the exercise. It was observed during the post-activity discussion that the workers engaged in a fair amount of self critique, and were willing to openly admit where they might have gone wrong during the conduction of the activity, and how, had they behaved differently, a more productive outcome could have been achieved. However, the managers did not engage in any form of self criticism whatsoever, instead choosing to blame the experimental setup, the behaviour of the workers, and other situational factors. This became even more salient when the managers were later asked how they would have done things differently if they had been the workers.

All of them unanimously echoed the sentiment that they would have proceeded with a policy of complete disclosure and transparency, while ignoring the fact that they could have taken that very approach as managers as well.

This shows how power affects our self awareness, and how even being given positions of power and authority arbitrarily, and for short periods of time, can push us towards turning our critical gaze outwards instead of inward, and can lessen our tendency to admit our own mistakes or failures. This can also be explained using the Minimal Group paradigm, the influence of which will be discussed in further detail later. However, it should be kept in mind that this inference is based on a very small sample size, and only one iteration of this exercise, and hence needs to be experimented upon further to be able to draw any concrete conclusions.

Source of resistance to change: monetary incentive or desire to win?

There was a lot of disagreements over whether the participants resistance to change stemmed from a desire to 'win' the activity, under the understanding of the activity that most worker had, or whether it came from a fear of monetary loss. The win-lose paradigm became relevant as the workers got the idea that they would 'win' the activity if they managed to hold on to their seats. There were several participants who said that money was the primary factor for them , as they did not want to lose the money that they had contributed to the activity. Attempts by the managers to assuage the monetary concerns of the workers were met with incredulous attitudes by the workers, as the managers spoke of financial reimbursement in vague terms, and failed to make concrete offers and promises. This was later solved through a written agreement, which shall be discussed later.

Interestingly, a third source of resistance emerged, which was the workers willingness to cling on to their arbitrary 'roles' that they had been assigned by the managers during the course of the activity. Workers, when told that they were being 'transferred' to another location, came up with bizarre concerns regarding how the 'move' would affect their imaginary lives. This again made the Minimal group paradigm very salient, and showed how workers were forming ties with arbitrary identities that they had been assigned, and how deeply they were willing to submerge themselves into the identity provided for them.

Perceived sincerity as a source of trust

Another interesting thing that was observed during the activity was that while workers were hardly swayed by the promises of monetary compensation in exchange for their move, seeing the move as being meant to deceive them into shifting, this distrust was assuaged by the provision of written agreements between the managers and the workers. 'Having it in writing'

went a long way in dealing with the workers concerns of disingenuity on part of the managers, and helped build a bridge of trust upon which further negotiation could be successfully done. The written agreement helped convince the workers that the managers were indeed sincere in their promises.This sincerity played a part not only in the form of documentation, but also in perceived changes in body language and tone. One of the workers talked about how she felt the desire to give in to the change when she felt that one of the managers was being very sincere and polite in her efforts to get the workers to move.

Minimal Group Paradigm

One of the most stark and surprising findings of the activity was just how deeply the participants got involved in the role that they had been given to play. There were several heated moments during the activity, with managers giving up in frustration, yelling at workers, and getting into intense arguments with them. Moreover, workers showed a strong tendency to identify with the roles that they'd been given by the managers within the organisation, and thought up imaginary problems that would interfere with the move that the managers were suggesting. Moreover, it was observed that the managers became less likely to be critical of themselves, and thus we got a glimpse at the subtle personality changes that happen when people are assigned to a group arbitrarily. The fact that the participants got so involved with an impersonal activity that has no direct relevance or influence on their lives, can help us appreciate how conflict arises both in real world organisations and our everyday lives, where the stakes are so much higher, and there are real world consequences to our actions.

Accountability and transparency

One of the major factors, which was identified universally by all the participants as a major source of distrust and conflict was a perceived lack of transparency and accountability. The workers felt that they were not being given complete information by the managers, and hence felt a lack of transparency, which fueled their mistrust of the managers. Some of the workers said, *"itna kya discuss karna hai", "transparecy hi nahi hai".* This was exacerbated by a declaration from one of the managers that complete information was not being provided to the workers. When asked how things could have been done differently, all participants unanimously agreed that there could have been better disclosure of the instructions given to both groups and their subsequent intentions.

Moreover, a perceived lack of accountability was also a major reason why the workers did not take the managers' promises seriously. This was demonstrated quite clearly when the managers' promise of monetary compensation for the move was disregarded for its apparent

lack of seriousness, till the managers were able to produce a written document which would hold them accountable to any promises they make. However, even after giving a written document some workers were not ready to shift. The managers tried coercing the non-cooperating workers by saying, *"yaha pe dekho hum sab accountable hai, tum log cooperate karo, yaha pe paper bhi aa gaya hai ab kya problem hai."* Thus, we see concrete examples of a sense of accountability and transparency going a long way in building trust between the workforce and them managerial staff.

Discussion

The change process demands high understanding of the barriers to change as well as effective application of managerial skills. The leader and the top management plays an important role in facilitating the change process. In the present study it was found that a lack of clear communication, trust, transparency, accountability, and perspective taking between the managers and the workers were the major reasons for the failure of the implementation of the change initiative.

The experiential exercise, The Change Game (Lewis and Grosser, 2012), was quite effective in simulating the complexities of leading change in a classroom setting. Assigning roles impact how a person interacts with the surrounding nature. For instance, the managers always maintained a dutiful tone and expected compliance and obedience from the workers, thus, highlighting that role giving activates certain schemata and scripts in individuals. This kind of change fits well in the Minimal Group Identity paradigm as given by Tajfel (1962). Furthermore, this form of assertive role imbibing helps us to understand the implicit stereotypes attached to the roles of managers and workers and their perceived importance placed in an organization. This also led to another interesting learning that the Managers were rarely self-critical. Again this might be due to the fact that the voices of the manager were controlled only by two participants who seemed to have a domineering presence while the CEO shifted to the background. In the debriefing session, the managers were quite defensive and critical of the alternative techniques that could have been used. They also claimed that had they been the workers they would have listened to their managers directly and trusted them. Perhaps this highlights the lack of perspective taking but again, on a grand platform perhaps it is this lack of perspective-taking that leads to resistance and passing the bucket type of attitude which leads to lack of accountability and a failing effort to change.

Closely linked to perspective taking is the understanding of communication which Kotter (1995) claimed to be the most important variable in change management. Communication can be understood as: what is being said and what is being understood. It is often quite easy

to remark on communication and calling for 'better and healthy communication' has become a trend, yet, communication patterns are very difficult to change, they are culturally imbibed and manifested in every domain. Thus, the first level of communication gap starts when the participating members divide themselves into in-group and out-group creating visible boundaries around themselves as observed in the activity. Furthermore, the speakers often overestimate how they speak and hence, they place all the onus of reception on the listeners and perhaps this is linked to the poor perspective taking skills and ability in individuals. A healthy communication is characterised by trust and transparency which aid in developing cooperation and as identified by Porras and Robertson (1992), this actually leads to behavioural changes among employees and actual change takes place. In a study conducted by Stasser, Vaughn and Stewart (2000) it was found that in hidden profile problems there were difficulties in understanding the problem fully and thus, it is imperative that one tries to remove any surrounding vague terms and vague rhetoric while communicating their wishes.

It was felt that the change only started occurring during the last minutes which corroborates Kotter's (1995) model where he suggested that there must be a sense of urgency for change to take place. In the activity, the managers developed this sense of urgency quite late. However, the other steps of Kotter's model were taken in account as the managers tried to type on the 'win-win scenario' vision and tried to harness a sense of belongingness by using the word 'our company'. The failure of their strategies combined with the sense of urgency led the managers to take quite drastic actions of wishing to fire dissenting people. The findings suggest that organizations should create safe spaces for rigid workers and try to understand their needs rather than firing them directly as this will not only lead to increased costs of employee turnover but also negatively impact the organizational culture.

An important understanding that emerged from the present study was that not only the managers claimed to have legitimate power, the workers who happened to be their classmates also placed the power with the managers and this power dynamic was in constant negotiation. Power emerged in the form of knowledge and control over that knowledge. The workers and the managers constructed personal bases of power but due to the intergroup dynamic there were power differentials (Franz, 1998). When a communication gap occurs it is natural for a worker to harbour negative out-group sentiments and hence the entire conversation then is looked with an eye of suspicion (Chambers & Melnyk, 2006). Therefore, organizational trust is very important in bringing about change. It emerged that although some people might want to change but it is only feasible when others would want to change also and thus, it essentially demands a peer-influence effect and creates a sort of prisoners' dilemma situation

where one looks forward to who will take the first step in change movement. Perhaps, it is also important that we look at the power of group-norms and the need for certitude in people as suggested by Hoggs (2003).

Conclusion

The study reflects that the difficulties that arise during the change process are due to lack of clear communication, trust, transparency, perspective taking and accountability between the management and the workers. A gulf is created within the organization which further hampers the communication such that even sincere efforts come to be viewed negatively. The negotiation of power between the managers and workers and the influence of group norms were the strongest barriers that instigated high levels of frustration and negative emotions. Together all these factors leads to a loss of concern for mutual benefit and the vision for change loses meaning. The experiential exercise, The Change Game (Lewis and Grosser, 2012) gave a first-hand experience of the change process to the participants and was effective in simulating the uncertainty, distrust, and barriers that preclude enacting change.

Implications and Limitations

The survival and growth of an organization depends on its ability to tap in opportunities (Kotter, 1996) and adopt new technologies (Kwiatkowski, 1989) to gain a competitive edge in the market. This requires adapting to change and successfully implementing change initiatives at all levels. However, previous literature shows that individuals often resist change, even beneficial change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Piderit, 2000). To overcome the difficulties that arise during the change process it is necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the process and the skills required to lead change. Further research on the power dynamics operating during the implementation of change initiative and the influence of group norms in accepting change can help in formulating effective strategies for leading change. The findings of the present study are based on a single conduction of one experiential exercise. Repeated conduction of various other experiential exercises on varied samples can add more verisimilitude to the understanding of change process.

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