

FORGET FAILURE - FOCUS ON SUCCESS TO PLAN FOR LASTING CHANGE

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The prophetic words 'There is nothing permanent except change' and 'nothing endures except change' are phrases attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (c.535 - 475 BC). In recent times these have become the catch cry for modern organisations and those who work in them. Organisations which are under tremendous pressure to pursue change in order to survive in an environment of increasing change and turbulence (Weber & Weber, 2001).

Organisational change was once regarded as something of an aberration, a departure from the more usual static position of the organisation. However, change is now regarded as a natural response to environmental and internal conditions (Fullan, 2007). Change is also consistent within open systems in which learning occurs and where learning relates to change by seeking equilibrium or adaptation resulting from experience (Collins, 1996). The work of Henry Mintzberg (1997) and Peter Senge (1992) reflect the need for organisations to adopt forms which permit continuing adjustment and learning to take place. For these reasons it appears that a normal part of organisational life includes the capacity to change as reflecting the need to embrace flexibility in less certain environments (Nelson, 2003).

Organisational change is now, however, regarded as 'sine qua non' (without which it cannot be) and is a natural response to environmental and internal conditions. Organisations are defined by their paradigms, that is, the prevalent view of reality shared by members of the organisation. Structure, strategy, culture, leadership and individual role accomplishments are defined by this prevailing worldview and therefore radical change may be construed as a discontinuous shift in this socially constructed reality. Leaders find themselves at the centre of complex sets of relationships between participants of change

with divergent as well as convergent interests in environments of uncertainty, tension and conflict.

Leading change

The idea of 'successful' change leadership is both a highly contextualised and relational construct and needs to be examined with reference to the multiple perspectives of leadership and organisational change contexts. The literature consistently acknowledges the important role of the follower/employee role in organisational change action as well as the relationships, values, moral purpose and social cultural aspects of organisations and the effects that change can have on them. Therefore the analysis of models of 'people-centred' change leadership (Day, Harris & Hadfield, 2001) which are achievement oriented and involve the management of tensions and dilemmas in the tasks and processes associated with the change action provide a basis on which to examine 'success'.

The history of educational reform and innovation is replete with good ideas or policies that fail to get implemented (Hancock & Hellowell, 2003) or that were successful in one situation but not in another (Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005). Much has been written about 'failed' change initiatives and 'failed' management approaches (Barth, 2007; Huy, 2001; Kanter, 1979; Maurer, 2003; Zaleznik, 1990), however little research focuses primarily on 'success' as a way of setting an agenda for future change (Brinkerhoff, 2005). As is apparent when seeking definitions of leadership, there are also an ever-changing series of recommendations to leaders and managers on how best to implement successful change.

Organisational change is intensely personal in nature (Duck, 1993) in that it requires each individual to think, feel, or do something different. If organisations want their workers to contribute with their heads and hearts then they have to accept that emotions will form part of a new leadership style; one which admits that change is therefore fundamentally about feelings (Bartkus, 1997). Old leadership paradigms suggested that at work people were only permitted to feel emotions that were easily controllable, emotions

that could be categorised as 'positive' (Gill, 2006). However, new leadership paradigms contend that managing people is about managing feelings and the issue is not whether or not people have 'negative' emotions; it is how they deal with them (Dulewicz, Young & Dulewicz, 2005). The most successful change programs connect with their people most directly through values (Fullan, 2000), which ultimately are about beliefs and feelings.

My recently completed Masters study explored the role of the educational middle manager as 'change leader' in successful organisational change. It contextualised the role of the middle leader in organisational change by examining the relationships and dealings with their superiors, their peers and their subordinates. It also examined the core capabilities and attributes of middle leaders in creating an organisational culture and climate conducive to successful organisational change and the policies and practices employed by them to minimise the potential negative impact of change (Marshall, 2008).

The aim of my research was to identify and explain the contextual factors of successful middle leadership change initiatives as a way of helping to determine the value that success focussed initiatives were capable of producing, and whether they could be leveraged to a wider constituency to assist in improved and sustained success in similar settings.

To achieve this I actively engaged participants who had been identified as successful middle leaders of change, requesting them to share meanings and to discuss actions that they had employed which enabled them to succeed. This success focussed approach intentionally sought the very best that a change action had produced, so that the resulting 'lived experiences' of the participants could be explored to provide a basis for an understanding of how these people think and act in the world (Danzig, 1997). They constructed their personal accounts of practice based on reflection and these accounts led to deeper understanding of how expertise is gained in the real world through linking the study of leadership to professional practice (Hancock & Hellawell, 2003). Reflecting on these personal accounts of practice, in turn, led to a greater understanding of professional motives and workplace practices

(Hannabuss, 2000). In my study, I set out to explore the research issues in a 'real-life' context and in a New Zealand setting.

The objectives which framed the context for my study were:

- To describe and critique the role that higher education middle leaders play in leading successful organisational change;
- To examine a middle perspective of successful change leadership; and
- To explain the characteristics of successful change leadership.

The key research questions associated with these objectives were:

- What are the core capabilities and attributes associated with successful change leadership?
- In what ways do educational middle leaders act as 'change leaders'?
- What practices do successful middle leaders employ to minimise the potential negative impact of change?

A personal context

As a middle manager in a large tertiary institution which has undergone substantial and ongoing organisational change in the past few years, I have been interested in the role that the middle leader plays and the core job characteristics that may be important in creating an organisational culture and climate conducive to successful change. Specific issues of my interest revolve around how middle leaders in academic settings might make a significant contribution to radical organisational change. It has been suggested that they achieve this by "being far better than most senior management at leveraging the informal networks" (Huy, 2001, p. 73), as well as staying attuned to employee's moods and emotional needs whilst managing the tension between continuity and change. Most commentators agree that successful middle leaders are those who establish clear goals for the change effort including launching communication and training efforts, and promoting opportunities for employee participation (Caldwell, 2003).

To place the role of the middle leader in context, in regard to their role in organisational change, it was also important to consider the relationships and dealings between the middle leader with their superiors, their peers and their

subordinates. There is much agreement that middle managers need to be, synchronistically, masters and slaves and serve both the tops, middle and bottoms (Joseph & Winston, 2005). Middle leaders engaging in change are concerned with reconciling both top-level perspectives with lower level implementation issues. This has been described as the middle manager acting as the “synapses within a firm’s brain” (King, Fowler & Zeithaml, 2001, p. 95).

There is evidence from the literature that academics see themselves as representing core academic values rather than necessarily representing core organisational values (Gleeson & Shain, 2003; Lapp & Carr, 2006; Mintzberg, 1975). Successful academic middle leaders need to see themselves as being at the forefront of change in key areas such as learning and teaching and in the advancement of core pedagogical and academic, as well as organisational goals (Hancock & Hellawell, 2003). The academic middle leader possesses a stock of knowledge of a substantive area of expertise or knowledge. This approach to the assimilation of expertise and management capability can be a powerful approach to management in professional organisations, although the capability often seems to occur through personal predisposition rather than through processes of management development (Grint, 2003).

Therefore, given the middle leaders deep understandings of the networks within the professional organisation, and through the requirement on the role to act as colleague during times of trouble and as people who are seen to learn with their colleagues in times of change (Huy & Mintzberg, 2003), a core question is whether a developed middle leadership, framed in the context of evidence of ‘success’, would enable change to take place in a less confrontational and abstracted manner (Marshall, 2008).

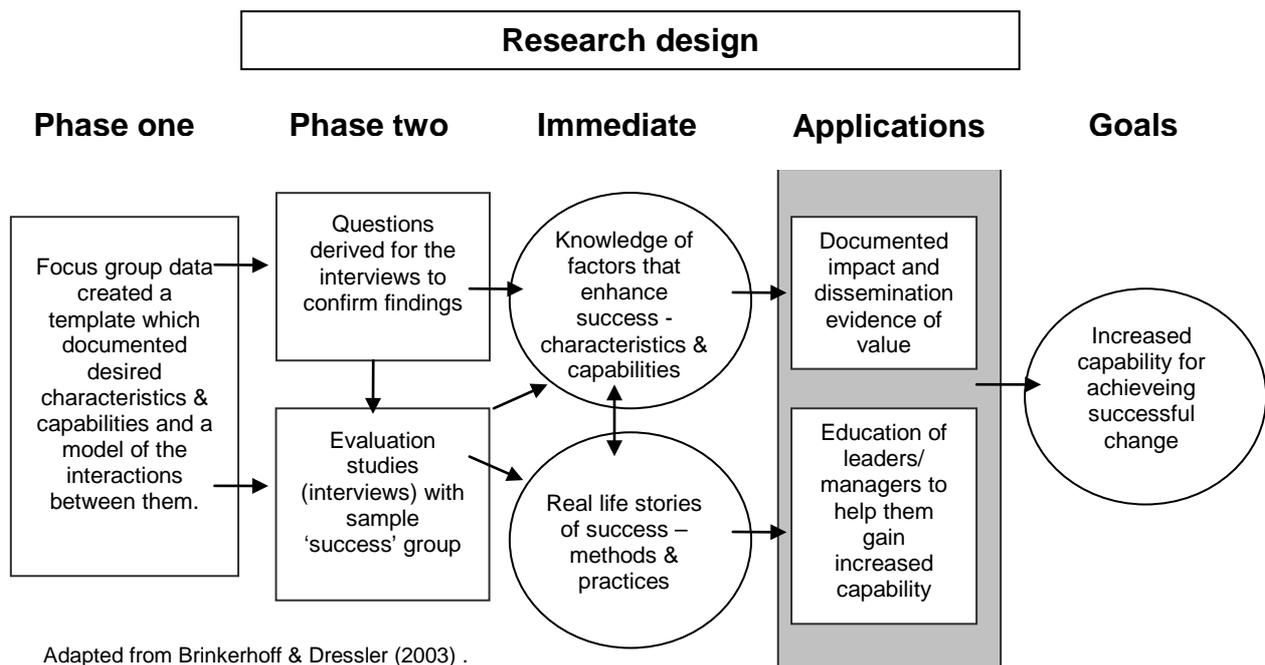
A success focussed methodology

I employed two qualitative research methodologies for my study. Each addressed its own distinctive area of the research but each acted as a reference and cross check for the other. The first was the phenomenological focus group, which was used in the confirmation of criteria for ‘success’. A

template was created from the findings of the focus group that illustrated the core capabilities and attributes employed by middle managers in successful organisational change actions and that might have been important in creating an organisational culture and climate conducive to successful change. This data was employed to define the nature of success and was used in the second part of the study as the foundation for the interview questions.

The second part of the study employed a semi-structured interview format to create 'success' case stories, utilising traditional case study techniques, as a way of documenting each of the participants' experiences. A collective case approach was undertaken which utilised a group of individual studies to gain a fuller picture (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In this study, I wanted to explore the research issues in a 'real-life' context and in a New Zealand setting, therefore this success case method enquiry used a variation of the case study that is both holistic and exhaustive to capture the meaningful characteristics of realistic events (Bassey, 2007) and to examine a multifaceted approach to change (Wetherell, 2003).

The data collected in each of these phases linked to each other, and supported and qualified the results of each. Each phase was designed to exploit its potential for gaining reliable, valid, rich and insightful data that would assist in answering the aims of the research study.



The two phases of data collection show the interconnected relationship between the two and the data gathered. Immediate results were able to be drawn from findings of the data collection and cross-referenced with each other before being used to propose applications for the use of the data toward the final overall goal of the study.

Robert O. Brinkerhoff, Professor Emeritus at Western Michigan University and an internationally recognised expert in training evaluation and effectiveness originated the 'success case method' (SCM). Brinkerhoff describes SCM as "combining the ancient craft of storytelling with more current evaluation approaches of naturalistic inquiry and case study" (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p. 17). Stories of 'success', which have corroborating evidence and documentation to ensure that each is defensible and thus reportable, are sought out. A 'success story' is not a testimonial or a critical review. It is a factual and verifiable account – citing evidence that would 'stand up in court' – that demonstrates how valuably a person used some method, tool or capability. Following identification of the success cases the more traditional interpretive methods can then be employed using the social inquiry processes of key informants in order to examine the features of 'success' of each case and draw forth data that may inform future practice (Gold & Holman, 2001).

The SCM does not seek to learn about the 'average' or modal participant in an enquiry, rather it intentionally seeks the very best that an action is producing, to help determine if the value an action is capable of producing is worthwhile, and whether it is likely that it can be leveraged to a greater number of participants (Brinkerhoff & Dressler, 2003). Typically, an SCM study results in only a small number of documented success cases - just enough to poignantly illustrate the nature and scope of the success. The method achieves efficiencies by purposive versus random sampling, focusing the bulk of inquiry on only a relative few (Brinkerhoff, 2003). The success cases allow the researcher to look at the experiential whole, not simply the component parts (Kruse, 2003). This method is used to connect the explicit,

formal, symbolic presentations of knowledge with the practical know-how found in each individuals' effective actions (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

In my study the success case method provided two results:

1. In-depth stories of documented capabilities and job characteristics that are able to be disseminated to a variety of audiences involved in change management. These stories are both credible and verifiable and dramatically illustrate the actual change effect results that 'successful' middle leaders are capable of producing; and

2. Knowledge of factors that enhance the effect of middle leaders on change results. The key factors that seem to be associated with successful applications of middle leaders as change agents have been identified and compared and contrasted to those where the factors seemed to impede success.

I explored the lived experiences of the participants to provide a basis for an understanding of how these people think and act in the world (Danzig, 1997). They constructed their personal accounts of practice based on reflection. These personal accounts led to deeper understandings of how expertise is gained in the real world through linking the study of leadership to professional practice. Reflecting on these personal accounts of practice, in turn, led to a greater understanding of professional motives and workplace practices.

So what can we learn by focussing on success?

The successful middle leaders represented in my study shared a wide range of practices and approaches taken by them which helped to minimise the potential negative impact of their various change actions. These approaches, while varying in detail and effect, generally concur with the change literature and are variations of well documented change themes and practices. However, the participant contributions of personal observations and unfolding real life stories which meld personal common sense with local meaning have formed a unique local ontology and allowed for a deeper understanding of contributing success factors.

The change leaders were generally concerned with organisational effectiveness, improvement, development, and enhancement. While these middle leaders were not a very homogeneous group, they did have many

similarities. Among them were characteristics of transformational and visionary leadership as they had each been successful in changing the status quo of their organisations by displaying and employing appropriate leadership behaviours throughout the transformation process. I found that successful middle change leadership combines real engagement, with passion and courage on behalf of one or a range of people; utilises the leader's ability to set strategic direction to be able to implement the strategic changes; initiates innovation and creates a vision of change; and implements change through change leadership and management by translating the vision into agendas and actions. Organisational values and behaviours are deeply embedded, and successful organisational change takes time, and that time must be given to communication up, beside and down the organisation at all levels.

Above all the 'success' focus was on people, and the leaders interaction with them. Successful middle leaders stay attuned to employee's moods and emotional needs whilst managing the tension between continuity and change. They employ high levels of inter-personal competencies for communication which they place at the centre of each change action. By developing strong operational and relational skills with particular focus on the ability to listen, observe, identify, and report; to form relationships and inspire trust; and to manifest a high degree of behavioural flexibility, middle leaders are better able to minimise the potential negative impact of change. They are not necessarily interested in changing personnel but rather in the relationships, attitudes, perceptions, and values of existing personnel.

Some scholars suggest that leadership can best (and probably only) be learned by actual real life experience that teaches, through successes and failures, how one can develop a personal repertoire of effective leadership skills (Caldwell, 2003). With regard to developing management capability, the participants agreed that as academic middle manager service posts have varied backwards and forwards between 'permanent' and 'fixed-term' appointments there was a need for institutions to consider who leads and why they lead. There was general agreement that one of the dangers of natural selection in educational leadership was that often people who are very good

in one position are promoted up to a level where they are not doing what they are necessarily good at any more. Fostering emergent leaders was highlighted in my study as an important activity for educational organisations.

Organisations, like individuals, have different potentials for success and successful change requires the alignment of an organisation's internal architecture, individual actions, and collective goals in order to achieve optimal results. Leading change is a form of purposive action where the leader needs to exhibit transformational leadership behaviours that direct people towards constructive effort and that provide others with a more integrated understanding of what is to be achieved. They have to be flexible in making the most of the opportunities that emerge while working with what is there and is already working. Leading successful change is not simply a matter of a leader's style or personality; it is a leader's philosophy of how to generate and mobilise the people of an organisation to participate in achieving the change.

In conclusion

As organisational change leaders, we are often stuck with having insufficient and incomplete knowledge as to exactly what needs to be done to improve organisational effectiveness. Rapid change, incomplete knowledge of cause-effect relationships, insufficient information about what is really happening, misleading data, and the pressure for a quick response all conspire to make our solutions potentially less than perfect. Given this reality we have to learn what works so that we can continually revise our solutions and build better solutions for the future based on our learning from the present.

It is acknowledged that one of the missing ingredients in most failed change cases is the appreciation and use of change knowledge (Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990; French, 2001; Wallace, 2003). Change knowledge is the understanding and insight about the process of change and the key drivers that make for successful change in practice (Allix & Gronn, 2005). Whilst the presence of change knowledge may not guarantee success, it is agreed that its absence, more often than not, leads to failure (Fullan, 2003).

By identifying and explaining the contextual factors associated with successful middle leadership change initiatives we can help to determine the value that success focussed initiatives are capable of producing, and whether they can be leveraged to a wider constituency to assist in improved and sustained success in similar settings. Change is a constant for Unitec and as a result there is a wealth of institutional knowledge about what constitutes successful change. In our environment there are, and have always been, pockets of excellent practice and an examination of these practices of excellence may well help our organisation change successfully.

As stated at the beginning of this session, much has been written about 'failed' change initiatives and 'failed' management approaches, however little research focuses primarily on 'success' as a way of setting an agenda for future change. Research tools such as the success case method can be employed to assess the effect of an action by looking intentionally for the very best that an action is producing. When these instances are found, they can be carefully and objectively analysed, seeking hard and corroborated evidence to irrefutably document the application and result of the action.

I began this presentation with a quotation about change from antiquity and I finish it with a whimsical quote which was a favourite of Warren Bennis (1997) the well known American scholar, organizational consultant and author, who is widely regarded as a pioneer of the contemporary field of Leadership Studies. It comes from E. B. White:

I wake up every morning determined both to change the world and have one hell of a good time. Sometimes this makes planning the day a little difficult. (p. 71)

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