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Theory to Practice

Managing Successful Organizational Change in the Public Sector

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Can governmental organizations change? Reform initiatives have swept through governments in the United States and overseas, again and again bringing news about efforts to reinvent, transform, or reform government agencies (Barzelay 2001; Kettl 2000; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Stillman 1999). Curiously, however, this recurrent theme of change in government agencies has not induced a high volume of articles that explicitly address the topic in public administration journals. There are prominent exceptions to this observation (e.g., Bryson and Anderson 2000; Chackerian and Mavima 2000; Mani 1995; Wise 2002) and journal articles about topics related to organizational change (e.g., Berman and Wang 2000; Brudney and Wright 2002; Hood and Peters 2004). Articles reporting research and theory with titles containing "organizational change" and with that theme as a focal topic, however, appear with much less regularity in public administration journals than in research journals focusing on general management and organization theory.

In that literature on organization theory, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) report a count of one million articles relating to organizational change. This vast body of work abounds with complexities, including multiple and conflicting theories and research findings and a good bit of inconclusiveness. This complexity presents a challenge to public administrators and public administration researchers alike. To respond to that challenge, the full version of this article, which is available on *PAR*'s Web site (www.aspanet.org), provides an overview of the vast literature on organizational change—a review demonstrating its complexity but also bringing some needed order to the literature. Here, the analysis identifies points of consensus among researchers on what are commonly called *organizational transformations*: initiatives involving large-scale, planned, strategic, and administrative change (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Kotter 1995). These points serve as testable propositions for researchers to examine in future research and as major considerations for leaders of change initiatives in public organizations.

Theories of Organizational Change in Public Organizations

The variety of theoretical perspectives summarized in the online version of this article presents a rather confusing picture, but it provides insights into the nature of organizational change, and in particular, the causes of change and the role of managers in the change process. Some of the theories downplay the significance of human agency as a source of change (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1984; Scott 2003). Conversely, other theories view managers' purposeful action as driving change (e.g., Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), although environmental, cognitive, and resource constraints place limits on such action (Van de Ven and Poole 1995).

These major theoretical perspectives illustrate researchers' conflicting views about the causes of change in organizations, especially the capacity of managers to bring about change. Despite the conflicts among theorists, however, a significant body of research indicates that managers frequently do make change happen in their organizations (Armenakis, Harris, and Feild 1999; Burke 2002; Judson 1991; Kotter 1995, 1996; Yukl 2002). Public sector studies also offer evidence of the critical role that public managers play in bringing about organizational change (e.g., Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Bingham and Wise 1996; Borins 2000; Doig and Hargrove 1990; Hennessey 1998; Kemp, Funk, and Eadie 1993).

Noting that managers can effect change tells us little, however, about whether an intended change actually occurs and about the best strategies for effecting change. Fortunately, a stream of research exists that contains various models and frameworks, many of them loosely based on Lewin's (1947) steps or phases of change. These studies describe the process of implementing change within organizations and point to factors contributing to success (e.g., Armenakis, Harris, and Feild 1999; Bingham and Wise 1996;

Burke 2002; Greiner 1967; Kotter 1995, 1996; Rainey and Rainey 1986; Thompson and Fulla 2001).

Despite some differences in these models and frameworks, one finds remarkable similarities among them, as well as empirical studies supporting them (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999). One can discern from this body of research a consensus that change leaders and change participants should pay special attention to eight factors, each offering propositions suitable for further testing and refinement in future research. The full online version of this article presents a more elaborate and detailed propositional inventory; this shorter version emphasizes the most general propositions identified.

Because it draws on points of consensus among researchers and experienced observers, the set of factors discussed here resembles, but differs in significant ways from, some other frameworks (e.g., Kotter 1996). Some experts portray the change process as a linear progression through successive stages represented by the factors discussed here (e.g., Armenakis, Harris, and Feild 1999; Greiner 1967; Kotter 1995). The process, however, rarely unfolds in such a simple linear fashion (Amis, Slack, and Hinings 2004; Van de Ven 1993). The eight factors and propositions that are discussed in the following sections can influence the outcome of change initiatives at different points of the process. Moreover, researchers have generally treated these determinants of effective implementation of organizational change as having additive effects. The present analysis, in contrast, treats each determinant as potentially contributing to the successful implementation of change—or making implementation smoother—by adding to the effects of the other factors. Finally, despite what some practitioners might see as the commonsense nature of these factors and propositions, examples cited below—as well as many other studies and examples—indicate that change leaders very often ignore, overlook, or underestimate them (Kotter 1995, 1996).

Factor 1: Ensure the Need

Managerial leaders must verify and persuasively communicate the need for change. Research indicates that the implementation of planned change generally requires that leaders verify the need for change and persuade other members of the organization and important external stakeholders that it is necessary (Armenakis, Harris, and Feild 1999; Burke 2002; Judson 1991; Kotter 1995; Laurent 2003; Nadler and Nadler 1998). The process of convincing individuals of the need for change often begins with crafting a compelling vision for it. A vision presents a picture or image of the future that is easy to communicate and that organizational members find appealing (Kotter 1995); it provides overall direction for the change process and serves as the foundation from which to develop specific strategies for arriving at a future end state.

Some research on private organizations indicates that it is easier to convince individuals of the need for change when leaders craft a vision that offers the hope of relief from stress or discomfort (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1999). Nadler and Nadler (1998) even suggest implanting dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in order to get members of the organization to embrace change. To convince individuals of the need for and desirability of change and to begin the process of "unfreezing" the organization, Armenakis, Harris, and Feild (1999) suggest employing effective written and oral communication and forms of active participation among employees.

The public-management literature contains evidence of the importance of determining the need for change and persuasively communicating it through a continuing process of exchange with as many stakeholders and participants as possible (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Rossotti 2005; Young 2001). For instance, Kemp, Funk, and Eadie (1993) and Bingham and Wise (1996) conclude that successful implementation of new programs depends on top management's ability to disseminate information about the change and convince employees of the urgency of change. Denhardt and Denhardt (1999) describe how effective local government managers verify the need for change through "listening and learning" and then communicate those needs in ways that build support for change. Researchers have also noted public sector leaders' efforts to take advantage of mandates, political windows of opportunity, and external influences to verify and communicate the need for change (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Harokopus 2001; Lambright 2001; Rossotti 2005).

Factor 2: Provide a Plan

Managerial leaders must develop a course of action or strategy for implementing change. Convincing the members of an organization of the need for change is obviously not enough to bring about actual change. The new idea or vision must be transformed into a course of action or strategy with goals and a plan for achieving it (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Carnall 1995; Judson 1991; Kotter 1995; Lambright 2001; Nadler and Nadler 1998; Young 2001). This strategy serves as a road map for the organization, offering direction on how to arrive at the preferred end state, identifying obstacles, and proposing measures for overcoming those obstacles. As Kotter (1995) explains, the basic elements of the vision should be organized into a strategy for achieving that vision so that the transformation does not disintegrate into a set of unrelated and confusing directives and activities.

Two aspects of a course of action that appear crucial for organizational change in the public sector include the clarity or degree of specificity of the strategy and the extent to which the strategy rests on sound causal theory. Policy implementation analysts have long noted the importance of clear, specific policy goals and coherent causal thinking about the linkage between the initiative to be implemented and the desired outcomes (Bishop and Jones 1993; Grizzle and Pettijohn 2002; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989; Meier and McFarlane 1995). Specific goals help ensure that the measures implemented in the field correspond with the formal policy by limiting the ability of implementing officials to change the policy objectives and providing a standard of accountability. As Bingham and Wise (1996) and Meyers and Dillon (1999) discovered, policy ambiguity can sow confusion, allowing public managers to reinterpret the policy and implement it in a fashion that brings about few of the changes that policy makers intended (see also Montjoy and O'Toole 1979). Finally, a mandate for change based on sound causal theory helps eliminate inconsistent or conflicting directives that can undermine efforts to implement change. Rossotti (2005) shows how he and others leading major organizational changes at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) set forth a clear, well-conceived, well-organized plan for the change process.

Factor 3: Build Internal Support for Change and Overcome Resistance

Managerial leaders must build internal support for change and reduce resistance to it through widespread participation in the change process and other means. Students of major organizational changes typically report that successful leaders understand that change involves a political process of developing and nurturing support from major stakeholders and organizational members. Individuals in organizations resist change for a variety of reasons (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1999)—for example, some ideas for change are simply ill conceived, unjustified, or pose harmful consequences for members of the organization. Even assuming a well-justified and well-planned change initiative, however, leaders must build internal support and overcome resistance.

How can they do so? Several researchers have observed that a crisis, shock, or strong external challenge to the organization can help reduce resistance to change. Van de Ven (1993) explains that because individuals are highly adaptable to gradually emerging conditions, a shock or stimulus of significant magnitude is typically required for them to accept change as inevitable. In a similar vein, Kotter warns managers against the risk of "playing it too safe" and noted that "when the urgency rate is not pumped up enough, the transformation process cannot succeed" (1995, 60). He even observed that in a few of the most successful cases of organizational change, the leadership manufactured crises (see also Laurent 2003; Thompson and Fulla 2001).

For many decades, social scientists have emphasized the value of effective and ethical participation, as well as other means, in supporting group and organizational change and in lowering resistance to it (Coch and French 1948; Lewin 1947). More recently, experts have further explored ways of reducing resistance to change. Judson (1991) identifies a variety of tactics that managers can employ to minimize resistance to change, including threats and compulsion, criticism, persuasion, inducements and rewards, compromises and bargaining, guarantees against personal loss (e.g., offering job security or retraining to employees), psychological support, employee participation, ceremonies and other efforts to build loyalty, recognition of the appropriateness and legitimacy of past practices, and gradual and flexible implementation of change. With the exception of threats, compulsion, and criticism, which can have counterproductive effects and further increase resistance, he argues that these approaches can be effective at reducing resistance to change (see also Kets de Vries and Balazs 1999). A "dual approach" that creates pride in the organization's history and past success while arguing for a new way of doing things seems also to be effective at reducing resistance to change.

The scope of participation is also important. Widespread participation in the change process is perhaps the most frequently cited approach to overcoming resistance to change (e.g., Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Young 2001). Many scholars who focus on private organizations have asserted that planned change requires extensive participation by members at multiple levels of the organization during all stages of implementation (Bunker and Alban 1997; Greiner 1967; Johnson and Leavitt 2001; Nadler and Nadler 1998; Pasmore 1994). The literature indicates that involving organizational members helps reduce barriers to change by creating psychological ownership, promoting the dissemination of critical information, and encouraging employee feedback for fine-tuning the change during implementation.

Participation presents a particularly important contingency in the public sector. As Warwick (1975) asserts, career civil servants, who are allegedly motivated by caution and security, can use the frequent turnover among top political appointees to their advantage by simply resisting new initiatives until a new administration comes into power. However, their participation in the stages of change can help reduce this kind of resistance. Rossotti (2005), for instance, recounts a continuous process of meetings with all types of stakeholders—frontline employees, union leaders, taxpayers and taxpayer groups, managers, Treasury Department executives, members of Congress, and others (see also Denhardt and Denhardt 1999; Poister and Streib 1999). Goldsmith (1999, 68ff), too, describes how employee "empowerment" played a key role in his change efforts as mayor of Indianapolis.

Interestingly, Kelman's (2005) analysis of the federal procurement reform process suggests that one should avoid *overestimating* change resistance. A significant number of employees welcomed reforms, and their support needed only to be "unleashed." Buttressing Kelman's point, Thompson and Sanders's (1997) analysis of change within the Veterans Benefits Administration suggests that success may require bottom-up participatory elements, such as delegating decision making to middle management and granting frontline workers greater discretion to implement changes. They note, however, that top management still must play a critical role by encouraging and rewarding innovation and expressing support for the change. Successful implementation of organizational change, therefore, often resembles a hybrid combining elements of lower-level participation and direction from top management.

Even widespread participation, however, does not offer a magic bullet for overcoming resistance to change (Shareef 1994). Bruhn, Zajac, and Al-Kazemi (2001) advise that participation should be widespread and span all phases of the change process, but they stress that leaders must take participation seriously, commit time and effort to it, and manage it properly. The failure to do so can be counterproductive, leading to wasted time, morale, and resources (see also Quinn 2000). Bryson and Anderson (2000) make a similar observation in their analysis of large-group methods used to diagnose problems and implement changes in organizations.

Factor 4: Ensure Top-Management Support and Commitment

An individual or group within the organization should champion the cause for change. Top-management support and commitment to change play an especially crucial role in success (Burke 2002; Carnall 1995; Greiner 1967; Johnson and Leavitt 2001; Kotter 1995; Nadler and Nadler 1998; Yukl 2002). Some studies of organizational change stress the importance of having a single change agent or "idea champion" lead the transformation. An idea champion is a highly respected individual who maintains momentum and commitment to change, often taking personal risks in the process (Kanter 1983). Policy-implementation scholars have offered evidence of how a skillful and strategically placed leader or "fixer" can successfully coordinate the behavior of disparate actors and overcome obstacles by leveraging close personal ties and pursuing informal avenues of influence (Bardach 1977; O'Toole 1989).

Other authors have stressed the need to have a guiding coalition to support the change. A guiding coalition is a group of individuals who lend legitimacy to the effort and marshal the resources and emotional support required to induce organizational members to change (Carnall 1995; Kets de Vries and Balazs 1999; Kotter 1995; Yukl 2002). Kotter asserts that one or two managers often launch organizational renewal efforts, but "whenever some minimum mass is not achieved early in the effort, nothing much worthwhile happens" (1995, 62).

Whether it occurs in the form of a single change agent or a guiding coalition, considerable evidence indicates that top-management support and commitment play an essential role in successful change in the public sector (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Berman and Wang 2000; Bingham and Wise 1996; Denhardt and Denhardt 1999; Harokopus 2001; Hennessey 1998; Kemp, Funk, and Eadie 1993; Lambright 2001; Laurent 2003; Rainey and Rainey 1986; Thompson and Fulla 2001; Young 2001). Barzelay's (2001) analysis of New Public Management reforms in various nations, for instance, reports that Aucoin (1990) attributes the failure of these reforms in Canada to a lack of support from cabinet ministers, who simply did not care much about the reforms.

Finally, in the public sector, top-management support for change often requires the cooperation of top-level career civil servants in addition to politically appointed executives. Moreover, the need for leadership continuity and stability raises particular challenges in the public sector because of the frequent and rapid turnover of many executives in government agencies compared to business executives. This may explain why, contrary to stereotype, many significant changes in government need to be—and have been—led by career civil servants (Holzer and Callahan 1998).

Factor 5: Build External Support

Managerial leaders must develop support from political overseers and key external stakeholders. Organizational change in the public sector also depends on the degree of support from political overseers and other key external stakeholders. The impact of these actors on the outcome of change efforts stems in part from their ability to impose statutory changes and control the flow of vital resources to public organizations. Political overseers can influence the outcome of planned change by creating and conveying a vision that explains the need for change, as well as by selecting political appointees who are sympathetic to the change and have the knowledge and skills required for managing the transformation. As Golembiewski (1985) suggests, attaining support from governmental authorities and political actors involves serious challenges, given the constraints imposed by the political context in which public organizations operate. Public agencies often have multiple political masters pursuing different objectives, and politically appointed executives often have very weak relationships with career civil servants. Despite these challenges, public managers implementing change in their organizations must display skill in obtaining support from powerful external actors.

Public policy scholars have observed the impact of support from political overseers or sovereigns on the outcome of policy implementation (Goggin et al. 1990; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989). They are now joined by more recent studies of public sector reform that have begun to stress the importance of external political support (Berman and Wang 2000; de Lancer Julnes and Holzer 2001; Wallin 1997). Berry, Chackerian, and Wechsler (1999) note that the governor's high level of commitment and support for particular reforms in Florida had a substantial influence on the degree of implementation (see also Chackerian and Mavima 2000). Changes that could have been implemented quickly and cost-effectively seemed to generate more support from elected officials than those with higher implementation costs and those requiring much more effort and time to implement.

Support from other key external stakeholders figures prominently in successful change efforts (Abramson and Lawrence 2001; Denhardt and Denhardt 1999; Harokopus 2001; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989; Rossotti 2005; Wallin 1997). Thompson and Fulla (2001) conclude that the interest group environment acted as an important determinant of agency adoption of National Performance Review (NPR) reforms, with strong interest group opposition to an agency's NPR reforms constraining change. Conversely, Weissert and Goggin (2002) found that proceeding to implementation without garnering the support of interest groups can speed up the implementation process, albeit at the cost of dissatisfaction and criticism.

Factor 6: Provide Resources

Successful change usually requires sufficient resources to support the process. A fairly consistent finding in the literature is that change is not cheap or without trade-offs. Planned organizational change involves a redeployment or redirection of scarce organizational resources toward a host of new activities, including developing a plan or strategy for implementing the change, communicating the need for change, training employees, developing new processes and practices, restructuring and reorganizing the organization, and testing and experimenting with innovations (see Burke 2002; Mink et al. 1993; Nadler and Nadler 1998). Failure to provide adequate resources in support of a planned change leads to feeble implementation efforts, higher levels of interpersonal stress, and even neglect of core organizational activities and functions. Boyne's (2003) review of research, for example, found that "resources" is one of the important factors for improving public services (and hence, bringing about change). Rossotti (2005) heavily invested resources in major changes at the IRS and expressed regret that he had not sought at the outset stronger assurances of budgetary support for the reforms from Treasury Department officials.

Policy implementation scholars have long recognized this need for adequate resources to implement policy changes (Goggin et al. 1990; Matland 1995; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989; Montjoy and O'Toole 1979). Ample funding is necessary to staff implementing agencies and to provide them with the administrative and technical capacity to ensure that they achieve statutory objectives. Similarly, students of recent administrative reforms have observed that resource scarcity can hinder organizational changes (Berry, Chackerian, and Wechsler 1999; Bingham and Wise 1996; Chackerian and Mavima 2000; Kemp, Funk, and Eadie 1993).

As Chackerian and Mavima (2000) discovered in their analysis of government reform in Florida, resource munificence becomes even more complex when multiple organizational changes are implemented as part of a comprehensive reform agenda. The authors found that multiple organizational changes interact with one another, causing synergies and trade-offs. For example, the pursuit of multiple changes that demand *modest* amounts of similar resources can lead to synergies, increasing the likelihood that all changes will be implemented successfully. The pursuit of multiple changes that require *large* amounts of similar resources, on the other hand, tends to result in trade-offs. Trade-offs, in turn, result in winners and losers, with low-cost changes taking precedence over or even displacing more costly ones.

Factor 7: Institutionalize Change

Managers and employees must effectively institutionalize and embed changes. To make change enduring, members of the organization must incorporate the new policies or innovations into their daily routines. Virtually all organizational changes involve changes in the behavior of organizational members. Employees must learn and routinize these behaviors in the short term, and leaders must institutionalize them over the long haul so that new patterns of behavior displace old ones (Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano 2001; Greiner 1967; Kotter 1995; Lewin 1947).

Doing so, however, is not easy. Armenakis, Harris, and Feild (1999) have developed a model for reinforcing and institutionalizing change. According to the model, leaders can modify formal structures, procedures, and human resource management practices; employ rites and ceremonies; diffuse the innovation through trial runs and pilot projects; collect data to track the progress of and commitment to change; and engage employees in active participation tactics that foster "learning by doing." Judson (1991), too, strongly emphasizes the need to collect data and monitor the implementation process to keep managers aware of the extent to which organizational members have adopted the change. Evaluation and monitoring efforts should continue even after the change is fully adopted to ensure that organizational members do not lapse into old patterns of behavior.

The evidence, however, is mixed regarding the optimal pace for institutionalizing change. Some experts underscore the need to adopt change gradually or incrementally on a small scale in order to build momentum and to demonstrate the benefits of change (Armenakis, Harris, and Feild 1999; Cohen and Eimicke 1994; Greiner 1967; Kotter 1995; Rainey and Rainey 1986). Others have argued that a rapid pace of change can overcome inertia and resistance (Tushman and Romanelli 1985). Small-scale or gradual implementation, however, may pose more of a challenge in the public sector than in business because frequent shifts in political leadership and short tenures for political appointees can cause commitment for change to wane.

Factor 8: Pursue Comprehensive Change

Managerial leaders must develop an integrative, comprehensive approach to change that achieves subsystem congruence. Many researchers stress that in order for fundamental change in behavior to occur, leaders must make systemic changes to the subsystems of their organization. These must be aligned with the desired end state. Changing only one or two subsystems will not generate sufficient force to bring about organizational transformation (Meyers and Dillon 1999; Mohrman and Lawler 1983; Nadler and Nadler 1998; Tichy 1983). Still others have warned, however, that implementing multiple changes without understanding the structure and nature of the interconnections among subsystems can result in additional costs and a longer implementation period than anticipated (Hannan, Polos, and Carroll 2003).

Amis, Slack, and Hinings (2004) go even further, arguing that the actual sequence of change matters; they found that beginning the transformation process by changing "high-impact" decision-making elements of the organization first helps to build momentum for the broader array of changes that follow. Likewise, Robertson, Roberts, and Porras conclude from their study of business firms that practitioners should begin any change effort with systematic changes in the work setting and "insure that the various work setting changes are congruent with each other, sending consistent signals to organization members about the new behaviors desired" (1993, 629).

Support for these arguments is also present in public sector research. Shareef (1994), for example, found that an effort to implement a participative culture in the U.S. Postal Service fell short because of management's failure to modify organizational subsystems for the desired cultural change. Golembiewski (1985) emphasizes the fruitlessness of attempting to change attitudes and behaviors toward more teamwork and participation if the organizational structure remains strictly hierarchical and fails to support a team orientation (see also Meyers and Dillon 1999). The wisdom of this strategy notwithstanding, Robertson and Seneviratne's (1995) study suggests that subsystem congruence may be more difficult to achieve in the public than in the private sector because change agents in the public sector exercise less discretion than their private sector counterparts.

Conclusion

The factors and propositions offered in this article should serve not as a road map but as a compass for practitioners seeking to find their way amid the sustained, persistent, and challenging pressures for change they confront daily. They, in turn, suggest a robust, varied, and quite challenging agenda for future research, an agenda that is discussed at length in the extended version of this article on the *PAR* Web site. It suffices to note that work by Nutt (1983, 1986) and others accurately suggests the need to move beyond the literature's additive assumptions in researching these propositions. Researchers should analyze the interactive effects of such factors using research designs and methods that treat the possibility of a contingency approach to implementing organizational change seriously. Especially useful would be the employment of multivariate statistical techniques and large-sample data sets of organizations at different levels of government and in different public management settings. Another immediate research need involves refining the general propositions offered here, synthesizing the various theories underlying them, and testing rival propositions. In the process, researchers must confront the challenge of analyzing the relationship between the content and process of change and such organizational outcomes as performance. Some designs will be very challenging and expensive, but researchers should seek ways to conceive and execute them, possibly through consortia of researchers (e.g., Huber and Glick 1993) and proposals for large research grants. Such an effort would be timely, important for both practice and theory building, and long overdue.

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