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DRIVING FORCES FOR MISHANDLING CHANGE?

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Abstract

This paper takes a starting-point in managers as change drivers and investigates driving forces for mishandling change. The research is based on three theoretical foundations: theories on managerial work, change theory, and agenda formation theory. The methodological approach is a longitudinal case study of a manager and his management team. Based on an overview of the theoretical foundations and the methodological design, the paper discusses underlying reasons for a manager as change driver to mishandle changes. Findings suggest that agenda formation theory can help revealing and explaining driving forces for mishandling change, which in turn can help furthering the understanding of the managerial role as change driver. Furthermore, framing of issues is suggested to be of essential importance for the understanding of handling change.

Keywords: Organizational change, agenda formation, managerial work, framing, case study

Introduction and Research Objective

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions" (Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784)

One starting-point for this piece of research is that managers want to succeed when taking on roles as change drivers. That is, when initiating and driving change processes in organizational settings, there is an intention to achieve successful results. Another starting-point is that managers as change drivers not always are successful in their attempts, in spite of good intentions.

The importance of handling change efforts from a managerial perspective has been highlighted (e.g. Kotter, 1996), not least through the increased attention paid to IT-based organizational change efforts (e.g. Sauer et al, 1997). Often an explicit or implicit intention in literature is to explore how change processes could, or should, be handled. This paper aims at a slightly different angle of change, in terms of investigating driving forces for *mis*-handling change. This means to reveal driving forces influencing a manager as a change driver that are counterproductive in relation to intended goals of change efforts. The specific objective of this paper is thus *to investigate how agenda formation theory can contribute to the understanding of driving forces influencing a manager to mishandle change.*

Theoretical Foundations

One theoretical foundation for the study is found in theories on managerial work (e.g. Stewart, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982; Watson, 1994). Previous studies of managerial work have found that a manager's work is fragmented and includes a huge number of various issues (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973). Managerial work has also been described in terms of executing a number of issues on an explicit or implicit agenda (e.g. Kotter, 1982). The explicit or implicit managerial agenda influences or guides managerial activities in order to achieve suitable actions and results. In one stream of research managerial work has been seen in terms of different managerial roles, like for example interpersonal roles, informational roles, and decisional roles (Mintzberg, 1973). Research efforts have also focused on aspects of managers' roles in change processes and much of the results of these efforts have been published with a practical and partly normative stance (e.g. Kotter, 1996). One particular aspect of leaders' roles in relation to development processes is related to the sense of urgency in the organization or the climate for change (cf. *ibid*).

A second theoretical foundation is found in theories on change (e.g. Watzlawick et al, 1974; Lewin, 1947; Kotter, 1996). The amount of previous research on different aspects of change is extensive, including for example literature on how to lead change efforts (e.g. Kotter, 1996) and how change efforts can be mishandled (Watzlawick et al, 1974). Watzlawick et al (*ibid*) have suggested three basic ways of mishandling change: (A) action is necessary but is not taken, (B) action is taken when it should not be, and (C) action is taken at the wrong level. Action taken at the wrong level could mean that there is need for second-order

change activities, but efforts are only made in terms of first-order changes (cf. single- and double-loop learning, Argyris and Schön 1974). More efforts will not help such a situation. Instead there is a need for a shift in focus to change at another level. The different types are illustrated in Figure 1.

The three basic ways of mishandling change suggested by Watzlawick et al are illustrated as (A), (B) and (C) in Figure 1 and describe different ways of failing as a manager in a change driver role. Besides these three alternatives, there are two other ways of handling changes that are included in Figure 1. Alternative (D) can be described as taking no action when no action is necessary, and alternative (E) can be seen as appropriate action taken on right level when necessary. As shown in Figure 1, the cell for action taken when necessary is treacherous includes both alternative (C) and (E). This is the cell where a manager as a change driver wants to be, if at all conducting change efforts, but action can be mishandled by taken at wrong level (C) as described by Watzlawick et al (ibid).

		Necessary:	
		No	Yes
Taken Action:	No	(D)	(A)
	Yes	(B)	(C) (E)

↑
Action taken at the wrong level

Figure 1. A Basic Framework for Ways of Handling Change (partly inspired by Watzlawick et al, 1974)

A third theoretical foundation is found in theories on agenda formation (Dutton, 1986; Dutton and Ashford, 1993). These theories help explaining mechanisms for issues, here issues related to change efforts, entering the managerial agenda (or not entering the agenda). One view of an agenda is to see it as an array of a number of issues at any point in time (Dutton and Duncan, 1987). There is the overall agenda-setting for the goals of the organization, and there is also the agenda-setting in a more specific respect for the managerial work. The formation of the agenda for the managerial activities is influenced by factors both related to issues per se (form of presentation of issues and sponsor etc.) and to organizational context (strategy and culture) (Dutton, 1986). Regarding factors related to the specific issues, perceived attributes of an issue (issue salience) is important which means that an issue's magnitude, abstractness, simplicity and immediacy are important attributes to take into consideration (ibid). The different factors are often combined when people try to increase the managerial attention paid on an issue. Someone can for an example try to "sell" an issue to the manager by framing the issue in a certain way (cf. Dutton and Ashford, 1993). Framing and reframing issues can be expressed in terms of bisociation where an issue is not only associated to one context, but bisociated with two (Koestler, 1964). One example of reframing, or bisociation, is humor where the punch line often is when the facts are seen through a new frame (ibid).

Research Methodology

The methodological approach chosen in this exploratory research is a longitudinal (Kimberly, 1976) case study (Benbasat et al, 1987) conducted with a clinical research approach (Schein, 1987). In the clinical research approach the researcher adopts a helping role in the organization and during parts of the process the focus is on helping the client. The chosen approach can be seen as an attempt to conduct academically rigorous research that is also relevant to practice (cf. Robey and Markus, 1998; Benbasat and Zmud, 1999). The empirical foundation for the study consists of empirical material collected during a four-year period and is based on multiple sources (Yin, 1994). The sources include documentation from 105 interviews, minutes from all monthly meetings in the management team during the time period, as well as minutes from all quarterly board meetings during the four-year period. Besides these sources, the empirical material includes extensive field notes and various types of internal documents from the organization. The primary unit of analysis in the work is the work of the managing director and the secondary units of analysis is the work in the management team. The empirical material has been coded and an extensive chronological case study description has been written. In this paper examples from the case study description will be used as illustrations.

Empirical Illustrations

In the following paragraphs three empirical illustrations from the longitudinal case study are used to illustrate ways of handling change. The empirical setting for the case study is a managing director in an organization operating in retail trading business. The organization consists of about 600 persons and is owned by a large service group operating worldwide. The empirical illustrations will be discussed in light of the theoretical foundations in the subsequent discussions. Given the focus on driving forces for mishandling change, one starting-point for the discussions of the illustrations will be in different types of mishandling changes suggested by Watzlawick et al (1974) and described above.

Illustration 1: "Slow Decision-Processes"

The managing director in the organization introduced new demands of preparation before suggested investments were approved. When people did not change their ways of preparing investment proposals, there were iterations in the decision-making processes until proper preparation was done. After a while, a number of persons in the organization perceived the decision-processes to be too slow. There was a frustration about a perceived "brake" in the decision-processes. This led in some cases to persons breaking the rules in order to increase the speed in the decision-processes, and in other cases to persons who resigned. Over time, people learnt "the hard way" about the new demands.

Illustration 2: "Change Projects Subsequent to a Lost Contract"

The organization lost an important contract. The loss was regarded as a major crisis for the organization. This led to activities in the management team to initialize a huge number of different change projects. The intention was to compensate for the lost contract. The results of the efforts were that the number of change projects the management team initialized exceeded the organizational ability to handle the different projects. Too many projects were initialized compared to resources available. Over time, and after a certain amount of frustration in the organization, the management team had to reduce the number of change projects.

Illustration 3: "Changing Information - For a Start"

When a new managing director took office in the organization, the information to the management team was perceived to be insufficient. A change project was initialized to improve the management information. New reports and reporting routines for management information were developed. When this project was concluded, the management director still felt a need to improve the situation. This in turn led to new change efforts aiming at changing structures for management meetings. Fixed agendas for management meetings were introduced in order to focus discussions at management team meetings. These efforts then in turn were not perceived to be sufficient for perceived problems, but led to new changes. This time changes were conducted regarding persons included in the management team.

Discussion of Empirical Illustrations

In *Illustration 1* there was a change concerning the demands of preparation before investment decisions, but there were no particular change efforts carried out concerning consequences of the new demands. There were for example not sufficient efforts spent on communicating the new demands, and how these could be met. The new demands were informally communicated to persons directly involved in the decision-processes, but not to other persons in the organization who merely perceived slow decision-processes. This illustration can be seen as different types of mishandling change depending on perspective. From the perspective of the managing director the illustration can be seen as an example of Type A for mishandling change, i.e. action is necessary but not taken. That is, there was a need for action to explicitly communicate the changed demands on preparation for investment decisions, but this was never done. From the perspective of other members of the organization the illustration can be seen as an example of Type B, i.e. action is taken but not necessary. This means that from some perspectives there was no need to increase the demand of improved preparation for investment decisions in the first place.

In *Illustration 2* the problem was that the number of change efforts initialized was not in accordance with resources available. The illustration can be seen as an example of Type B for mishandling change: action is taken when not necessary. That is, there was a need for action to be taken, but the management team initialized more projects than the organization could handle. From another perspective one can see this illustration as an example of Type A, i.e. no action is taken when necessary. That is, the managing director and his management team did not take any action in order to change the resources available for all change projects initiated.

In *Illustration 3* the initial change efforts concerning information turned out to be insufficient. This led to new change efforts concerning business activities in the management team, and furthermore to changes among the persons. This example can be seen as an example of Type C for mishandling change (action is taken at wrong level). The scope for the initial change efforts was too restricted to information and did not include the larger relevant contexts. This means that in the first phase of the process there were needs for more change efforts than the managing director initialized. That is, from some perspectives this can be seen as Type A, i.e. action is not taken but necessary, regarding the context of the management information.

These few empirical illustrations show how change efforts can be seen from various perspectives and give a picture of the complexity involved in the expression "mishandling change". What is perceived as appropriate change efforts from one

perspective may turn out to be mishandling change from another perspective. When studying the managerial role as change driver, there is thus a need to be careful about judging what is *mishandling* change and what is *handling* change.

The illustrations also show how the basic framework suggested in Figure 1 can be applied for revealing various perspectives of change. Assume that a change effort is seen as Type E, i.e. an appropriate change that is necessary, from a management perspective. By investigating how the change efforts instead can be seen as Type B, i.e. an unnecessary change, the manager can increase the chances of understanding alternative perspectives of current change efforts.

General Discussion

The three different types of mishandling change suggested by Watzlawick et al (1974) and illustrated above, can be seen from an agenda perspective (cf. Dutton, 1986). In Type A change efforts are *not* included on the agenda. In Type B and Type C change efforts *are* included on the agenda, although on the wrong level in the latter case. This means that change efforts can be mishandled in terms of being either not included on the agenda, or being included, depending on the situation:

ON THE AGENDA OR NOT \Rightarrow MISHANDLING CHANGE?

The next question is then why an issue is included on the agenda in a manager's work or not. According to agenda formation theory (Dutton, 1986), as discussed above, there are different types of driving forces for including or excluding issues on/from the agenda. This means that there are different driving forces influencing whether an issue is included on the agenda or not:

DRIVING FORCES FOR AN ISSUE \Rightarrow ON THE AGENDA OR NOT \Rightarrow MISHANDLING CHANGE?

These driving forces can be related to issues per se and to the context (ibid). Given the scope of this paper it is of particular interest to look at factors related to the issues per se, i.e. related to change efforts per se. Here agenda formation theory highlights the importance of perceived attributes of an issue in terms of an issue's magnitude, abstractness, simplicity and immediacy (ibid). This means, for example, that a change effort can be framed differently depending on described magnitude of the change, how abstract the change is described, described complexity and urgency of the change. The framing of the issue influences the driving forces to include the issue on the agenda or not:

FRAMING OF AN ISSUE \Rightarrow DRIVING FORCES FOR AN ISSUE \Rightarrow ON THE AGENDA OR NOT \Rightarrow MISHANDLING CHANGE?

When applying agenda formation theory to the suggested ways of mishandling change, the focus shifts to the inclusion (or not) of the issue on the agenda. Given the nature of managerial work (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982), the agenda perspective seems appropriate when addressing managers as change drivers. There are many issues competing to find the way to the managerial agenda and agenda formation theory helps revealing relevant dimensions for investigating driving forces behind these issues. An issue, such as a change effort, can be seen through different frames (cf. Koestler, 1964) and the framing of an issue seems to be important for the handling of the change effort. The significance of various ways of framing an issue is for example used when change efforts are "sold" to managers (cf. Dutton and Ashford, 1993).

In Figure 1 five different fundamental ways of handling change were illustrated. Three of these ways (A, B and C) were described as mishandling change. The application of agenda formation theory points to different driving forces for including issues on the agenda or not. It also shows how framing of change efforts in terms of the magnitude, abstractness, simplicity and immediacy of the change efforts influences the likelihood of an issue to be included on the agenda. Given this, the framing of change efforts influences how the change efforts are handled, and whether it can be seen as mishandling change. A particular change effort can, for example, be framed in terms of various levels of complexity (simplicity) and various levels of emergency (immediacy). If a change effort is described as very complex and not emergent at all, it is likely to be left outside the agenda. If the same change effort, on the other hand, is described as rather simple and very emergent, is more likely to be included on the agenda. With an agenda perspective, the framing of issues is important to take into consideration, and influence the handling of change efforts.

Desirable situations for a manager as a change driver are to handle change efforts as alternative (D) or (E) in Figure 1, i.e. to take action only when necessary and to do it on right level. As the empirical illustrations above illuminate, a particular change effort can be looked upon from different perspectives, which in turn may lead to different views on whether the change is mishandled or not. What is perceived as mishandling change (A, B or C) from one point of view, may seem like appropriate change (D or E) from another point of view.

This means that there are arguments for investigating various points of view, in order to improve the ability to handle change efforts. By explicitly frame and reframe change issues as discussed above, different perspectives of the change can be revealed. Managers as change drivers can further the understanding of change efforts by deliberately alter the framing of issues at hand.

These reframing activities can help revealing driving forces for including the change efforts on the agenda. The manager as a change driver can also take a starting-point in various ways of understanding the handling of the change efforts. As discussed in relation to the empirical illustrations above, the manager can ask him-/herself how the particular change effort is handled and how this can be perceived from other perspectives. This in turn can help revealing different framings of the change effort and can be seen as moving from interpretations of handling change to alternative framings of an issue.

Concluding Remarks and Implications

This paper has investigated driving forces influencing a manager to *mishandle* change. Even if a manager does not *want* to mishandle change in the role as a change driver, there are situations when change efforts are handled with limited success. Handling of change has been described in terms of an elaborated basic framework partly inspired by Watzlawick et al (1974) see Figure 1. Agenda formation theory has been applied in order to offer possible ways of describing reasons for changes to be included on the agenda, and thereby be handled or mishandled.

Findings suggest that agenda formation theory can help explaining forces influencing how managers handle change by revealing driving forces behind issues on the agenda. Given the nature of managerial work with a huge amount of issues competing on the agenda, agenda formation theory can help furthering the understanding of driving forces involved in handling change. The paper points to the importance of framing and reframing of change efforts. Altering the framing of change efforts can alter how change efforts are handled.

This piece of exploratory research points to a need for further investigations of agenda formation processes and consequences for how change processes are handled. There are for example other dimensions than attributes of an issue influencing agenda formation processes that are of interest to include in further studies. Empirical illustrations from the case study indicate the complexity involved in the matters.

From a practical point of view, the paper suggests that a manager as a change driver deliberately should frame the change in various ways. The framing can be changed regarding for example, magnitude, abstractness, simplicity and immediacy of the change. Looking at the change through different frames can result in different ways of including the issue on the agenda and thereby also different ways of handling the change. By investigating the change for various perspectives, the manager can increase the understanding of the change effort at hand and avoid mishandling it.

The title of this paper is expressed in the form of a question about driving forces for mishandling change. The paper suggests that one answer to the question is that agenda formation theory can help revealing forces for mishandling change. The paper points to the complexity embedded in the question in the sense that driving forces and mishandling change are concepts that can be seen from various perspectives. There is no single *true* answer to the question and one could say that the driving forces are in the eye of the beholder. The discussion in the paper aims at furthering the understanding of possible reasons for mishandling change, and to offer managers tools to view driving forces from various perspectives in their roles as change drivers. Hopefully this can contribute to an alternative destination for the road paved with good intentions!

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