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SOCIAL SHAPING OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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Abstract

In this paper a case of organizational change is cited from empirical sources and reanalyzed as a failure case of IT-enabled radical organizational change. It is argued that management's mechanical, Tayloristic philosophy of organizational change are the primary causes of the failure. We maintain that successful organizational change requires a more human-centered view of organizations and information systems.

Introduction

Reengineering movement started in the early 1990s (Morgan, 1997). But business processes have been with us at least since the mid-1940s and process emphasis really goes back to Frederick Taylor (Davenport and Stoddard, 1994), who advocated scientific management. Hammer and Champy (1993) viewed BPR as the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business "processes" to achieve dramatic improvements in critical, contemporary measures of performance, such as cost and speed. They further viewed it as the single best hope for restoring competitive advantage. Similarly, Davenport and Stoddard (1994) defined it as a powerful change approach that can bring about radical improvements in business processes.

However, it has been reported that 50-70% of all BPR efforts have failed (Hall et al., 1993; Hammer, 1995; O'Neil and Sohal, 1999). This high rate is a significant meaning with respect to not only economic sense but also social and cultural sense, since radical organizational changes often create downsizing, layoffs, mistrust between management and employees, people's emotional trauma, losing sense of identity at work, and many other societal impacts.

In this paper, a case – JLS Office Supplies - of organizational change (Putnam, 1990) is cited and the case is reanalyzed as a fail case of IT-enabled radical organizational change. There could be many different explanations about the high failure rate. We recognize as the key problem management's Tayloristic managerial philosophy, mechanistic view of organization, transmission view of communication, functionalistic view of culture, and Tayloristic view of information systems. In what to follow, we introduce the company background and the reengineering processes. Then we discuss the issues identified in JLS case.

Organizational Change Initiatives – Reengineering

Company Bckground

Jones, Lowell, and Smith (JLS) is a family-owned office-supply firm with the 70-year-old history as one of the largest office supply dealers in U.S., currently having 50 employees. The company is a customer-oriented, top-quality firm handling – "everything for the office" - supplies that range from pencils and paper clips to original artwork and executive desks. The clients of this medium-volume business in the marketplace are primarily small businesses including law firms, banks, and dentists' offices. In the industry the company has a reputation as pioneering firm because of its innovative programs: sales team training program and establishing an interior design department and a new office-supply order system. Although it is an uncommon practice in the industry, JLS maintains several weeks of training for all sales people. JLS is one of the first office-supply firms to establish an interior design department.

Motivation of Reengineering

The former president, Smith, was a shrewd businessman and his employees respected and admired him. But he left the company with outmoded methods, a loss of revenue, and the pressures of severe competition in the marketplace. The current president, Harry, realized that the marketplace has changed rapidly. The young, progressive firms that have the latest technology and

innovative marketing methods have emerged and threatened the company's competitive position in the industry. Thus, there was a strong pressure on increasing efficiency in order to obtain and sustain competitive advantage.

Process of Reengineering

The current president enacted this situation with a number of changes in company policies and in the duties of several administrators. First, the president has made plans to develop and use a computer system to place orders, maintain accounts, keep inventory, and purchase supplies. A new comptroller, Tom, a MBA from Harvard, was hired to design and manage that system in a cost-efficient manner. Among changes in policies, the company plans to concentrate on large-account customers and phase out clientele who spend less than \$10 per month or \$100 per year. For billing cost reduction and better estimates of monthly sales, a system of contract sales that delineate the terms of payment between the customer and sales representatives was adopted. The company eliminated the entertainment fund that sales personnel used to purchase gifts, meals, or provide entertainment for prospective and long-term customers.

Implementation

The president announced its reengineering initiatives in a memo and then reviewed them in a company-wide meeting. In the meeting he commented,

Although we are currently competitive ... we cannot remain competitive with them unless we increase efficiency, cut costs, and reorient our focus to tomorrow's innovations. Changes in company policies and procedures are absolutely essential. ... I can assure you that these changes are absolutely essential at this time ... if you have concerns about the new policies, please bring them to me or to members of the operations committee. The operations committee will meet next week to process reactions and make suggestions for implementing these changes (Putnam, 1990)

The president did not inform his employees about the severe financial difficulty that the company had faced. But he shared the financial problem with Bill, his vice-president (VP) and general manager, and with Tom, the comptroller. At the following week, there was the operations committee meeting. The committee was comprised of six elected members who served 1-year terms and who met with Bill, the VP. The elected members were Sam, Alice, and Harvey from the sales department, Susan from design, and Judy and Fred from the supply department. The operations committee was established 5 years before to review problems and to make recommendations for improving task operations in sales and supply departments. Committee recommendations were sent to the executive committee, the decision making body of the company, comprised of the president, VP, comptroller, and the three managers from each department.

Bill, the VP, typically ran the meeting. But this time the president and VP decided not to attend the meeting, since they were afraid of the situation that members would raise voices against the reengineering plan. Instead they asked Sam, the most senior of the elected members, to chair the meeting and provide them with constructive recommendations for making the reengineering plan work. Sam supported management but wanted committee members to express their opinions about the reengineering, to prepare for the future uncertainty, and to support the new policies. As expected, the result of the meeting was a lot of complaining about the reengineering process. Members pointed out the problems about ways of implementing the changes and with the new policies. Also, they raised their negative reactions to ways the comptroller has implemented the reengineering and practiced his power. The results of the meeting were reported to the president that changes were taking place too rapidly and rigidly for members of the operations committee. He recommended more communication between management and employees. The president, after meeting with the VP and comptroller, sent out several memos supporting the changes and reengineering processes, justifying strict enforcement of the new policies, and announcing efforts to ease the transition. But employees continued to be non-cooperative with management and the changes.

Result of Reengineering

One month later 15 members in the sales department found jobs in new office-supply firms. There was no time to declare "failure" of the reengineering. Two month later the company declared bankruptcy and closed its doors. The loss of key sales personnel and the inability to recover from its financial problems were attributed to its downfall.

Discussion

The loss of sales personnel and the inability to recover from its financial problems might be the “direct” causes of its downfall. However, this case study is much more complex than that. Noticeably, the reengineering initiatives brought several significant changes to JLS in terms of organizational culture, employees’ perception of leadership, their attitude toward the company in general, etc. All these changes negatively affected its situation and actually made the problem worse. After the implementation of the reengineering, for example, employees felt that CEOs are less humane nowadays than before and formal communication between management and employees has broken down lately. Compared to the early days’ family-like culture, the culture after the reengineering became bureaucratic and Tayloristic.

This case highlights many common problems faced during the redesigning of business processes and organizational policy changes such as poorly formulated strategy, flawed objects, insufficient knowledge about the IT, and employees’ resistance to change (Sutcliffe, 1999; O’Neill and Sohal, 1999). Especially, as Morgan (1997) pointed out, many radical organizational changes place primary emphasis on the design of technical “business system.” As a result, the majority of reengineering programs mobilized all kinds of social, cultural, and political resistance that undermined their effectiveness. JLS would be a good example of this “technical” approach to organizational change without properly considering non-technical, human factors. In this section, we review more fundamental problems with this company and identify the five fundamental issues – *management philosophy, leadership, lack of communication, culture and conflict, IT as a magic bullet*.

Management Philosophy

One of the key success factors in organizational change is a managerial philosophy (Miles, et al., 1995). Typically, there are two distinct philosophies of management and organization: mechanistic and humanistic. A mechanistic philosophy has been deeply influenced by scientific management or Taylorism and views organizations as machines. This approach overemphasizes the role of management, while limiting the development of human capacities and molding employees to fit the requirements of mechanical organization (Morgan, 1997). Also it views the role of information technology as “automation and efficiency” for high productivity. On the other hand, a humanistic philosophy recognizes human roles as the central in organizing and develops the requirements of any changes based on human activity systems. Thus, its position on the role of information technology is fundamentally different from its counterpart. It insists that the role of information technology is not automating of process but informing people (Zuboff, 1988).

JLS’s management had a rather mechanistic philosophy of management and organization. According to a mechanistic approach, managers should do all the thinking relating to the planning and design of work, leaving the workers with task of implementation (Morgan, 1997). It appears that JLS’s management viewed organizational change as a dependent variable and the introduction of a new computer system, the new comptroller and new policy changes as independent variables. The president simply expected employees to follow these reengineering initiatives. He set the requirements and tried to mold employees to fit these changes. Furthermore, he simply believed that changes in existing policies and processes through automation will “cause” increases in efficiency and consequently organizational competitive advantage. He exactly followed the principle of scientific management: separating the planning and design of work from its execution. Organizational decision-making was centralized to management only. Employees were viewed as those who are subject to execute or follow the decisions made by management. The new comptroller had a mechanistic philosophy of management too. His rigid management style made many employees annoyed. He is the one who made the matter worse. Overall, the Tayloristic design philosophy of organizational change led management reinforce top-down approach to the redesigning processes and policy changes and ignore many human factors (e.g., culture, employees emotions, existing practices).

Leadership

Many researchers recognize the critical role of leadership in the reengineering initiatives (Sutcliffe, 1999). Without proper and committed leadership, organizational changes are very likely to fail. For radical organizational change the leader requires transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and especially in the implementation phase committed leadership is critical for success (Davenport, 1993). A transformational leader articulates a realistic vision of the future that can be shared, stimulates employees intellectually, and pay attention to the differences among the employees (Yammarino and Bass, 1990). Also he tends to advent flattened hierarchies and employee empowerment (Schuster, 1994).

On the other hand, JLS’s management failed to recognize more fundamental problems (e.g., employees’ mistrust about management and resistance to new policies and the new computer system) the company had faced and instead blindly enforced

to implement the changes in policy and process. Also management did not have clear visions for the company's future. What they only concerned about was "increase efficiency." For transformational leadership a leader must see his organization as a social system, which consists of individuals trying to cope with the sweeping changes in their lives due to radical organizational changes and the potential for low morale in their work-place as a result (Hammer and Champy, 1993). For this a leader has to possess systems outlook (Senge, 1990) and see the whole picture of the reality.

Noticeably, in addition, in the case there are the breakdowns of leadership. The new comptroller who was hired to manage the new computer system and to redesign the work processes took over a significant power from the president and practiced it over employees. Instead the president who used to receive respect and trust from employees moved back to the second line. This was another significant problem, when we consider that many failures of reengineering stem from the breakdowns in leadership (Hammer and Champy, 1993). In the operations committee meeting, one of the members told a story about her frustration about the breakdown of leadership.

During the transition period I had already agreed to take one of my customers to dinner and a hockey game before the policy on expense funds was enacted. Reservations had been made. The total cost of the evening would be about \$21. I explained the circumstances to the president and asked him to chip in \$10. He said he couldn't assist without checking with Tom. Now, when the president of a company can't make a decision for a mere 10 bucks, something is wrong! ... Tom is a power-hungry individual who wants to run JLS his way. He believes in strict enforcement of the rules and seems to have no time for people. For example, once a customer returned some merchandise and the salesperson misplaced the return slip. When the salesperson took the merchandise back to the storeroom, Tom followed him and waited until he left, grabbed the merchandise, and brought it to the president with the exclamation that sales personnel never follow the rules! Tom claimed that sales people ought to know that a signed return slip must accompany an item before it is reshelved in the storeroom

The comptroller's power stemmed from formal authority, control of knowledge and information, and control of technology (Morgan, 1997). Even though he was new, his formal position as the company's comptroller legitimized his power. "Power accrues to the person who is able to structure attention to issues in a way that in effect defines the reality of the decision-making process. This draws attention to the key importance of knowledge and information" (Morgan, 1997, p. 179). The president shared the important financial information with the comptroller and he was a member of the executive committee that was the decision-making body of the company. Also the introduction of the computer system gave him a significant power. However, the employees were very against his mechanistic management style and ways of exercising of power. Even some employees denied recognizing legitimacy of the comptroller's power. In the meeting one member from the supply group spoke,

Tom is an outsider who doesn't understand the traditions of this company. He treats employees as robots who must first their job performance into 12-digit fields just like that damn compute ...

Lack of Communication

Many researchers see communication as the key organizational issue for organizational change. Davenport (1993) points out that regular communication must be established between management or process innovation teams and those who will be affected by the new process and sensitive issues must be addressed honestly and openly. Hammer and Stanton (1995) also see the importance of communication for the reengineering and propose ten principles of communication for radical organizational change: use multiple channels; honesty is the only policy; use emotion, not just logic; heal, console, encourage; listen, listen, listen, etc.

This case illustrates how poor management's view of communication is. Organizational change is such a big deal to everyone in an organization. But in this case management's view of communication is the conduit metaphor of communication. In this metaphor, communication is equated with transmission (Putnam, 1996) and just seen as a medium for the exercise of power (Fairhurst, 2000). Management viewed employees as passive receivers of its message. It appears that management got confused about the difference between communication and order. Thus, management failed to recognize that communication is dialogue and a social construction of meaning rather than monologue and employees are coauthors of the message (Putnam, 1996; Fairhurst, 2000).

For example, the president never discussed changes in policies with employees in advance. Instead he announced these changes in a "memo" and then reviewed them in a "company-wide meeting." His transmission view of communication led him choose such poor communication media (memo and company-wide meeting). However, drawn from social constructivist roots, the metaphor of performance and symbol of communication see it as social interaction and interpretation of literary forms such as narratives, metaphors, rites and rituals, and paradoxes respectively (Putnam, 1996).

From this interpretative perspective of communication, not only are these media lean with respect of media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) but also they are weak at supporting two-way, open communication and social interaction. Larkin and Larkin (1996) are warning that “Do not introduce the change to employees in a company publication” (e.g., memo) (p.97). Simply it is untrustworthy and usually incomprehensible in the eyes of frontline employees. These mediums reinforce one-way communication between management and employees and would result in increasing employees’ resistance to management and organizational change.

Also, management neglected the importance of feedback loop and organizational learning. Management became a closed system having only top management (the president, VP, and comptroller) and isolated from the rest of the organization. The operations committee meeting was the only channel for two way communication and feedback in the company. But most employees thought the operations committee was ineffective because management rarely acted on its recommendations. Feedback is the process that one element of experience influences the next (Morgan, 1997). However employees believed that the operations committee merely functioned as a mechanism for employee input and feedback. Rather it was instrumental in the executive committee’s agenda. Absence of open communication and feedback loop eliminated the chance of even single-loop organization learning to occur. Also, radical organizational change requires “sustainable” double loop learning that questions the underlying assumptions of theories-in-use (Argyris and Schein, 1978). For double loop learning, according to the logic of dialectic view of change (Morgan, 1997) positive conflict based on open communication is required. A number of management scholars (Leonard and Strauss, 1997; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Eisenhardt, 1999) recognize that conflict is essential to successful organizational change and decision effectiveness. However, without open and honest communication, mutual trust and respect conflict often goes to not positive but negative, what we call negative conflict.

In JLS case the president intentionally avoided facing with his employees who might have different opinions about new policies and the new computer system. He decided not to attend the operations committee meeting and instead sent out “more” memos supporting the changes and management’s positions. Because of its Talyoristic management philosophy, management did not accept any disagreement from the employees. There is no clear indication that management “respected and trusted” its employees. Rather management neglected employees’ emotion and opinions further created more mistrust and less communication and feedback. This machine-like rigidity inhibited sustainable double-loop organizational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and ultimately caused the firm’s downfall.

Culture and Conflict

Many researchers recognize organizational culture as the most important issue for organizational change. Many authors suggested that high failure rate of organizational change can be attributed to lack of understanding employee culture by top management (Popoff and Brache, 1994). Thus, leaders must attempt to identify and protect organizational culture and values (Bell, 1997). Organizational changes require far more than just attendance to new policies, skills, or behaviors. It completely changes not just the processes and practices as individual employees but also their values, norms and beliefs (Lancaster, 1998).

Especially, this case highlights the criticality of organizational culture and employees’ resistance to any attempt to attack the organizational history of old images. Probably the biggest problem in JLS was management’s negligence and/or its functionalistic view of organizational culture. Top management’s negligence of organizational culture would have stemmed from the issues (lack of communication, traditional scientific management style, poor leadership) we have discussed so far.

However, probably a more significant one was management’s functionalistic view of organizational culture. Organizational culture can be referred to the broader patterns of an organization’s norms, values, and beliefs (Schneider et al., 1994) and can be understood as the unique sense of place that is made up of several elements: metaphors, rituals, stories, heroes, cultural artifacts, performance, and values (Trethewey, 1997). However, functionalistic perspective on organizational culture may see culture as a variable that can be manipulated by individual managers to create a strong, effective, and competitive organization (Trethewey, 1997). Thus, management with functionalistic view of organizational culture prefers large meeting to close face-to-face contact with employees and does not feel the need of being truly part of organizational members to understand the true nature of organizational culture. Instead, they tend to try to manipulate organizational culture through their power and/or other management techniques. For example, such management believes that new values, norms and beliefs can be delivered to employees through large meetings.

However, organizational cultures are more than a variable that can be easily manipulated. They are a system of shared symbols and meanings (Trethewey, 1997). And the elements - narratives, rituals, myths, heroes, stories, etc. - of organizational culture are not simply artifacts of cultures but instead they operate as a means of public persuasion, as ways of knowing, as options for managing identities, and as political control” (Putnam, 1996, p. 129). This was exactly what happened in the operations committee meeting. In that meeting employees created these literary forms (e.g., heroes, myths, stories, narratives) to construct and

reconstruct the reality of organization and organizational culture. Further they actually used as a mechanism to attack management's rigid reengineering initiatives and to defend the organizational history. These stories, myths, and narratives illustrate what employees' values, norms, and beliefs are. Management's transmission view of communication and functionalistic view of culture led them constantly neglect the significance of these stories and narratives for understanding the reality of the organization as well as employees' reaction to the reengineering initiatives and management. After all non-participatory and non-cultural organizational change resulted in employees engaging in defensive routine (Argyris and Schon, 1996) and looking for jobs with new office supply firms. It is more important to understand and be part of members' cultures rather than simply attempt to manipulate that as an outsider.

IT is a Magic Bullet?

In most cases of radical organizational changes a new computer system(s) is introduced for the purpose of automating existing processes. Many organizations see the new computer system a magic bullet (Markus and Benjamin, 1997) for organizational change and view organizational change as a technological change (Davenport, 1998). This rather technology deterministic view often neglects the importance of social success factors for systems (Markus and Benjamin, 1996). Many studies have recognized the problems with a mechanistic view of IT-enabled organizational change (Davenport, 1998; Markus and Robey, 1988; Markus and Benjamin, 1997; Robey and Boudreau, 1999). JLS did exactly same thing for the same purpose. Management neglected the "complexity" of implementing new technology in organization.

The development process of the system did not include any user involvement and user training was poor. Orlikowski (1992) states that technology has its dual nature as objective reality and as socially constructed product. She argues that (1) once developed and deployed, technology is reified and institutionalized, and loses its connection with human agents, and (2) this is caused mainly by the fact that users are often excluded in the process of development and the processes of development and use are often done in different organizations. Thus, the dualism of technology can be attributed for destroying the interpretative flexibility of information systems (Kakola and Koota, 1999) and lack of feeling of ownership of the new computer system. Probably, the comptroller is the only one who had ownership of the computer system.

In the operations committee meeting members told stories about problems with the rigidity of the new computer system and tried to defend their practices.

Do you realize the complications that the computer systems has caused? Every invoice I complete must have exactly 12 entries—nor more or no less. It takes me hours to check code numbers, rectify inconsistencies, and fit each order into exactly 12 digits ...my customers say that they can't understand the codes ... The automatic reorder mechanism sometimes fails to place new orders or to reorder products before the present supply has diminished ... the new computer system had resulted in unnecessary inconvenience, inefficiency, and confusion ... why have a computerized purchase order and inventory system for a business in which only a few employees really use it. It's quicker to do it without a computer

Even though the computer system might deliver precision, accuracy, speed, automation, and efficiency, they tended to view them as rigidity and put more values on flexibility and defended their existing practices. Most of people do not want their jobs fully designed by someone else (Davenport and Stoddard, 1994). Workplace practices are situated and historical in nature (Schuman, 1987) and thus cannot be easily created by the introduction of new computer systems. But in JLS case non-participatory and non-democratic design of the new computer system made it difficult for users (employees) to make senses of the new system and processes that were created by it (Bjerknes and Bratteteig, 1995; Mumford, 1993; 1996). Management's mechanistic or Tayloristic view (e.g., separation of designing and use) of organization caused this kind of problem again. This resulted in increasing employees' resistance to top-down and IT-enabled organizational change.

Closing Remark

In this paper JLS case was seen as a failure of IT-enable radical organizational change. The case revealed that management had neglected the complexity of organizational change and reinforced rigid organizational changes without considering many human factors. Its negligence of many human factors during organizational change was attributed to management's mechanistic view of organization and communication which might be more fundamental causes of the firm's downfall.

Influenced by Taylor's scientific management and Cartesian view of the world, still, many manager and leaders view an organization as an "economic" system and information systems as "technical systems" or "appliances." Further, they believe that efficiency is the key source of competitive advantage and it comes solely from reducing cost and doing things "efficiently." We

believe that this tendency has created more problems rather than truly solve. Instead we argued that for successful change organizations need a more human-centered view of management, leadership, communication, culture and conflict, and information systems.

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