The case for a further development of organizational change research: some contemporary reflections

Un plaidoyer pour le développement de la recherche sur le changement organisationnel : des réflexions contemporaines

BELHABIB-FILALI Mouna
Doctorante
FSJES Souissi
Université Mohamed V Rabat
Laboratoire de Recherche en Management des Organisations, Droits des Affaires et
Développement Durable - LARMODAD
Maroc
belhabibfilalimouna@icloud.com

KARIM Khaddouj
Enseignant chercheur
ENSAM Rabat
Université Mohamed V Rabat
Laboratoire de Recherche en Management des Organisations, Droits des Affaires et
Développement Durable - LARMODAD
Maroc
k.karim@um5r.ac.ma

Abstract:

This paper draws on the centrality of change in organizational life, the riskiness of change endeavors and, the lack of guidance offered so far by science, to make the case for the necessity of a further investigation of the phenomenon of change in organizational settings. It suggests to define organizational change before going into further detail on how it has become a ubiquitous phenomenon at the core of organizational life. Then, the article sheds light on the difficulty of implementing change successfully as well as the riskiness of such endeavors. Furthermore, literature struggles to provide guidance for practitioners in charge of implementing changes or transformations. Given this context along with recent developments (digitalization, pandemic), this paper pleas for the necessity of investigating such a central and important phenomenon of organizational life and ends the reflection with some possible avenues for research development.

Keywords:

Organizational change ; centrality ; riskiness ; literature gap ; research perspectives

Résumé :

Ce papier se base sur la centralité du changement dans la vie organisationnelle, le caractère risqué des missions de changement et, la pénurie d'orientations offertes à ce jour par la science, afin de plaider pour la nécessité d'une recherche plus approfondie du phénomène du changement dans le contexte organisationnel. Il propose de définir le changement organisationnel avant de revenir en détail sur comment il est devenu un phénomène omniprésent au cœur de la vie organisationnelle. Par la suite, cet article attire l'attention sur la difficulté de mener à bien le changement ainsi que le caractère risqué de telles missions. En outre, la littérature peine à fournir une aide aux praticiens en charge d'implémenter des changements ou transformations. Au vu de ce contexte et des développements récents (digitalisation, pandémie), ce papier plaide pour la nécessité d'investiguer un phénomène aussi central et important de la vie des organisations et clôture la réflexion en proposant quelques avenues de recherches possibles.

Mots clés :

Changement organisationnel ; centralité ; caractère risqué ; gap de la littérature ; perspectives de recherche

Introduction

Nowadays change seems to have become a ubiquitous reality in the life of organizations. Consequently, we cannot afford anymore to have a merely superficial understanding of its dynamics as it may be the case currently given the criticisms addressed to the change literature available so far. Moreover, the digital revolution and the covid crisis may seem to spread change everywhere. Everyone is concerned from now on. Implementing change successfully in the era of transformation is an imperative. Yet, many managers struggle with such a risky and ambitious endeavor, mostly lacking reliable guidance on how to do things.

This paper draws on such a reasoning to urge for a further investigation of organizational change in contemporary organizational settings and opens up some avenues for reflection on how to push research forward.

Based on a quick overview of how change evolved as an event in the course of organizations' lives, it first stresses the centrality of change in today's business environment. Then it recognizes that implementing change remains a risky endeavor though its centrality for business success. Indeed, the failure rate is quite significant, and the available literature seems to offer poor or little guidance to practitioners who resort to prescriptive expert opinions instead as seem to notice (Stouten, Rousseau et de Cremer, 2018) . Finally, it depicts the issue lived by the practitioners to call for expanding research on the field while suggesting some avenues for future research.

1. The centrality of change in today's corporate life

(Burnes 2017) writes in the 7th edition of his book, "Managing change", the following lines:

The year after the first edition of this text was published, Hammer and Champy (1993: 23) declared that 'change has become both pervasive and persistent. It *is* normality'. Many people thought this was something of an exaggeration, but now most people would see this as a statement of the blindingly obvious (Burnes, 2017: xii).

Indeed, as (Autissier, Vandangeon-Derumez, Vas, & Johnson, 2018) put it, "change has become a structural component of management and, more generally, of companies' functioning" (Autissier et al., 2018: IX). More importantly, these authors assert that change capability is an "immaterial asset" that can "no longer" be "bought" from external partners (Autissier et al., 2018: IX).

Let's first overview some definitions offered in the literature as per the concept of "organizational or organization change" before digging deeper in how it has become central to management nowadays.

As of (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), "' Change, one type of event, is an empirical observation of difference in form, quality, or state over time in an organizational entity"(Van de Ven & Poole, 1995: 512). (Autissier, Johnson, & Metais-Wiersch 2018) define change as a set of "actions" in a "project" which objectives consist of "altering the practices, tools, organizations and/or behaviors of a social system in order to replace them" (Autissier, et al., 2018: 47).

In both definitions, change is conceptualized as a difference, a modification, an alteration or a replacement and substitution. In organizational settings, it is a variance in whatever component or unit of the organization, be it at a small unit level or at the whole organization. (Autissier et al., 2018) provide a further nuance: whereas change is delimited to one project, transformation is intended at a set of projects while observing "anchoring and coherence" (Autissier, et al., 2018: 46). Now, let's uncover how has change become a ubiquitous phenomenon in organizational life.

(Burke, 2017) contends that "[o]rganization change is as old as organizations themselves" (Burke, 2017). In the same vein, according to (Autissier, et al., 2018), change had always been managed in organizations for the sake of differentiating the offer or matching environmental demands (Autissier, et al., 2018: 2). Yet, approaches to change evolved over time (Autissier, et al., 2018: 2).

"Economic stability" and a tremendous prosperity spanned the years between the end of World War II till the mid-seventies (Demers, 1999: 131).

Change is conceived of as an incremental development process stemming from the very nature of the organization. This gradual adaptation is carried out by a rational leader, in response to a rela[-]tively *[sic]* predictable and, on the whole, favorable environment (Demers, 1999: 131).

 (Autissier, et al., 2018) argue that the leader aspires to fit his organization "characteristics" with external demands to guarantee performance as of the contingency theory (Autissier, et al., 2018: 7). The authors note that the more "unstable" environment of the early 1970s challenged such a theory which was relevant in a context of "growth" and "low turbulence" (Autissier, et al., 2018: 7).

Indeed,

[b]y the early 1980s, with the oil shocks of the 1970s, the rise of corporate Japan and severe economic downturn in the West, it was clear that many organizations needed to transform themselves rapidly and often brutally if they were to survive (**Burnes, 2000**)"(Burnes, 2004: 988).

Change is seen as a crisis and theories of episodic and "revolutionary" change develop during these "upheaval" years (Demers, 1999: 133).

The new decade starts with globalization, the development of technology and fiercer competition, all of which combine to step up "business cycles" (Demers, 1999: 135). Change seems "the only thing that is predictable" at the outset of the nineties (Demers, 1999: 135). It is "no more a rare and shattering event, but a daily reality" (Demers, 1999: 135). Innovation is enabled by change, a "continuous learning process" (Demers, 1999: 135).

[C]hange is invoked in all leaders and managerial discourses (Autissier, et al., 2018: 1). Change is "no more a component of companies' functioning but a central element of it" (Autissier, et al., 2018: 1). Somehow, it seems beyond dispute that change is at the core of the corporate survival. More than 15 years earlier, (By, 2005) asserted that "the successful management of change is crucial to any organisation in order to survive and succeed in the present highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment."(By, 2005).

2. Implementing organizational change: a risky endeavor…… with poor reliable guidance

Although change is central to the success of business operations and companies' survival, it remains a struggle for the majority of organizations. Indeed, (Burke, 2017) recognizes that "most efforts" of significant change fail (Burke, 2017). Similarly, (Burnes, 2017) points out that change is successful in only "a third of organisations" as of McKinsey (2008) (Burnes, 2017: xiii). He also adds that, along with McKinsey, Deloitte invokes that "around" 70% of change fails and Beer and Nohria (2000) refer to approximately a 2/3 failure rate (Burnes, 2017: xiv). Nevertheless, in a review of some publications claiming the 70% failure rate, (Hughes, 2011) does not find support for the rate claimed (Hughes, 2011).

Yet, to sum up, as (Burnes, 2017) puts it:

[w]e can dispute whether or not the failure rate is 70 per cent, we can dispute whether or not some types of change are more difficult to undertake than others, and we can also dispute whether or not some organisations are better able than others to achieve successful change. However, what seems beyond dispute is that managing change is one of the most problematic tasks organisations undertake (Burnes, 2017: 5).

Thus, change is not only a risky endeavor but also quite a problematic mission to undertake. This is all the most true when the available literature seems to fail to support practitioners in the successful implementation of organizational change initiatives.

Actually, the theoretical offer regarding organizational change is quite criticized. Already in 2005, (By, 2005) regretted that "theories and approaches to change management currently available to academics and practitioners are often contradictory, mostly lacking empirical evidence and supported by unchallenged hypotheses concerning the nature of contemporary organisational change management."(By, 2005).

Almost a decade later, (Barends, Janssen, ten Have & ten Have, 2014) depict nearly the same scenario. The authors seem to challenge the solidity of the available evidence while stating that "[f]indings suggest that scholars and practitioners should be skeptical [*sic*] regarding the body of research results in the field of organizational change management published to date."(Barends et al., 2014).

In the same vein, (Stouten et al., 2018) deplore "practitioner reliance on popular change models that more often cite expert opinion as their foundation rather than scientific evidence" (Stouten et al., 2018).

As of what precedes, one could quite obviously conclude that while any change initiative remains very difficult to implement successfully, practitioners cannot find reliable and solid literature to rely on in their daily exercise.

Hopefully, Stouten et al., 2018's review constitutes a major contribution to the body of research. As described by (Burke, 2021), it provides extensive coverage of what change practitioners recommend and follow in their work with client organizations. Then they compare these practice models with one another and research-based evidence that either supports or challenges the practitioners' approaches to organization change. Finally they synthetize best practices and research evidence to generate a list of ten principles and steps of change management (Burke, 2021)

3. The case for developing research on organizational change & some reflections on research development

The ideas developed above shed light on a real difficulty that faces managers on a daily basis when implementing change in organizational settings. One can quite easily assume that practitioners are cornered to resort to the available prescriptive literature that lacks scientific evidence and rigor.

In today's VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, such a situation can be faced by any manager whatever the change he/she needs to implement, be it at a small unit level or at the whole organizational structure. Any manager is supposed to be lacking relevant and reliable guidance when trying to achieve successful transformation in the most sustainable and

human-friendly fashion while meeting business and economic requirements of efficacy and profitability.

This experience is all the more real in an ever-changing world, where digitalization has upheaveled the way things are done and where the covid crisis created unprecedented adaptation challenges. Research development is consequently two-fold.

First, digitalization is on all lips. It is a recent revolution that promises to substantially change the way things are done. The following quote explains the phenomenon:

We follow Verhoef et al. (2021, p. 889), who define digital transformation as "a change in how a firm employs digital technologies, to develop a new digital business model that helps to create and appropriate more value for the firm". Liu et al. (2011) similarly emphasize that digital transformation is facilitated by digital technologies and carried out in order to attain competitive advantage. Further, digital transformation changes the business model of the company through changing for example value creation processes, organizational tasks and how the business is made (Verhoef et al., 2021) (Ellström et al., 2021).

It is thus obviously evident that the digital revolution brings with it a change or even a transformation imperative for all businesses and companies. Not only is it a challenge that repositions change and the necessity of achieving it successfully as the central concern for businesses, but it also opens up avenues for new research as (Ellström et al., 2021) ascertain citing Warner and Wäger (2019) who "highlight the need for more research on how firms digitally transform since this is a field with only limited empirical and conceptual studies."(Ellström et al., 2021)

Second, the recent pandemic promises alternative and further changes. In Frimousse & Peretti's (2020) collection of testimonies regarding organizational changes driven by the covid crisis, Mohamed Benabid puts forward a double phenomenon: the shortening of decision-making processes and the acceleration of the digital transformation.

Consequently, and given the centrality of change in the organizational life, it goes without saying that the scenario depicted so far is a real-world puzzle which calls for further research to better understand change and its dynamics in organizational settings.

Furthermore, many avenues could be sought in quest of a successful way to manage change in organizational settings. Indeed, a new type of organizations seems to spread over the world: f-form entreprises. (Getz, 2009)   "define the F-form as an organizational form that allows employees complete freedom and responsibility to take actions they decide are best" (Getz, 2009: 35). As far as understood, such companies have had to transform themselves radically to

become liberated flat organizations. As they prosper, it means that the evidence of at least a type of successful change management in nowadays' turbulent and unpredictable world is just out there. Researchers could seek to immerse themselves in such experiences to better understand how these companies have come to succeed in such a tremendous transformation at the whole organizational culture level.

In addition, with developments on organizational neuroscience, we can now better understand what drives human behavior from the brain and neurological standpoint, which is applicable to all humans wherever they are. There is then some sort of ever-valid theory to discover as per changing human behavior stemming from breakthroughs in neuroscience.

Conclusion

Eventually, this paper stands as a plea advocating for the necessary investigation of such a central and ubiquitous organizational phenomenon as leading change and transformations. It has overviewed how change, which has always existed in the course of organizational life, has become a central element of today's business world. It pointed out that, although central to the organizational life, change seems to remain quite poorly understood and the available literature does not seem to meet enough of the needs of practitioners in terms of guidance and solid evidence to support their daily decision-making processes. Finally, drawing from the contemporary situation that faces managers aiming to implement organizational change, it suggested at least two avenues of research that could hopefully advance the academic thought of the field.

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