

MANAGING CHANGE/ CHANGING MANAGERS

Julian Randall



Managing Change/Changing Managers

The topic of change management presents students with many challenges. One of the most challenging is making sense of guru and hero-manager literature, of which there is a plethora.

Managing Change/Changing Managers is an innovative textbook that encourages readers to question rigorously popular management theory, presenting a challenging review of existing literature in the change management field. The author brings together an overarching perspective on the most influential writings in the area, but, unlike other textbooks, provides a much-needed critique of the material and its implications for management practice.

Arguing that the majority of management guru literature makes the art of managing change appear simple and foolproof when it is not, this text is refreshingly critical, guiding and enhancing the reader's own criticality. The book also draws the best practice out of the traditional theory, using cases to illuminate the practical side to change management.

Primarily a guide for managers and postgraduates entering the territory of change management, this invigorating book is essential reading for all those studying or working in the field.

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Contents

List of figures	ix
List of tables	x
List of boxes	xi
Acknowledgements	xii
Introduction	1
1 Finding your way in: managing change or changing managers	3
Introduction	3
Managing change	5
Examining different contributions	6
Different voices in the management of change	7
Textbooks	8
Learned articles and periodicals	10
Theoretical assumptions underpinning management and change	12
The subjective–objective dimension	13
Order and conflict	15
The context of change literature	17
A historical perspective on the management of change	17
The managerial paradigm	18
Interventional approaches	19
The excellence literature and human resource management	20
The radical shift towards interpretation	21
Underlying theoretical debates	21
Addressing significant questions	22
Discussion questions	23
References and further reading	24
2 Thinking about change: stages, process or continuum	27
Introduction	27
Different types of change	28
Theoretical underpinnings of change	32
Planned interventions and the management of change	35

The enduring problem of resistance	37
Emergent change and the management of change	40
Emergent change and changing managers	43
Discussion questions	47
References and further reading	49
3 Managing systems: open or closed?	53
Introduction	53
Organization as system	56
The systems thinking approach	59
Managing resistance to change	60
Resisting management and change	62
Summary issues arising	64
Practical examples	67
Discussion questions	74
References and further reading	76
4 Individuals and change: manageable or not?	79
Introduction	79
Individual learning: theory and practice	87
Schemas, frames and scripts	88
Motivational theory	92
Individual learning theory and change	94
Basic assumptions and enforced change	95
Basic assumption and reframing	96
Same song or new tune?	98
Discussion questions	100
References and further reading	102
5 Cultural transformation: behaviours or perception?	105
Introduction	105
Culture as an operational construct	115
Culture and Human Resource Management	116
The formation of cultures	117
National cultural typing	119
Cultural transformation	121
Culture as a metaphor and metaphors for culture	123
Managing cultural transformation	124
Emergent approaches to cultural change	126
Discussion questions	127
References and further reading	128
6 N-step models: practice, performance or preference?	133
Introduction	133
The stepped change approach	136
Theoretical underpinnings of n-step approaches	145
Phase analysis and organizational development	146
Benefits of the phase model	149

Upbeat or downbeat?	150
Discussion questions	153
References and further reading	155
7 Programmed approaches to organizational change: rhetoric and reality	157
Introduction	157
The rhetoric of radical programmed change	158
The rhetoric of quality programmed change	165
TQM and underpinning theory	168
The content of TQM	171
Steps in the TQM process	173
Questions arising for TQM practitioners	174
Management competencies and TQM	175
Business Process Re-engineering revisited	176
Emerging evidence of unease	177
Postscript on New Public Management	179
Summary	180
Discussion questions	181
References and further reading	182
8 Project management: facilitation or constraint?	185
Introduction	185
What is a project and how is it managed?	186
Some examples to work on	188
Trying it out	190
Management by objectives	193
A broader view of project	196
Ways in for the change agent	200
Facilitating discussion	201
Implementing change programmes	203
Action research and action learning	206
Evaluating change	207
Emergent change strategies	211
Evaluating training interventions	212
Discussion questions	212
Points to examine	213
References and further reading	214
9 Change agency: managing change or changing managers?	219
Introduction	219
Summary	223
Leadership and management	225
The management and leadership connection	226
Different roles of change agents	226
What change agents need	227
So, how many change agents are needed?	229
The use of experts as change agents	230

CONTENTS

Context of change agency	232	
Managing the culture	233	
Stages involving change agents	235	
Critical change situations	235	
Gaining and making alliances	237	
Process consultation	238	
Return to leadership	240	
What the good leader does	240	
Discussion questions	242	
References and further reading	243	
10 Conclusions		247
Introduction	247	
Rethinking organizational change	248	
The deeper theoretical debate	249	
The way ahead	251	
References and further reading	252	
Index		253



Figures

1.1	Two dimensions, four paradigms for organizational analysis	15
2.1	Forces affecting flight	30
2.2	Demand/supply curves	31
2.3	Example of a Case Analysis Form	39
3.1	Congruence model	56
3.2	Leavitt's diamond	57
3.3	An input-process-output model of Dunlop's system of industrial relations	60
3.4	Problems of change and implications for change management	61
3.5	Implications for change management and related action steps	62
3.6	The structure underlying actions	71
3.7	Structures that underlie complex situations	72
4.1	A schematic summary of conceptual categories	89
5.1	Schein's cultural layers model	118
6.1	Commitment mapping	142
7.1	Steps in the TQM process	170
7.2	Diagram of interrelated factors affecting change	177
7.3	Managing integration paths	178
7.4	Links between competitive drivers	178
8.1	Decision flow diagram	188
8.2	Structure diagram before change	189
8.3	Structure diagram after change	189
8.4	Precedence network	190
8.5	Hospital training budget spreadsheet	194
8.6	Hospital training budget spreadsheet	194
8.7	Linked issues in a change programme	197
8.8	Building blocks for change	198
8.9	Cyclical processes in action	206
8.10	Action research and action learning	207



Tables

4.1	Links between HR policies and organizational outcomes	94
5.1	Steps for managing cultural norms	124
6.1	Outline of the four-phase model	149
7.1	Results of participants' selections	169
7.2	Standard, routine and non-routine processes	173
8.1	Transforming the psychological contract	205
8.2	Relative position of roles, objectives, techniques and skills	209
9.1	Approaches to change and their uses	234
9.2	Process consultation	239



Boxes

1.1	Key philosophical ideas in sociology	14
3.1	Regulation versus radical change	63
4.1	Restaurant script	91
4.2	The Bales categories	92
5.1	General principles for successful cultural change	125
5.2	A schema for facilitating emergent change	126
8.1	Readiness for change	210
8.2	Styles of management	211
9.1	Mechanistic versus organic cultures	232
9.2	Inner and outer contexts of change	233
9.3	Significant factors during change	234
9.4	Change agent roles	235
9.5	Factors affecting change adversely	236



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The discussion that followed included the usual question of the textbooks used and I allowed myself the self-indulgence of complaining that there were so many different books needed to cover a complex and diverse set of literatures, each of which included theory and empirical work. My visitor without hesitation suggested I should write a book to bring some of those diverse themes together. The result is the present volume. I am indebted to Catriona King who was responsible for this invitation.

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Introduction

In nearly twenty years of management consultancy work in the UK and abroad, I have experienced the management of change in different initiatives in over 300 companies. In 1993 I embarked on an MSc in Human Resource Management and discovered that theory can appear to conflict with assumptions born of previous consultancy practice. Sometimes the academics teaching us found the older, experienced learners in the class less inclined to accept the prescriptions offered by the textbooks. We in our turn had to learn that, in order to contribute to learning, it is necessary first to listen to the general debate contained within a literature before attempting to make a contribution through research and dissertation.

Many textbooks approach their subject by addressing the theoretical principles underlying each topic before offering empirical evidence or case study to illustrate and develop the critical points being made in the text. A different approach seemed appropriate for experienced students and postgraduates. As a management trainer, it had always been my experience that subjects raised with managers benefit from reflection and active discussion of practice encountered and then addressing the implications for underpinning theory. The problem for a book attempting to replicate this approach lies in the difficulty of simulating such reflectiveness in the written text.

Most managers probably read popular management books, broadsheet newspapers or professional journals on the subject of managing change at work. The articles are usually current, topical and well written. However, they can sometimes leave more critical questions either unanswered or only briefly addressed. Besides journalistic contributions there is a range of books which includes what David Collins refers to as guru/hero manager texts together with more closely argued academic works and scholarly monographs.

The layout of each chapter has therefore been planned to enable the reader coming back into study or embarking on postgraduate study to read each chapter in a discursive way. The first section includes popular readings and poses questions arising from the approach taken by the contribution. The critical points arising then lead on to a second section in which the theory underpinning the topic is examined in greater detail together with accounts from practitioners. A third section includes examination questions and offers an opportunity to consider possible structured answers. Finally, a fourth section contains references drawn on throughout the chapter and attempts to include a representative selection of the different books and journals that might offer a point of departure for further study.

It has always been my experience that students with previous working experience enhance the learning that can be offered on a postgraduate course of study. It is the hope of the present author that this book may make the challenging topic of the management of change more accessible to those who come to it from that background of experience and facilitate their contribution to research and the development of the theory which underpins it.

Finding your way in

Managing change or changing managers



TOPIC HEADINGS

- Current issues in the management of change
- The different literatures contributing to the management of change
- The theoretical assumptions underpinning the management of change
- Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis
- Historical human relations background to change interventions

INTRODUCTION

The Management of Change is a subject that is destined to be with us for many years to come, while people adjust to a world of work that is likely to be more fragmented than previous generations had come to expect. In the middle of the last century it would be fair to say that most people expected to choose a trade, profession or occupation and, if they wanted to, stay in it until retirement. Popular authors frequently refer to a period of stability after the Second World War when full employment was the objective of governments, whether in the Western world or in the more managed economies to be found elsewhere.

If we accept the findings of Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964), we would anticipate that most individuals looked forward to a stable experience of employment, which started with specific qualification levels and induction training and then proceeded through various promotions, accompanied by appropriate incremental pay rises. For many, the prospect of working for one employer enabled individuals to plan their lives, and to invest in a family and property with the security of feeling that they could discharge these responsibilities with a reasonable prospect of consistent success. Individuals might freely embark on change should opportunity arise elsewhere or an alternative offer be made in the same sector. One well-known popular writer in management summarizes what many might have felt then:

Thirty years ago I started work in a world-famous multinational company. By way of encouragement they produced an outline of my future career – ‘This will be your life,’

they said, with titles of likely jobs. The line ended, I remember with myself as chief executive of a particular company in a particular far-off country. I was, at the time, suitably flattered.

(Handy, 1989, 5)

However, the author continues to consider the changes that have broken into the world of work since that time. We can note that it has given rise to much reassessment by individuals of how they will manage their lives to take account of different, sometimes imposed and unplanned breaks in what would previously have been a seamless experience. The post-war consensus of providing employment for all broke down and the assumptions that underwrote motivation at work and career development came to be questioned.

Interestingly, the full development of the all-providing organization had emerged in the terms of Human Resource Management (HRM) (Beer, 1984). It could be said that traditional personnel management during the twentieth century had offered the prospect of managed motivation leading to productivity and achievement of organizational objectives (Storey, 1989; Sisson, 1994). However, now there came a philosophy that was far more comprehensive and combined performativity with personal commitment to the organization (Fournier and Grey, 2000). The outcomes of HRM could be listed:

- Quality
- Flexibility
- Commitment
- Strategic integration.

(Guest, 1989)

There were even those who saw a psychological contract in which transactional elements (money in return of work and effort) were balanced by relational elements (loyalty and trust), which would explain the internal calculation that an individual might make during his or her experience at work (McNeil, 1985; Rousseau, 1998).

This obligingly cohesive and easily managed world could not be expected to survive what was to be a decade of monetarism in which businesses were projected into a financial accountability, which would find them struggling to survive without radical downsizing or merger. The alluring prospect of reducing what for most businesses accounted for 75 per cent of overhead – staff costs – could only lead to the competitive drive to become lean and risk averse (Peters and Waterman, 1985). Excellence came at a price and the right formula for a company's survival could well mean reduction in numbers and arbitrary termination of employment contracts. The effect of this on individuals became the focus of increasing research (Jahoda, 1982; Little, 1976; Smith, 1985; Swinburne, 1981). The consequences were found to impact on not just workers directly affected in this way, but also those employees who remained in work and had witnessed how their peers had been treated (Hallier and Lyon, 1996; Hallier and James, 1997).

The implications of this imposition of change also affected the rationale of much public sector employment. Governments were not slow to see the value of reducing head-count in sectors for which they were responsible. Performativity could offer the prospect not just of reduction of overhead but also the functional flexibility that unionized environments had

precluded in the past. The debate about the rights of private profit makers to undertake publicly funded services is with us still. But the drive for what was sometimes referred to as New Public Sector Management is unlikely to recede (Fox, 1991; Pollitt, 1993).

MANAGING CHANGE

The claim that change at work can be managed is not a new position. The history of industrialization offers myriad examples of organizations evolving in all sectors. New technologies have always driven the search for new applications, which in turn provide the competitive advantage to those who first implement them. Unsurprisingly, it often meant for workers increased productivity imposed with no necessary compensating benefits (Littler, 1985; Melling and McKinlay, 1996; Gall, 2003). Into that world of change came initiators, inventors and managers of change who offered business owners new ways of implementing such competitive advantage. Taylorism is a prime example of Ford's investment in performativity linked to production, but following this application of derived productivity to systematic management were many others whose names are equally well known. Most students of social sciences will have heard of Lewin (1947) who addressed the forces for and against change and attempted to manage the process with groups of workers using group work. His research influenced many practitioners who took part in facilitating that work and who went on to research and write in the field of management and motivation in their own right. Among them were such well-known names as Argyris, Schein and McGregor, to name but three of those who continued and developed his work.

However, it took the excellence literature to bring popularity to writings on the management of change. Academics such as Porter and Kanter became household names among the advocates of proactive intervention and positive interpretation of the imposed management of change. Practising managers and students alike found such contributions accessible and readable. They often reinforced an optimistic belief that it was possible to bring about change at work without inducing resistance or alienation in those on whom it was imposed.

Not surprisingly a range of texts appeared for students and managers wanting to investigate good practice and the theoretical principles that underpin the practice of change management (Burnes, 1992; Carnall, 1999; Wilson, 1999; Collins, 1998; Williams *et al.*, 2002; Darwin *et al.*, 2002; Hayes, 2002; Jick and Peiperl, 2003). They balanced the theoretical and the empirical using different approaches, sometimes illustrating theory with practical examples or alternatively offering case study-led comment on practical contributions to an exponentially burgeoning literature on the successful implementation of change.

At the foundation of such theorizing lie the findings of researchers. Such contributors, mostly academics, enter into the world of work carrying with them a set of tools and a set of assumptions (Weick, 1995). Some come from the Labour Process tradition, which has its roots in the assumption that the employer–employee relationship is inherently exploitative. Others have a more critical approach, perhaps accepting the necessary interaction of worker and manager whilst seeking to evaluate critically the outcome of management strategies and their intervention in the workplace. Such work often finds its initial publication in periodicals and journals and in edited volumes of assembled contributions (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998).

EXAMINING DIFFERENT CONTRIBUTIONS

In the first section of this chapter we will attempt to give the reader examples of these different types of contribution. Popular writers can provide compelling reading, particularly when consultancy has provided them with examples which give their texts both credibility and currency. It can sometimes be difficult for the general reader approaching such literature to identify the theoretical assumptions being made by the writer. Perhaps the pace of the narrative overtakes the need to be analytical and, on occasion, critical of claims being made about effectively managed change and its impact on the individuals involved. The examples used offer opportunities to examine the assumptions made by the writers.

In the second section we will look at the theoretical assumptions underlying the management of change in greater detail, for the impact of change on individuals has its base in the discipline of psychology, in which there is a very full literature addressing change and its impact on individual subjects both in laboratory and in fieldwork. But individuals usually work with others and this brings us into the areas of group work and the ever-popular emphasis on teams. Here we are entering into the more sociologically based literatures of group dynamics and team roles. Finally, once we embark on organizational studies there are other debates that need to be addressed. These are both definitional – what is an organization – and also conceptual – how do we think about the dynamics which underpin the disciplines we are studying during change?

In the third section we will look at the historical evolution of traditions, which have been significant contributors to the way we think about change and the assumptions that may be made about it. We will consider the background of those who would see organizations as almost mechanical in the way they operate. There are still many practitioners and consultants who would see their work as diagnosing problems arising from the way an organization is structured and staffed. Organization Development as a discipline has its roots in such a functionalist view.

The alternative tradition of perceptions of individuals as the critical factor in managing change in organizations derives from an interpretist tradition. Contributions range from the Human Relations school to later work on climate and culture, in which the way individuals interpret change depends on the basic assumptions they hold about themselves, their jobs, their career and the organization. Here we are at the heart of the structure and actor debate, which surfaces along the interface between personal and corporate constructs (Balnaves and Caputi, 1993). The debate will endure and reflects the distinct contributions that psychology and sociology have made to the management of change. We have allowed that distinction expression in the alternate parts of the title of this book, for structuralists will usually be more comfortable with *managing change* as a process, whereas interpretists will be more comfortable starting from the premise that *changing managers'* attitudes is what actually underlies the claim to be effective in the management of change.

The fourth section of this chapter will address the practical considerations of those embarking on academic, postgraduate courses. You will probably be confronted by requirements to produce essays, assignments and eventually a dissertation. Getting back into the ways of writing extended prose composition can be trying for those whose lives are more dependent on minimal e-mails and bullet-point lists.

So, here is the opportunity to examine the conventions required to be successful, and the form and content, which should make it easier to write and gain reasonable marks from academics who, as a race, can be remarkably insistent on the requirements of parsing, analysis and the grammatical conventions sometimes left behind at school by those involved in everyday management practice.

In this first chapter we will look at the structure of assignment and examination questions and the methods to follow in putting together your answer. Writing is a discipline which, like any other, should become easier with practice. However, some ground rules may make it easier to judge how closely your work has come to best practice. In subsequent chapters we will use the fourth section to examine how to develop questions which can arise in exams and assignments.

DIFFERENT VOICES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

The most accessible works for a general readership interested in entering the world of the management of change are usually popular to-do books. Their titles often give them away. We will notice the inclusion of 'how to' and 'to do' phrases included in the title. Academic students are often warned off using such books as frequently very little is offered to the reader by way of Index or References. This makes the work, however well written, difficult to link to other contributors and can become a monologue of the author's personal opinion backed by anecdote and selective quotation from sympathetic sources. However, for those looking to break into the subject there is sometimes a value in reading to identify what the basic assumptions of the writer are and whereabouts on a spectrum of contributors he or she would be sited. With this in mind we offer the following extract as not untypical of such general works. It comes from a book entitled *Effective change: twenty ways to make it happen*:

Search for initial solutions

Faced with a complex situation requiring change a common management reaction is 'Where do I begin?' Successful change efforts suggest that a change should start at those points in the system where some stress and strain exist, but not where these are the greatest. Strain causes dissatisfaction with the status quo and thus becomes a motivating factor for change in the system. Look carefully at the recipient of the proposed changes, to see if they can be grouped or segmented so as to benefit from slightly varying change strategies.

Stagnating organisations develop many layers of filters to keep out the external world. One solution may be to deliberately introduce conflict. This can stimulate the creation of mutual goals and values, integrating individuals into the groups. Confrontation meetings, for example, can ensure that problems are aired along with alternative solutions.

Problem recognition narrows the task, putting crucial not marginal issues on the agenda for action. At this stage you are only looking for an outline of possible action and this must reflect:

- Available resources
- An acceptable time scale.

It is no use, for example, devising a major change programme, which cannot be properly financed. Similarly, there is no point planning a major change programme lasting too long.

At this early stage in the process of organising the change effort you should also identify how much commitment to change exists. The retailer's survey, for example, revealed that there was widespread staff support for it:

*The smaller the commitment, the more intense
The change effort required.*

(Leigh and Walters, 1998, 114)



Before we move on consider the following questions:

- 1 What sort of stress and strain is the author referring to?
- 2 How does strain become a motivating factor?
- 3 On what basis would change recipients be grouped or segmented?
- 4 How would you identify a stagnating organization?
- 5 What examples would typify layers of filters?
- 6 How do you deliberately introduce conflict?
- 7 How can you gauge commitment to change prior to its taking place?
- 8 What comment would you make about the final statement 'the smaller the commitment, the more intensive the change effort required'?

The use of this excerpt is not intended to suggest that the work from which it is derived is unworthy in any way. There are many ways of gaining interest and commitment to a subject and popular or journalistic articles will be used throughout this book because they are often insightful and can be stimulating. However, the reader embarking on an academic course now needs to be more critical in the best sense. Criticism here does not mean being negative, but it does mean asking questions to clarify statements or concepts that may be unclear.

So, in the above passage we can ask what the author means by 'stress and strain' and how it becomes a motivating factor. Sometimes an example would have sufficed. Here, it is not given. The tenor of the excerpt is anecdotal in style. It passes uncritically over assertions that do not offer a clear definition to allow us to identify, for example, what is a 'stagnating organization'. It offers general prescription in a definitive way, for example, suggesting that deliberately introducing conflict and confrontation meetings would facilitate the formation of consensus. The final summaries about time and resources would seem unexceptionable and the quotation at the end has a surface validity, which scarcely needs stating but frustratingly offers no specific example.

TEXTBOOKS

Here is another excerpt, this time from a well-known textbook, which offers both references and tools for considering the phenomena involved in thinking about the stages that might comprise change and allows us to think more clearly about how they interface with each other:

Change and transition model

If the concept of change can be examined from an internal, external or proactive set of viewpoints, then the response of managers has to be equally as widespread. Buchanan & McCalman (1989) suggest that this requires a framework of 'perpetual transition management'. Following from Lawler's (1986) concept of the lack of a visionary end state, what appears to be required is the ability within managers to deal with constant change. This transition management model, although specifically related to large-scale organizational change, has some interesting insights into what triggers change in organizations, and how they respond. It suggests that four interlocking management processes must take place both to implement and sustain major organizational changes. These processes operate at different levels, and may involve different actors in the organizational hierarchy. The four layers are:

- *Trigger layer* Concerning the identification of needs and openings for major change deliberately formulated in the form of opportunities rather than threats or crises.
- *Vision layer* Establishing the future development of the organization by articulating a vision and communicating this effectively in terms of where the organization is heading.
- *Conversion layer* Setting out to mobilize support in the organization for the new vision as the most appropriate method for dealing with the triggers of change.
- *Maintenance and renewal layer* Identifying ways in which changes can be sustained and enhance belief, reinforce and justify change and avoid regression by using, say, ritual.

(Paton and McCalman, 2000, 10)

We can contrast our first excerpt with the second by considering the more structured layout of the content. Many textbook writers include diagrams and outlines to guide the reader through processes, steps or stages, which make the material they feature appear more logical in sequence and therefore easier to follow.

The links to previous contributors allow the student to identify the authors whose work may have provided the basis for the inclusion of the model or diagram. They may also offer critical comments and questions themselves, as is the case here:

Transition management suggests that organizations have to plan for, divert resources to, and implement four sets of interlocking processes. These are designed to implement, to sustain, and to build on change and its achievements in an attempt to address the issues associated with change over time. The argument here is that these layers – trigger, vision, conversion and maintenance and renewal – are necessary processes that occur in change management. The respective emphasis and priority attached to each of them will alter over time, but recognition of their existence goes a long way to determining the management action needed.

The model of perpetual transition management starts out with a number of questions. How do we explain successful change? How do we explain attempts at change that is initially successful but wanes or fizzles out halfway through? Effective large-scale change demands a series of management actions linked to four interlocking layers or processes.

(Paton and McCalman, 2000, 11)

LEARNED ARTICLES AND PERIODICALS

All serious students at postgraduate level will be guided towards the sources of research from which theory is derived and developed. Reading excerpts as we are at present and as is offered in textbooks, is no substitute for consulting original research at source and intact. For most students this is by far the hardest part of the work and will become increasingly so if a dissertation is to be embarked upon.

It may be useful to consider an example of what could be described as empirical evidence simply offered and linked to a general theme, which has been part of a topical debate for some years now: the Learning Organization. The authors of our excerpt have surveyed 92 managers from 14 public and 14 private-sector organizations. Explanations for differences in experience and perception are considered along with their implications. The authors identify what they believe are the significant differences, which need not detain us here. However, their final paragraph may give an idea of the conclusions of their study:

It therefore seems that the unanticipated can, in principle, be predicted. If the concept of the learning organization were to be taken seriously in this context, then what is conventionally regarded as 'planning error' in change implementation could be regarded instead as a platform for discussion, argument, learning and debate, addressing the fresh issues uncovered. If change were indeed an orderly and predictable process, would 96% of respondents to this survey have been able to claim that change for them was a valuable learning experience? The principle of the learning organization appeared to find some fragile support in the findings of this survey. It would appear, therefore, that establishing specific organizational learning mechanisms could contribute significantly to improvements in both the process and outcomes of the organizational change implementation process.

(Doyle *et al.*, 2000, S73)

A reader familiar with the ongoing debate on Learning Organizations might be reinforced in their belief that a question had been raised – that question is clearly there in the final paragraph. But how far the findings were significant would be a reasonable question. The authors themselves seem somewhat tentative in their claims here. Perhaps it is a question of more research needing to be done.

Compare this piece of scholarship with an excerpt from an author who is well known for her writings on corporate transformation. Following members of staff through their experience of change in one organization, she examines how far the findings of the research support the idea of the emergence of a post-industrial, 'post-occupational' social solidarity:

As the new technologies integrate and inform more and more of the production process, the social technologies are similarly organized to facilitate the integrated flexibility and democratizing capacities of the technologies. It is indeed possible that employees could appropriate the new culture to genuinely transform the institutions of work. However, what is happening now is a nostalgic restoration of the effect of industrial solidarities and pre-industrial mythical memories of family and belonging, to hold together the social sphere and to ensure production for the time being. It is an effort to shore up against

the effects of the wider cultural changes that are now upon us. The new corporate culture and its manufactured post-industrial solidarities, as currently manifested, do not herald truly new forms of social life beyond industrialism. Corporate post-industrialism is only an interim movement – we are not yet beyond the iron cage.

(Casey, 1996, 335)

At this stage we might be forgiven for thinking that what we had read and reread bore little relation to life in the outside world. The debates that might be heard even within a senior management group are unlikely to include this kind of discussion. We can also see from the contrast with the previous excerpt that not all academics write with the same clarity.

At first sight we might think that academics use terms that ordinary people are totally ignorant of and have little significance in the outside world of those trying to make sense of managing the world of work. However, looked at more closely the author is linking into a global debate in a very significant way. Her conclusions are not tentative in the manner of the previously quoted article. She is much more specific about the links that she sees in a universal argument about changes at work and their significance for all those who are trapped in it.

There is just one problem: what does it mean? It is clear that we would need to know what precisely ‘new technologies’ and ‘social technologies’ mean and how the author sees them contrasting with each other. We might pick up the point about ‘industrial solidarities’ from the allusions to ‘family and belonging’, but again ‘pre-industrial mythical memories’ might elude us. Most of us have heard of culture and may have some idea of its meaning. However, we are then left with the challenge of linking the concept of the ‘new corporate culture and ‘post-industrial solidarities’. Finally, what exactly is this allusion to ‘the iron cage’?

It is obvious that we are caught up here with a debate about the significance of change in what would have been a traditional way of seeing working life. We have already noted that, for ourselves and many others, there will have been more than enough experience of unwanted change at work. But it is clear that this author is trying to draw significance beyond the examples given to deeper trends and tendencies taking place in society today. The traditional industries which absorbed people for most of their working lives have fragmented for all sorts of reasons in ways that make the previous certainties irrecoverable. So, we are entitled to ask how these fixed points in our lives that gave cohesion to families and local communities are being replaced and, if so, by what exactly? If we accept that there are sets of values called cultures, which give shared meaning to who we are and what we do, then, as we move away from the traditional beliefs of what working experience will be like, what exactly will replace it? Finally, the context within which the author writes is a wider debate about the iron cage in the sense of a structured working existence embodied in hierarchical bureaucracies and instrumental in the command and control that managerialism has always sought. The final thought of the author seems to be that the changes that we have seen may well have alerted us to local changes of existence in working lives, but that *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Change has not meant more freedom – even though sometimes forms of work may seem much less constrained by unpleasant physical environments than once they were.

There is an excellent chapter in Collins (1998, 34) which lists the approaches to change. In it the author offers a framework for analysis in which he identifies four different categories of writing:

- 1 Hero-manager reflections and biographies
- 2 Guru works
- 3 Student-oriented texts
- 4 Critical monographs and research studies.

We have attempted in this section to give an indication of the range of such writing and some examples both of their style and content. We will continue to use examples to illustrate the topics addressed in this book about the management of change. Being analytical and critical of the writers' contributions will sharpen our critical abilities.

Throughout our study of management we will present different perspectives on change at work and its management. As we approach this, we recognize that they have been written from different standpoints and, as we go down the list, there are ever-stricter conventions of writing and presenting evidence. For some academics there is little benefit in looking at the more superficial accounts of self-congratulatory texts written by practitioners. And yet, just as the purist can easily turn away from sources which are regarded as purely anecdotal, so it is possible to recognize at least some value in examining the basic assumptions that the writer makes – wittingly or unwittingly. It may be assumptions about what an organization is, how groups function at work, or what motivates individuals to work in the first place. Such assumptions may not be addressed directly, but may lie beneath the text and beg important questions, which the author may not have addressed directly. Identifying these indications of taken-for-granted assumptions can greatly increase a student's ability to write worthwhile assignments and interesting dissertations.

It will be the aim of this book to adopt a questioning style. However, our critical approach will always accept that work, even if exploitative, may still be useful and even valuable in bringing knowledge and insight into a necessarily complex subject.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING MANAGEMENT AND CHANGE

In two simple words – 'manage' and 'change' – we have the opportunity of seeking to pin down a definition. We may adopt a simple and obvious description derived from popular writers, such as 'getting things done through other people' or a 'transition from one state to another', but as we do that we may be making assumptions or not being specific enough in closing off exactly what we mean.

For example, the slave-driver may be very effective in getting things done through other people, but we may want to exclude such an example of involuntary compliance from our definition. Similarly, what sort of 'state' is being referred to in terms of change? Is it a physical state, a mental state, a social state? The simple and direct definitions may need further clarification.

But that is not all that we need to consider in clarifying what we mean before we embark on further discussion. Social relations assume that we can make contact with other people and that they will understand what we mean. They also require that there are agreed tacit beliefs about what it is to be human, how humans should behave to one another and what that means in the context of working life.

But what other assumptions might practising managers be making? Experience suggests that most of us are realists: we feel that there is a world that we can intervene in and control, otherwise why would we be attempting to make things happen in a particular way? We might also believe that the world is a predictable place and that there are laws, like the law of gravity, which govern what we see occurring before our eyes. We may have embarked on an academic or postgraduate course because we think there is some knowledge based on experience and good practice, which will make us more effective in our attempts to bring order out of chaos at work. In this regard we might feel that there are factors that can be measured which would enable us to understand what underlies our experience and would enable us to work more efficiently if we were able to implement them in our working lives.

If we had to summarize that position we would wittingly or unwittingly have adopted a position that could be described as modernistic: a view of the world which is fully in tune with the tradition of scientific rationalism, which has been the vehicle for the practices which underwrite the progress of industrialization. But there are alternative approaches and they are sometimes summarized and represented in a tradition referred to as postmodernism.

Before we get too deeply into the terminology it would be as well to examine on what basis there might be an alternative perspective of analysing human experience. Dealing with people in a management situation should have alerted us to the uncertainties of making things happen through people. If only it were just as easy as the theory sounds. However, experience suggests that what one person thinks is a good business idea may well be viewed differently by those on whom it is visited. So, why does the same objective piece of information come to be interpreted in two or more different ways by different people involved? The answer may be something simple like: the people being managed had their own way of interpreting change. Looked at more closely, this statement may mean that these individuals had a different set of expectations, which were not met by the plan produced by others. So, what happens to individuals depends on how they interpret what is done to them. We will be addressing exactly how this occurs later in this book when we deal with culture and cultural change management initiatives. For the moment, though, it is sufficient that we accept diversity of view as a common occurrence in everyday experience.

THE SUBJECTIVE–OBJECTIVE DIMENSION

What we are accepting at this point is a world which is not as measurable and predictable as is sometimes suggested. Human beings have a propensity to behave in unpredictable ways or do not accept the rationality imposed by others. To find out about this would be more difficult for us than just measuring, say, productivity factors or working out statistical inferences on profit projections and share yields. But, more than that, our calculations on the hard facts might well be dependent on a world of feelings and opinions, which suggests a world of knowledge that is variable rather than constant – an existence that is not so hard and fast as first appears.

At this point we can usefully look at a book which made quite an impact when it appeared in 1979. It was entitled *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. The authors, Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, refer to this spectrum of ways of interpreting the world around

us as the subjective–objective dimension and they offer a diagram which offers what they describe as ‘a scheme for analysing assumptions about the nature of social science’ (see [Box 1.1](#)).

If you are not familiar with these concepts you could be forgiven for thinking that, while offering explanation of ways of thinking about the world around us, they also make it more difficult to express clearly what should be simple for managers to understand. Do practising managers really need to know this? Is this not a case of explaining the obscure by the more obscure? In some ways, we could say ‘yes’ to the last question. And yet in our previous discussion we have accepted that what managers become involved in is not just confined to the right-hand side of the diagram. If human beings were automatons then we might accept a deterministic view of managing them. But even those who work in closely determined control and command environments know that human beings can appear to give consent and ‘go through the motions’ while believing something different; in other words, experience suggests a voluntaristic aspect to the experience of managing working life.

Similarly, when we manage others we can measure what they achieve at the end of a shift and give performance-related pay as agreed with them beforehand. This kind of measurement would be part of a positivist approach. But how can we measure effort? We really have little idea what efforts individuals make, any more than we can know what pain another individual suffers. Pain and effort thresholds are alike in being purely subjective and therefore non-positivistic – there is no reliable way of measuring them, still less of comparing them between individuals.

So, too, a researcher can use methods of measurement which seem very objective and therefore fair. These are referred to as nomothetic – the Greek word *nomos* suggests that there are laws surrounding that sort of measurement, which make the results quantifiable. On the other hand, if we want to find out what individuals think, we would have to ask them. The problem is that they may not tell us everything we want to know. The more people we interview, the more opinions we will receive: as in the Latin phrase *tot homines, quot sententiae* – there are as many opinions as there are people. The researcher cannot compare these results between individuals very easily and, sometimes, not at all. This tradition of research is ideographic – it is qualified rather than quantified research.

Finally, we need to look again at the world itself. If you incline towards realism then, like Samuel Johnson, you will kick a stone and declare, ‘I refute him thus’. However, there

BOX 1.1 KEY PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS IN SOCIOLOGY

The subjectivist approach
to social science

Nominalism

Anti-positivism

Voluntarism

Ideographic

Ontology

Epistemology

Human nature

Methodology

The objectivist approach
to social science

Realism

Positivism

Determinism

Nomothetic

Source: Burrell and Morgan (1979, 3)

is just the problem of some of the realities we talk about and refer to, which are not quite as physical as the stone. How often have we talked about ‘mental faculties’ and ‘mind’? These things are incorporeal. We can observe the activity of the brain, but we cannot deal as directly with concepts that are abstract: beauty, goodness, truth – these are ideas. We see or experience a good person or drink a good wine, but goodness is an abstract concept. It relates to a nominalist world – it is a name, label or concept. We can think about it but cannot demonstrate it in a way that physical artefacts would allow us to do.

ORDER AND CONFLICT

Following their examination of the subjective–objective dimension, Burrell and Morgan identify another critical distinction in assumptions about the nature of society. They identify a view of society which emphasizes stability, integration, functional coordination and consensus. This they describe as an ‘order’ or ‘integrationist’ view. They contrast this view with a ‘conflict’ or ‘coercion’ view, which emphasizes change, conflict, disintegration and coercion (1979, 13). They finally label these contrasting theories as ‘regulation’ and ‘radical change’. At first sight the term theory seems to suggest that these are opposing poles and that it would be difficult to hold both views simultaneously. And yet, perhaps it could be argued that management is itself a battle ground between those elements which tend towards either a steady-state view of organizations or a sporadic almost anarchic radicalism. Certainly, we might identify bureaucratic tendencies as part of a colonizing attempt to impose order and direct acceptable outcomes in a proactive way. We might then compare that to the tendency to impulsiveness, randomness, surprise and reaction to events, which can characterize the reality of the daily conduct of business.

However, whatever we consider about the dimension itself and how comparable it is to the subjectivist–objectivist dimension, Burrell and Morgan combine the two to form what they describe as four paradigms (see [Figure 1.1](#)).

If we take the bottom right-hand quadrant first we can see that the term Functionalist is applied to those who take an objectivist and regulatory view of the conduct of academic

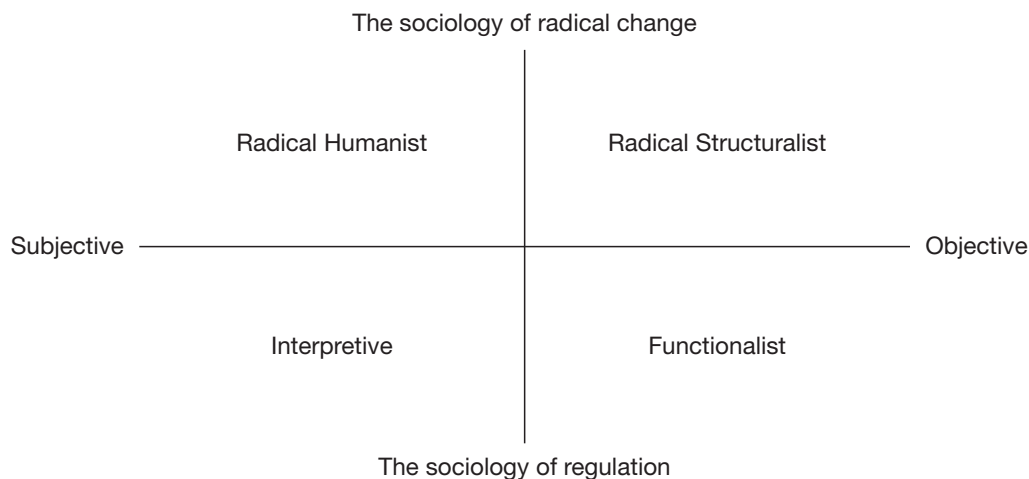


Figure 1.1 Two dimensions, four paradigms for organizational analysis