

CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Cultural change work in progress

SECOND EDITION

Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson

Changing Organizational Culture

How is practical change work carried out in modern organizations? And what kind of challenges, tasks and other difficulties are normally encountered as a part of it?

In a turbulent and changing world, organizational culture is often seen as central for sustained competitiveness. Organizations are faced with increased demands for change but these are often so challenging that they meet heavy resistance and fizzle out. *Changing Organizational Culture* encourages the development of a reflexive approach to organizational change, providing insights as to why it may be difficult to maintain momentum in change processes. Based around an illuminating case study of a cultural change programme, the book provides 15 lessons on the entire change journey; from analysis and design, to implementation and how organizational members should approach change projects.

This enhanced edition considers the most recent studies on organizational change practice, with new examples from businesses and the public sector, and includes one empirical study which uses the authors' own framework, enriching their practical recommendations. It also draws on the latest theoretical developments, including ideas of power and storytelling.

Changing Organizational Culture will be vital reading for students, researchers and practitioners working in organizational studies, change management and HRM.

Mats Alvesson is Professor of Business Administration at Lund University, Sweden.

Stefan Sveningsson is Professor of Business Administration at Lund University, Sweden.

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Second edition

Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson

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Preface

Why another book on organizational change? This is a question that the potential reader may ask him or herself – and with good reason. There is an abundance of studies and textbooks on the topic. Perhaps most things have been said already?

In this book – based on a case-study – we investigate how people work with, interpret and make sense of, and act in change processes. This book is aimed at locating and drawing upon the experiences of living with organizational change efforts among various groups of organizational members. We thus try to get close to the people involved and illuminate their assumptions and reasoning. Arguably, close-up studies of change efforts are necessary in order to understand what is happening, and to produce insights for much more thoughtful and realistic change work than is common. We feel strongly that our study opens up unexpected and novel insights and ideas. We hope and believe that this text gives additional depth and richness to the understanding of why change is so difficult, what can go wrong, and what can be done in order to make change work more reflexive and productive. The book provides a rather profound critique of many common assumptions and recommendations in the change literature and offers a rich case, new concepts, and some new ideas for thinking and acting in change work, partly focused on cultural change, but also with relevance for all kinds of change projects in organizations.

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In this updated second edition of the book a number of additions has been made to the first edition. We have also considered recent research and literature in the field.

Lund, March 2015
MA SS

Part 1

**Perspectives on
organizational and
cultural change**

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1 Introduction

According to most present-day writings on change we live in a time of turbulence and radical change. We are frequently informed about how changes in consumer and labour markets and in technologies, pressures of financial markets, globalization and new values and orientations from employees all act as key drivers for change. It is also often said that organizations must learn to adapt to changes or otherwise risk failure. This risk is regularly emphasized by contemporary authors of change. According to Beer and Nohria (2000: 133) modern societal conditions are exceptional in terms of change: 'Not since the Industrial Revolution have the stakes of dealing with change been so high. Most traditional industries have accepted, in theory at least, that they must either change or die.' Understanding and managing change has developed into a virtual industry, encompassing consultancy firms, management and leadership gurus, mass media, the business press, high-profile corporate executives, politicians and business schools, as well as management writings and management rhetoric and practice. In most writings, change is seen as good or necessary or both, often however with limited critical reflection on the subject matter (Sturdy and Grey 2003). Contemporary ideas of change stress that managers must be adept in working with planned organizational change as well as be responsive to changes in the environment. Efforts to change organizations are numerous and take a large proportion of the time and energy of many managers, staff and other employees. According to a British survey, 94 per cent of the investigated organizations experienced planned organizational change in 1997 (Ogbonna and Wilkinson 2003).

Many of the existing writings and projects of organizational change involves organizational culture in one sense or another. Culture is often seen as either the key issue to be changed or something that is crucial to take seriously in order to make change possible. Indeed, many authors of change suggest that a major reason for why organizational change efforts usually fail to materialize as planned is the frequent neglect of aspects of organizational culture (Balogun and Johnson 2004). In line with that, one could argue that few if any organizational changes are 'culture-free' or can navigate around culture. One author argues that 'organizational change involves confronting the persistent pattern of behaviour that is blocking the organization from higher performance, diagnosing

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its consequences, and identifying the underlying assumptions and values that have created it' (Beer 2000: 373). At minimum, culture may create problems and need to be considered. It is thus an important aspect and something to carefully consider for any person trying to change an organization.

Even twenty years after organizational culture was viewed as *the* ultimate way of addressing organizational problems – combining efficiency and focus with flexibility and engagement, through values and conviction – culture is still broadly seen as a key aspect of organizational competitiveness. In terms of the possibility of accomplishing change, Carl-Henrik Svanberg, CEO of Ericsson, has said that 'culture always defeats strategy'. Lou Gerstner, former president of IBM, concluded that 'I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't just one aspect of the game, it *is* the game' (cited in Palmer *et al.* 2009: 358). Accordingly, the belief seems to be that, unless culture, at a minimum, is seen as an integral part of change, efforts at the latter will fail. Many organizations work with, plan or contemplate organizational culture changes – often as an important element in other changes. In the present book, we elaborate extensively on organizational change efforts where culture was claimed as a key theme. More specifically the book offers an in-depth investigation of a cultural change programme in a high-tech firm.

This means that we go beyond surface issues and look at the meanings, definitions and identities of the people involved. How change work is organized (and disorganized), how people define themselves and others, and what the entire project is basically about emerge as key themes to explore, and for actors in change projects to address and work with. Part of our case story is that key actors in many ways had little knowledge of what was going on and produced a mismatch between their self-understandings and the expectations of others. Developing new metaphors for change work is part of a suggested approach for how to deal with this in more thoughtful ways than seem to be common.

Understanding organizational change

Organizational change is a very broad area. It addresses a variety of time spans, interests in broad patterns (industrial/professional trends) or organization-specific transformations, and types of changes (technological, mergers, downsizing, etc.). There is a lot of variety concerning the theoretical perspective employed; some emphasize agents of change, others environmental driving forces. Here we will raise a few issues that are usually seen as important in understanding organizational change and position our study.

Change typically, but not necessarily, implies an interest in *time*. Some say that we cannot understand changes through a snapshot and instead emphasize a longitudinal approach (Pettigrew *et al.* 2001). Different time spans can be focused on, however. At one extreme we have an interest in how changes take place over history, and here a decade may be a fairly short unit of analysis. At the other extreme we have a limited time period, where one may even study

what is happening over a few hours, for example when a work group develops a new idea or solution that subsequently affects its work. But sometimes time is disregarded and there is no focus on what is happening during the change process. In many studies of change projects it is actually common to focus on outcomes, for example on the difference between before and after the change intervention or period, thus downplaying what actually happens over time, that is, the process. Many authors observe that, although there is some recognition of the temporal (before and after changes) aspect, there is still a lack of studies focusing upon the micro-processes of change at work (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). This is probably a consequence of the significant requirements for close access and intensive ethnographic field work needed to follow change processes in depth. Consequently, in many change studies the actual change work is put in the notorious black box – before and after are studied, but not much is known about the actual change at work. Interviewing people at a distance may not say that much about what takes place.

We have been fortunate in terms of having very good opportunities of access to carefully and deeply follow change efforts in real time, and to interview a variety of people involved and observe different events.

Another interesting dimension concerns the presumed ‘need’ for change, including espoused or ‘real’ motives for change. As indicated above, it is frequently assumed that an organization, in the face of changing contextual circumstances, ‘must’ adapt or face great problems. However, we can also study people’s constructions of the ‘need’ for change or how rhetorical and other resources are mobilized in change projects. Many academics emphasize the need to address how contexts not only shape actions but also can be employed by individuals for pursuing certain changes. Researchers sometimes draw attention to how people interpret and make use of various logics and drivers behind changes. Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003) for example noted how management in one firm emphasized new forms of competition and an increased need for customer orientation, while many of the employees interpreted the motives of top management as being about cutting costs in order to appeal to investors and analysts. Talk about new values was seen as a smokescreen for less noble considerations.

In this book we encounter an interesting example where there was some agreement that there were good reasons for change, but where initiative, action and engagement around the change programme still faced problems of mobilization.

A third issue connects to the significance of *context* and *levels* of analysis. An interest in organizational change may lead to an extension of contexts to broad trends or macro- and business-level changes, for example changes in an industry and how fashions affect an entire set of organizations at an aggregated level. At the other end, there may be a focus on micro-level changes in a specific part of an organization, for example on how a new manager or an emergent expression of discontent among a group of employees or a customer triggers reactions within a department.

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We take a primary interest in specific events and acts, and follow the micro-processes of change efforts involving different groups as communicators, translators, interpreters and receivers of change messages. An idea is to take the varieties of people involved seriously. However, we also connect to broader trends in order to make change processes intelligible. It is for example important to relate the content of organizational change, such as customer orientation and quality programmes, to broader institutional and fashionable scripts and recipes. What is happening locally is sometimes best seen as imitations of trends and recipes circulating more broadly in business and amongst consultants.

Fourthly, a change typically involves a wide set of different phenomena and aspects, sometimes understood as the *content* of change: these may be the means and/or the outcomes of change projects. Candidates include everything from meanings, emotions and values to behaviours, technologies, systems and structures, as well as knowledge, objectives, strategies, vocabularies, systems, identities, social relations, networks and power relations. Many of these themes go together, and changes often involve several of these, but they may be given different emphasis – by the actors involved and by researchers trying to study what is happening.

This book mainly focuses on the cultural level, which means that we emphasize informal meanings, beliefs and understandings. We also consider values, but more in terms of how people relate to – and often become confused by – talk about (managerially invented) values, than what kind of values people in organizations ‘really’ have.

A fifth theme regards the possible interest in *actors* of change. Which actors are being focused on in the study? Are these institutions, such as the state, large companies initiating pressures on for example partners or suppliers to modify their operations, or industrial or professional bodies, or are local actors, for example a new top manager, of key interest? Or are we less interested in a centralized agent and want to know more about what is happening amongst those supposed to be targeted for change, their values, identifications or ways of working? There are many options. It is, of course, possible not to take any closer look at specific actors and their ways of initiating change or making sense of what managers try to encourage them to do. One may look at the operations of structural forces of change and their possible effects on behaviours and performances as if these worked in a ‘mechanical way’, thus black-boxing those supposed to create these new outcomes through modified practices.

Most research on organizational change tends to be management-centric, that is, focused on the management or the change agent’s point of view and actions (Bartunek *et al.* 2006), although there are some notable exceptions discussed in later chapters. Our approach is that it is very important to carefully consider the experiences, meanings and actions of all involved. It is not just those communicating objectives, messages and instructions who are of interest, but also those supposed to be affected by these, and how they interpret and accept, reject or downplay the goals, values and behaviours they are encouraged to take on board. Not only the managerial and subordinate, but also the

intermediary, levels are worth taking seriously. We thus give some space to the sandwiched person's, that is senior and junior middle-manager's, point of view.

Finally, we have the matter of *theoretical perspective*. This of course is closely interrelated with many of the other issues: a population ecologist is typically interested in the overall outcomes of developments in large samples of organizations over long time periods and does not care about actors and their meanings. A sense-making theorist takes the opposite stance, and pays attention to how people reason and act based on their identity and perception of the situation. But many theoretical approaches can be aligned with a span of different empirical foci. Concentrating on a particular kind of empirical theme does not in detail determine the theoretical perspective used: one can study a change process in a specific organization at close range and use for example a functionalist, an interpretative, a critical or a post-structural approach. Studying how people interpret and respond to a change programme can, within an interpretative approach, emphasize sense-making, psychodynamic or culture theory. The study of organizations is a field with many theoretical options – not so suitable for the researcher with severe decision anxiety.

We are proceeding from an interpretative perspective, in which the meaning-creating activities and the cultural background of such activities are focused on. As will be made clear in the next section, anthropological culture theory is significant here.

Studying change in depth

There are thus many options within an interest in change and we will take one specific route. Our study focuses on what is happening in, rather than with, a specific organization. Geertz (1973) suggests that anthropologists do not study villages, but *in* villages, and we see this as inspirational also for organization researchers. As mentioned above, we are interested in process issues, not so much in before and after scores on various variables (attitudes, behaviours, performances). We are not neglecting the latter, but are mainly interested in following an entire organizational change process in real time. We are perhaps not so much interested in organizational changes as change *efforts* and what these consist of. As the case that is the focus of this book indicates, change efforts and change are hardly the same.

The concentrated approach we take means that a number of organizational actors are targeted. We pay secondary attention to structural forces, fashions or institutional changes, and focus on how people try to improve their organization in what they perceive to be some key respects. We note that our research subjects construct a certain organizational context in which they motivate change efforts, but we do not try to make any objective assessment of this construction. We study what people do when they engage in change work and what this seems to lead to in an organization. A possible strength of the study is that we have studied a broad spectrum of people involved in or exposed to, and more or less successfully called upon by the initiators of, the change efforts:

in the text we will encounter top- and middle-managers, HRM people, consultants and low-level employees. We have had direct access to change activities and have listened to the thoughts, intentions, sense making and responses of people involved in and/or targeted by the change project.

The change project focused on culture or, rather, what those involved defined as 'culture'; values and 'drivers' behind success were targeted for change and improvement. This means that we tried to follow this project and the people more or less involved in it: looking at meanings, ideas, lines of reasoning, emotional responses, identities, etc. But we also looked at change design issues: how management operates and how managerial ideas inform and perhaps misinform actors in organizations.

In terms of theoretical framework we draw upon cultural thinking focusing on meanings and symbolism (Alvesson 2013; Geertz 1973; Martin 2002; Smircich 1983a). This is a broad and varied field, which still allows sufficient focus and support on in-depth inquiries and readings to allow for direction and the production of research results well beyond the case of finding results emerging inductively out of data and thus only 'surface patterns'. We are also inspired by Latour's (1986, 2005) idea of change and influence as translation, emphasizing how social institutions and interactions are contingent upon how various actors pick up and reinterpret the elements presumably linking people and social elements together. We focus on what the people involved tried to do, the micro-processes as indicated above. We raise questions such as 'What is going on here?' and 'What do these people think they are up to?' In addition we draw upon the organizational change literature, with an emphasis on process and the dynamics of change.

The organization studied here was formed as an independent company (subsidiary), having previously been a large R&D unit within a very large, internationally leading firm. The challenge as seen by management and consultants is a classical one: to make the company more market-oriented and also to make the organization work better internally, through better leadership and teamwork. The cultural change programme was conceived of and designed by top management together with consultants. Besides planning and design we follow the implementation phase and also uncover how various people related to and made sense of the programme as well as its outcomes. We have followed the change programme in detail and in real time.

We think that this makes the study quite original – there are enormous amounts of texts on organizational change. Some researchers report in-depth studies of cultural change projects (e.g. Helms Mills 2003; Ogbonna and Wilkinson 2003), but few, if any, follow the entire process of cultural change from intentions and aspirations to the outcomes via change practices and the responses to these in real time. It is much more common for studies to look at the output of a process or follow it in a broad, overall way (e.g. Murdoch and Geys 2014). It is probably even more common with consultancy or here-is-how-to-accomplish-great-results kinds of texts. These are seldom based on thorough studies and tend to report superficial and partly misleading examples

as ‘proofs’ or illustrations. They make their readers happy and optimistic when reading the text, but often an imperfect world less inclined to respond quickly to recipes for change projects lies ahead.

For some readers, looking at one single change project may appear limited. In line with a long and increasingly popular case-study tradition, we argue that getting a rich and detailed picture, sensitive to local context and the meanings of the people involved, is necessary in order to understand the phenomenon – and to learn something that can encourage more reflective and realistic change work.

It is important to study several different groups within an organization, as one cannot assume that people relate to the change project and the outcomes in similar ways. As we need to know the context, the actors, their interactions and practices, how processes unfold and how people make sense of what is happening, we realize that a single case can be sufficient for learning a lot. As mentioned above, this case involves part of a large, internationally leading firm. The consultancy firm mostly involved is also one of the internationally most high-profile ones. The case should be of some general interest. It may in some respects appear as rather idiosyncratic and deviating from what is generally presented as organizational changes in management textbooks and pop-management writings full of positive examples with happy endings, but we think that it exhibits many common themes and offers very good learning opportunities.

The purpose of the book

This book is directed at undergraduate as well as postgraduate students, academics and practitioners interested in organizational change, management consultancy, leadership and organizational culture. The purpose of the book is to investigate and discuss a range of questions such as:

- How do managers, consultants and HRM people *work* with cultural change projects? How do they design and execute such projects? How do they think, get information and follow up their work? Is there a set of shared meanings making coordinated work possible or are there varieties of interpretations and meanings among those engaged in the change work producing difficulties?
- What is happening in terms of *processes*? Are the intentions of the design of change projects realized in the implementation events? Are instruments of change used as intended? How do those involved in these processes, for example the managers and employees seen as the recipients and carriers of change initiatives, make sense of this and what do they do?
- What are the outcomes in terms of *responses and consequences*? Do the change projects lead to changes in values, meanings, beliefs, identities and sentiments and, if so, which? Do they lead to changes in practices? Are the possible changes those initially intended or are the consequences unforeseen? If there are no changes, how can this be understood?

- What can be learned about culture change projects and other forms of organizational changes? What are the *traps and problems*? What do managers, consultants, HRM people and other people involved need to consider in planning, designing, executing and learning from such projects? We have in mind here the need to consider complexities and difficulties rather than come up with a blueprint for success. The ability to navigate and act in an interactive and responsive way in the process is perhaps at least as important as to engage in careful planning and then implement the plan.

Apart from addressing questions such as these, we find it important to investigate *the organization of change work*, for example how people position themselves in terms of being central in or moderately participating in, as opposed to distancing themselves from, the change project. We thus address questions such as: how do people connect themselves to and disconnect themselves from change objectives and change work? We note in the study that people move in and out of change work – not only in terms of behaviour but also in terms of identification. We also note that the division of labour between the persons involved seems to create some peculiar consequences. Change work needs to be better organized, calling also for attention to the more implicit aspects of this, including the assumptions, images and identities of those involved.

We find the area of association with, commitment to or *identification* with themes and projects a) of great significance in organization studies more broadly and b) of clear interest for change projects. People relate to projects in terms of showing commitment to and sympathy with the ideas and ambitions, but also in terms of distancing themselves from projects. In some cases this means taking a fairly consistent position, but often people switch between positions. Interest and optimism may vary over time and sometimes even fluctuate from day to day.

This book then aims to make contributions in the following areas of, or related to, organizational culture and organizational change:

- *managing culture*: management thinking and action in relation to the engineering or influencing of values and beliefs;
- *organizational change project work*: the workings and problems of cultural change programmes, including connections to and disconnections from various phases and elements of change work;
- the *ambiguity*, fragmentation and disconnectedness of much organizational life;
- *cultural meaning creation in organizations*: the subtleties of meaning creation, and breakdowns and difficulties in understanding values;
- *paradoxes of change*: elements in change work that, ironically, reinforce what the work is supposed to change;
- *identities and identification in organizations*: how people define themselves in relationship to potential tasks and lines of action.

The structure of the book

The purpose of this introductory chapter has been to try to position the book in terms of some common and significant issues in organizational change and on that basis to raise some questions that we aim to discuss in detail throughout the book. The chapters of the book are organized in four parts.

In the first part, 'Perspectives on organizational and cultural change', we set the stage for the study in terms of elaborating on important issues in organizational and cultural change that need to be investigated, for example the emphasis on the experiences and sense making of those involved in the change process. We also review the concepts and frameworks within organizational and cultural change in order to bring some clarity and to position our study in the fields under investigation.

Chapter 1 offers a variety of questions that are commonly raised in connection with organizational change. In Chapters 2 and 3 we review some of the concepts, key issues and frameworks in the field of organizational and cultural change. In Chapter 2 we identify the why, what and how of change by primarily discussing the planning and process approaches, respectively, to organizational change. We relate this to cultural change in Chapter 2, but extend that discussion in Chapter 3. There we connect the discussion to some of the central perspectives and key debates in writings on culture. We elaborate on the debate about whether organizational culture can be managed and discuss two perspectives on organizational cultural change, the grand technocratic and the local emergent.

In Part 2 the objective is to present the reader with an account of the conduct of the study as well as a detailed, rich and intimate narrative of organizational change work in practice – a close-up study. In Chapter 4 we detail the organization in focus and how the study of it was conducted. We also outline an investigative model of change that guided us in our attempts to organize the collected data. This model involves a few stages, such as background and context, intentions and strategy, design, practices (implementation and interaction), reception (interpretation) and outcomes. The model is intended to show how we tried to capture the change processes as they evolved in the studied case.

Chapters 5 and 6 follow the organizational change efforts over time. In Chapter 5 we investigate how managers perceived the situation prior to the conception of a change programme and what they wanted to achieve with the programme. We also investigate how they worked with issues of design and interaction with the rest of the company in preparing for implementation. In Chapter 6 we explore in detail what happened with the carefully designed programme as it met the managers and employees it was supposed to target. We look at how the targeted people addressed the programme and its outcomes or effects.

Part 3 consists of three chapters on what 'really' happened in the process. The part offers deeper interpretations of the major problems and challenges that were raised throughout the change work. We listen to a variety of participants involved in the change process and how they experienced this in terms of

some, for them, crucial issues. In this part we come close to the change work from the actors' point of view.

In Chapter 7 we begin to more thoroughly report and analyse the change efforts based on interpretations from those experiencing it. We address why things went wrong in the process and here we focus on the absence of strong emotional engagement and lack of high-powered commitment or expressiveness from those in charge of the process.

Chapter 8 focuses on the organization of the change work. It does so through an account and analysis of how the change programme unfolded in terms of collaboration, interaction and division of labour between the participants involved in the change process – the top managers, consultants, HR people, middle managers and other employees. In the chapter we consider problems of integration between these individuals, partly based on diversity of understanding of the cultural change work, something that made the change efforts disconnected and fragmented.

In Chapter 9 we proceed to reporting on how the participants looked at the change process by investigating culture as what we call 'hyperculture'. In the chapter we discuss the culture programme as a package, as something manufactured, as ceremonial talk and as an ideal fantasy creation. We treat these aspects as contributing to making the formulated and designed culture more real than the reality, ideal or existing, it was supposed to mirror. We discuss this hyperculture as something used in the marketing and image building of the organization.

In Part 4 we get into the substance of organizational culture and change. We set out to investigate more in depth what assumptions and values govern people in their change efforts and change work. The idea here is not primarily to focus on how the activities of those involved produce a new culture but rather how the activities express a culture in terms of more deeply held beliefs and assumptions.

Chapter 10 provides an analysis of the organizational culture informing the cultural work in the studied organization. The idea in the chapter is to move beyond what the individuals talk about as culture and interpret their activities as expressing deeper, non-realized cultural assumptions and meanings. We confront the cultural values being talked about with meanings and ideas informing action. In doing this we suggest that many of the cultural change activities in fact reproduced and strengthened existing organizational culture.

In Chapter 11 we proceed from the analysis made in Chapter 10 and discuss specific problems and possibilities in working with cultural change. In particular we discuss problems involved in working with change efforts based on a technocratic approach to organizational culture. In this chapter we also deepen the analysis of the meaning constructions made by various involved participants and connect these to identity issues. We also discuss the cultural programme as a relay race and introduce an alternative metaphor of the change work as a football game. The latter challenges some conventional notions of managerial work in organizational change.

Chapter 12 addresses issues of practical relevance for those interested in change management. The chapter is based on our case but extends the discussion and offers a consideration of common traps in organizational change, and the need for and possibility of creating a shared language, and also directs attention to some lessons that can be drawn from the case analysis. The aim of the chapter is not to list a collection of how-to-do-it recommendations but rather to point to some considerations of practical value that broaden awareness and insights into the complexities of organizational and cultural change.