

A practitioner's view of the evolution of change management

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Received 09 July 2019
Revised 25 Sep 2019
Accepted 30 Oct 2019

Abstract

Change management is an important discipline. It is an essential component of any modern organisation's capabilities. Businesses without a change management capability struggle to respond to the need to change. This need derives from the ever-present progress of technology, social and environmental change as well as competitive pressures.

Change management has an interesting and unusual relationship between the academics studying it, and the change management practitioners working in businesses and other organisations. Unlike many other management disciplines, change management's origins lie in academic research, academic theories and the development of theoretical models of how change occurs.

Nevertheless, there is often a gap between academia and practising Change Managers. This is a pity as there is an ongoing need for good research to back up the development of the change management profession. This paper reflects on the evolution of change management and concludes with suggestions on areas where future research could be of value. These include better ways to measure the value of change management and improvements to one of the most common change management tools – the change curve.

Keywords: Change Management, Practice, Evolution, Organisational Change

Paper Type: Viewpoint

NBR

NBR-19-0109
NUST Business Review
Vol. 01, No. 01
10, 2019
pp. 50-61
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1. Introduction

There is a huge and ever-expanding amount written about change in business. At the core of all this writing is the fact that almost all organisations have an ongoing need to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Often quoted, and usually unchallenged, statements like “there is no constant but change” or “the pace of change is ever increasing” form some of the mantras of modern business.

The driving forces for change are many and varied. They can be summarised into advances in technology, social change, modifications in regulatory regimes, environment change, and the ever-present pressures of competitive behaviour and innovation in business.

As a result of these forces, the discipline of change management arose and continues to develop. It is a dynamic and rapidly evolving discipline that is in high demand in business. This can be seen in two main trends. On one hand, there is a growing demand for skilled change management practitioners, usually simply called *Change Managers*. On the other hand, there is also a demand for the development of change management skills across all an organisation’s leadership and general management. A degree of change management awareness is increasingly seen as an essential skill for all managers to have.

The track record of businesses successfully changing is mixed even when applying change management practices. There is a clear opportunity for improved change management theories, tools, and practices as it becomes an increasingly essential aspect of most organisations’ capabilities. The opportunity for academic input into change management is large.

This paper provides a practitioner’s view on the evolution of change management as a discipline, and some of key challenges that practitioners currently face. The paper is intended to both be interesting to current change management practitioners and academics.

Change management has a strong relationship with academia. Many management disciplines developed as practical solutions, learnt through trial and error and the hands-on process of work and running businesses. Later these disciplines were studied and enhanced by academic research and thought. Change management is different. It has certainly been developed and enhanced by practitioners, but its origins lie in academic thought.

It is ironic then that there is often a gap between change management practitioners and academics. Of course, this is not universal, there are some academics who are closely involved in the work of change management practitioners, and there are practitioners who are aligned with the latest in academic research. But frequently, there is a lack of understanding amongst academics of what practising Change Managers do, and amongst practitioners a lack of awareness of the ongoing flow of research and ideas in this domain.

This may partially be because change touches on so many aspects of business and management. As a result, organisational change is a broad topic. It is hard to keep abreast of all the different developments in all its constituent parts. Whatever the reasons, it is a gap worth closing.

This paper hopes to encourage a closer alignment between academics and practitioners, and potentially give ideas for areas where academic research in change management could be helpful to practitioners.

The academic origins of change management

It is hard to be certain when or where exactly change management began. As anyone who has studied the history of ideas will know, the path from an original idea through to the current thinking on it is often complex and takes many unexpected turns. There are many academics and practitioners who have contributed to the development of change management and it would take considerable research to identify all of them.

For brevity, this paper will mention 3 important academic contributors to change management to give a flavour of its origins. These three contributors are excellent examples of how academic research has shaped the development of change management.

Models of Change 1: Lewin's 3-step Change Model, 1940s

Whilst claiming anyone as the sole originator of any discipline is always contentious, there is a reasonable consensus that instrumental in the founding of change management as a practice was the work of the psychologist and social scientist **Kurt Lewin**. Working in the 1930s and 40s, Lewin is known for the development of *sensitivity training*, *force field analysis*, and most influential amongst change management practitioners, for the *3-step change model*.

This 3-step change model defines a model of change going through the sequential stages of unfreezing, change and refreezing. An organisation starts in a stable or frozen state. It then must be unfrozen, to subsequently enable change to occur. Once the change has happened it is refrozen into a new stable state.

There is some debate as to whether Lewin actually originated this model, but it widely held that he did.

The 3-step change model has been highly influential in change management, although current practitioners rarely refer to it. This is probably partially because more advanced models have superseded it, and it is not unusual to meet change practitioners who have never heard of it or Lewin. Even so, Lewin's role in initiating what was to become the discipline of change management should not be forgotten.

Models of Change 2: Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief and the Change Curve, 1969

A second critical body work in the development of change management came out of the research of the psychiatrist **Elizabeth Kübler-Ross** in her near-death studies, published in her book *On Death and Dying*. Most change management practitioners do not read this book and may not even be aware of the name Kübler-Ross, but they are aware of her theory called the *five stages of grief* usually portrayed in the form of the *change curve*.

The change curve is claimed to represent the stages individuals go through when facing change. Kübler-Ross identified and named these stages as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Some Change Managers claim that everyone, when going through change, passes through these psychological stages.

Presented with the requirement to change, it is claimed that individuals start by denying the change, then they become angry about it, then they attempt to bargain their way through the change, then once realising bargaining is not working become depressed. This is the ground for the final stage of the change curve, which Change Managers seek to facilitate – individuals accepting the change. It is important to understand that it is a model of how individuals respond to change. It is not a model of how groups or organisations do, as the theory claims that each individual passes through these stages at a different pace.

The change curve can be used in periods of change to help individuals understand why they are feeling as they are. It can be used to encourage persevering with change on the basis that feelings of negativity towards a change are normal and usually develop into a more positive psychological state. The change curve can also be used as a model by Change Managers to help them plan relevant interventions in situations of change. The change curve has a degree of intuitive appeal, but there is a debate between some change management practitioners about how accurately the five stages of grief apply to the experience of staff in organisations going through change. Even so, it is still a widely referred to model and is highly influential on the thinking of change management practitioners.

Models of Change 3: Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change, 1996

The final contributor to change management to be mentioned is, the Harvard Business School professor, **John Kotter**. Like Lewin and Kübler-Ross, Kotter's work has had a significant influence on the current thinking of change management practitioners. Unlike Lewin and Kübler-Ross, Kotter has directly addressed practising Change Managers and written several best-selling popular non-academic books on change management such as *Leading Change* and *Our Iceberg is Melting*. He also runs a management consultancy working in the fields of leadership and change, the eponymous Kotter International.

Central to Kotter's books, and what is most commonly used by practising Change Managers, is Kotter's *8-step process for leading change*. The 8-step process describes a series of eight sequential steps that provide a way to lead an organisation through change. This is a very widely referred to model of change, and many change initiatives have been planned around these eight steps. Kotter's work continues to be extremely influential on the profession and is one of the favoured approaches for leading change initiatives.

From academia to practising Change Managers

From these starting points, and others, a large and growing profession has grown up, centred on the job of the Change Manager.

The activities Change Managers are involved in vary widely. So widely that at times it can appear a valid question whether all Change Managers are doing the same job. Examples of initiatives which are centred on the work of Change Managers, or have a significant change management input, include one or any combination of the following:

- *Attempts to alter organizational culture, behaviours or mindsets*
- *Reorganizations and restructuring of departments or business divisions*
- *Relocations of business*
- *Process improvement activities and modifications to ways of working*
- *Technology enabled change, such as ERP or robotics implementations*
- *Performance improvements*
- *Cost reduction activities, especially those associated with reduction in staff numbers*
- *Post-merger integration and divestiture separation of businesses*
- *Responses to changes to the regulatory or legislative environment*

There is no single path into the change management profession and there are many practising Change Managers with widely differing academic and work experiences. Most typically in business though, change management is considered as a skill required when organisations undertake programs and projects which result in change.

Consequently, many change management practices used in business have evolved as responses to the problems faced when they try to implement projects. For instance, how can an organisation ensure that staff in the business accept and adopt the solutions delivered by projects? Without this acceptance and adoption, the project will have failed.

Project based Change Managers may be experienced Project Managers who have transitioned from role running projects to the role of helping projects be successful by ensuring the project's outputs are adopted by businesses. They may also have come from other project based or operational roles.

In a project, change management is often one workstream within that project. In these situations, the Change Manager typically reports into a Project Manager, along with all other project team members. There are some advantages, but also disadvantages, to Change Managers working within a project team, subordinate to a Project Manager. This topic is beyond the scope of this paper to review. It is worth noting that it is not universally accepted that it is optimal for Change Managers to work for Project Managers. Some of the current challenges of change management and some of the ways the discipline is changing stem from the relationships between project management and change management, and Project Managers and Change Managers.

Whilst a large proportion of Change Managers are project-based roles, it is important to understand that not all Change Managers work on projects. For instance, many organisational psychologists and those coming from an organisational behaviour background have a professional interest in change management. Change Managers from these backgrounds are often most interested in organisational culture and behaviour, staff motivation, developing leadership skills, and performance management.

Similarly, many HR professionals consider themselves as Change Managers. HR professionals regularly must deal with the results of change. There are many people

related issues that change initiatives cause, and HR professionals are often expected to resolve these. Included in this are issues relating to organisational design, capability development, training, staff changes through redundancy or recruitment, alterations to job roles and modifications to performance measures.

Finally, in recent years, there has been a strong relationship between the development of change management thinking and leadership development. In an era in which organisations face almost continuous change, one of the most important leadership challenges is leading organisations through change. Hence, increasingly a core attribute of successful business leaders is their ability to lead change.

Bringing all these strands together, change management can be thought of as broadly working from two dimensions:

- *As a top-down discipline* encouraging change at the organisational level, by creating an environment in which change can occur. This is the domain of change leadership and culture. It is where Kotter's 8-step process and arguably Lewin's 3-step model fit into change management. As a top-down discipline, the focus of change management is on aspects of change such as developing a clear vision, setting well-defined direction, empowering staff to make beneficial changes, and creating an environment in which staff is willing to accept change and hence change can occur smoothly.
- *As a bottom-up discipline* that considers that change occurs because of the choices and behaviours of every individual in the organisation. This can be best understood through the mantra that change happens one person at a time. Change is seen as being achieved as the cumulative result of individuals in an organisation changing the way they work. This bottom-up thinking is where the change curve finds its use. It is the space where some proprietary change methods, such as Prosci's ADKAR®, apply. It is also where widespread change management tools like *change impact assessments* fit in.

Sometimes these two dimensions of change portray alternative approaches to change. Increasingly, experienced practitioners have found that successful change needs both: a leadership team that creates the environment in which change can occur, and detailed bottom-up work to make change a reality for every member of an organisation's staff by overcoming the detailed and specific challenges each individual faces during periods of change.

Coming out from the shadows of project management

In the previous section explained the differing grounds for employing Change Managers in organisations. In reality, the vast majority of practising Change Managers work within projects and programs. For this reason, change management has often grown up in the shadow of project management. Sometimes it is even presented as a subset of project management with change management activities built into project management methods and lifecycles.

However, the perception of change management as a part of project management is altering. Change management is increasingly standing on its own two feet as a broad and important discipline in its own right. Change management may be required on projects, but it is not merely a part of project management. The alteration in thinking amongst practitioners is being driven by several factors. Two of these factors show why change management cannot be a subset of project management.

The first factor is the increasing awareness that the lifecycle of change management is not a subset of the project management lifecycle, but if anything is a superset of it. Historically, Change Managers were engaged in the latter stages of projects to prepare for “go-live” – the point at which a project ends development and starts to be implemented. This has proven to be an unreliable way of achieving change.

Modern change management practice stresses that effective change management starts before projects begin by encouraging the environment in which projects can be successful. Experience also shows that change management often needs to continue after a project has ended. Merely creating a project’s deliverables, such as new computer systems, and providing them to the users of these deliverables does not ensure change. It often takes an extended period after the completion of a project for change to truly occur.

The second factor that altered thinking derived from the practical realisation that many changes do not come about through projects. Projects are not the only vehicle to deliver change in business. For instance, many organisations seek to alter the behaviour of their staff and teams through behavioural change initiatives. These are important changes, which benefit from active change management support, but are rarely run as formal projects. Such changes are reliant on coaching and the behaviour and communications of organisational leaders. If change management needs to enable activities that are not performed as projects, it cannot be treated as a subset of project management.

These two alterations in thinking about change management are some of the key reasons for the ongoing evolution of change management. A follow up question is that given that change management has developed into a stand-alone discipline, are there tangible examples showing this development? In reality, there are many examples of the development of change management as a standalone discipline outside of project management within a business. Two are explored here as they are most significant.

One sign of this alteration in change management is the increasing desire within organisations to have defined and proscribed change management processes, independent of project management approaches. These processes typically define a lifecycle of change activities aligned with change management tools associated with performing those activities.

Another sign is the development of Change Management Offices or CMOs within organisations. These are permanent teams of Change Managers working across an organisation, often to a common approach, to enable change in that organisation.

Sometimes these Change Management Offices have a handful of staff. But in large organisations, undergoing significant change, such CMOs may house significant numbers of staff. It is not unusual for a large organisation to have a CMO with several dozen staff in it.

Current challenges driving further evolution of change management

As change management has evolved into a recognised practice and a discipline in its own right, it continues to face new challenges. Experience does not always help to resolve these issues. Three such issues are currently important to the future direction of the discipline.

The first is the increasing reality for organisations that change is not a discrete and occasional activity, but is a continuous state for a business. To think in terms of Lewin's 3 stage model – the stage of an organisation being frozen and then refrozen no longer occurs. There is never a stable point for the business, it is always in the middle stage of Lewin's model - changing.

The second is that if change is ongoing continuously, there needs to be a way to monitor change holistically across the teams in an organisation. There is evidence that people can only take so much change at one time, else they end up in the phenomenon of *change fatigue*. Change fatigue manifests as a general unwillingness to adopt further change. Also, reliable business operations can only handle so much change if they are to maintain their reliability. Much of good operational practice in business focuses on the stability of operational processes. Continuous change threatens this stability and hence threatens operational reliability.

This has resulted in many attempts to assess the cumulative impact of all the changes an organisation is undertaking on a team by team basis. The aim is to identify teams who are experiencing too much change and ideally to moderate the pace of change so they can keep operating reliably. The aim is also to identify teams that could undertake more change and see if there are opportunities to increase the pace at which they are changing.

These two challenges have also met with a third in a significant change in the way projects are run in business: *Agile*. In traditional project approaches (often called *waterfall*), projects run for an extended period before producing outputs at discrete and widely spaced time intervals. In the last decade or so, this approach has been challenged significantly by *Agile*. This is not the place to give a details explanation of *Agile*, which approaches projects in a different way from waterfall projects, but a high-level understanding of the pertinent points of difference is useful.

Agile works on rapid cycles of work somewhat analogous to a small project. Each cycle is sometimes as short as a week, usually not longer than 4 weeks. Each cycle, called a *sprint*, produces an output which may be implemented in the business. In Waterfall projects, the aim was typically to produce a high quality and functionally rich output. In *Agile*, the aim is usually to produce a relatively simpler *Minimum Viable Product* or *MVP*, which is implemented in the business and then incrementally improved in further sprints.

As a result, instead of occasional large changes in business from the traditional project approach, *Agile* results in a continuous stream of regular and typically smaller

changes. A business may have many parallel streams of Agile sprints each imposing streams of change on the business.

The important thing for Change Managers is that many of the traditional change management tools and thinking that were used in organisations with long term project cycles, do not work effectively in a rapidly evolving Agile based organisations. For instance, a traditional change impact assessment, which may have been a core change management deliverable in a waterfall project, may not be effective or practical to develop in a short cycle of Agile sprints. Hence change management practices once more have had to adapt.

One of the results of these sorts of challenges is to reduce the emphasis on change management as the sole preserve of expert Change Managers and to increase the emphasis on change management as an organisational capability.

This is not to say that Change Managers are not required anymore, but the focus of the role of the Change Manager is evolving. Change Managers increasingly focus less on being the person who does all the change management work, and more on being someone who facilitates change and develops change management skills across the organisations. This is seen by the increasing presentation of Change Managers as expert coaches more than expert doers. This is a still-evolving situation, and how it will end is open to prediction rather than being already set.

Where to next for change management?

Change management is a dynamic and evolving discipline. Even with the progress in the discipline, there continues to be a mixed track record in delivering change in organisations. This is obviously a problem if the need for organisations to adapt and change is not decreasing. Business news is full of stories of once successful businesses that have ceased because they failed to change successfully. Of course, this is not simply a matter of change management – issues such as strategic approach, operational efficiency, products, and services are fundamental factors in business survival. Yet it is evident that change management and an organisation's change capability also play a critical role.

From a practitioner's perspective what would help to improve change management? There are lots of aspects to study and improve. A few important ones are mentioned here.

The first way to strengthen change management would be to have a reliable and repeatable measure of change management's benefits. This would definitively show the importance and value of change management. Few doubt the need and value from change. It is possible to measure an organisation's performance, before and after a change, and to attribute and improvement or decline in performance to that change.

In practice, measuring the benefit of change is complex as many factors are involved. But it is possible. However, what is much harder is measuring the contribution that change management and Change Managers have made to that change. Even if the change was highly successful – was this due to the nature of the Change Managers, or something else? The truth is almost certainly a bit of each.

The aim of change management is to make change outcomes better. “Better” is a word that is open to huge interpretational variance. Nevertheless, it is possible, at least theoretically, to suggest that Change Managers make change outcomes better. For instance, change management can result in:

- *Faster change delivery*
- *More reliably achieving the desired outcomes from change*
- *Reduced risk and operation impact whilst changing*
- *Greater capacity in an organisation to pursue change*

At present, the investment in change management is largely an unproven belief based on the observation by leaders and managers that change in organisations typically causes fewer issues and is smoother when good change management practices are applied. Reliable ways of measuring the ways in which change management makes change outcomes better have proved elusive. Resolving this challenge would be of great value to Change Managers.

Another area where advances in change management would be helpful is in exploring the real appropriateness of the change curve. Kübler-Ross’s work on the five stages of grief model was based on her studies of people with terminal illnesses and exploring their psychological response to their impending death. Whilst the change curve derives from this work, it is at least questionable whether individuals at work actually experience change through those same five stages.

Better understandings of how individuals respond to change, enable Change Managers to make better decisions as to the appropriate response. Although this is no doubt complex, what helps practising Change Managers best, is when complex analysis can be distilled into simple, reliable models to help decision making on a daily basis.

The success of the change curve is without a doubt driven significantly by the fact it is easy to understand and use. As stated, earlier, the change curve has an intuitive appeal. However, the past has often demonstrated that an intuitive appeal does not entail it is right. If the five stages of grief were not the best model, a newer model would be of huge value to the change management profession.

One factor in this model should be also the reality of the turmoil of many modern businesses. Staff in business are often not facing huge single changes but are facing an ongoing storm of small changes. Their mental states may not be psychologically analogous to the experience of facing death, and yet that is the assumption of the change curve.

Research into how people deal with continuous multiple small changes, as opposed to single large changes, would be particularly helpful. As part of this, a better understanding of what change fatigue really is would also be helpful.

Implications

There are a number of implications we can draw from these points. The aim of this paper was to provide a practitioner’s view of the evolution of change management and by doing this to encourage closer cooperation between academic researchers and practising Change Managers. With this in mind there are three

implications which seem particularly relevant to call upon:

1. *As an academically driven discipline, there is significant value in practitioners keeping abreast of research in change management. This is true of many disciplines, but what makes this particularly important in the change management domains is the combination of the well-recognised shortcomings in many of the current approaches to change management in practice and the increasing need for organisations to find more effective ways to manage the ongoing flood of change.*
2. *However, there are a huge number of sources of information on change management in a wide variety of academic resources and journals. This is not only hard for Change Managers to keep track of it, but some of it, written in the traditional style of academic papers, is not easy for change management practitioners to access meaningfully. No concrete suggestion for the solution are made in this paper, but as a start more accessible practitioner orientated research findings would be helpful.*
3. *There is also a benefit in greater understanding by academic researchers into the challenges that Change Managers face. There are many interesting topics explored, but their relevance to the actual work of practitioners is not always clear. In the end, change management is an outcome orientated practical discipline. In this paper, some suggestions about specific areas of interest and value to Change Managers have been made.*

Conclusions

Change management is a dynamic and evolving discipline. It has come a long way in the last few decades from an obscure discipline on the periphery of organisations to a core capability with permanent teams of Change Managers in mostly large organisations.

However, there is an opportunity for further development. Much of this development will happen in the field, with practising Change Managers experimenting and learning what works best as the business environment and the demands on Change Managers evolve. But there are significant opportunities for robust research in change management. For instance, in this paper, two specific areas have been suggested for more research - developing ways to measure the value of change management, and validating, updating or replacing the change curve. There are, without a doubt, many other worthy areas of exploration as well.

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