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Towards a Global Definition of Best Practice in Change Management

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Abstract: It is estimated that almost two thirds of organizational change initiatives fail and almost 75% fail to fully meet their objectives (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Nikolaou, Gouras, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2007). In a global environment where the need for rapid change is urgent perhaps critical to the success of almost every organization, this is alarming. The identification and consensus on global change management best practices may offer the best way to improve organizational change success rates. However despite widespread usage of the term change management best practice there does not appear to be a consistent criteria for defining when change management practices become best practices. A review of the literature identified change management best practices based on results relative to return on investment and money spent for the change (Carter, Ulrich, & Goldsmith, 2005). Another criteria was use of a six phased system (Carter, Giber, & Goldsmith, 2001) and yet another criteria was the self identification by organizations of change management practices that worked (ProSci 2007). Even organizations acknowledged for their best practice in change management used different and unique change management methods (Carter et al., 2001). In this paper the authors explore 1) is there a criteria for defining change management best practice that can be consistently applied in practice? 2) what level of empirical evidence should exist before a change management practice is defined as best practice? 3) what is needed to develop consensus on a global change management best practice that would help organizations apply change management and improve results?

Keywords: Change Management, Best Practice, Methodology

Introduction

ALMOST NO ONE would dispute that every organization has experienced change. Yet despite organizations' familiarity with change, successful implementation is relatively rare. It is estimated that 70% of organizational change initiatives fail completely (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Of those deemed successful, as many as 75% fail to achieve their intended result (Nikolaou, Gouras, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2007). Despite these low success rates, the need for organizational change continues as companies attempt to adapt and respond to the changing economic conditions, customer and client expectations and a shifting workforce. It is estimated that 46% of organizations are undergoing three or more complex changes at any one time (Bareil, Savoie, & Meunier, 2007).

Organizations are also changing the way they implement and manage change. Change management in many organizations has shifted from being the responsibility of an internal or external change agent dedicated to its implementation and management to increasingly being identified as a core competency for most organizational leaders (Doyle, 2002). As such, the skills required to lead, manage and implement change are being incorporated into

the existing expectations, roles and responsibilities of managers, and other employees (Doyle 2002).

It is therefore not surprising in an environment where the magnitude of change, its complexity and its frequency are increasing that leaders have begun to focus their attention on the adoption of change management best practices. In almost every newspaper, management article and change management workshop the term best practice is used (Todaro, 2002). A simple Google search revealed over 36, 500 results for the term best practice in change management or change management best practices. However, despite the pervasiveness of the term, change management best practice, remains largely undefined.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the term best practice, broaden the discussion on what constitutes best practice in change management and stimulate thinking around the concept of a global definition of best practice that could be supported empirically and used practically. Three research questions were explored, 1) is there a criteria for defining change management best practice, 2) what level of empirical evidence exists before a change management practice is defined as a best practice, and 3) what is needed to develop consensus on a global definition of change management best practice?

The Dilemma with Best Practice

For many organizational leaders the concept of best practice sounds like the ideal solution. As such, the adoption and implementation of “best practices” appears to have reached epidemic proportion (Sanwal, 2008; Todero, 2002; Argyris, 2000). The allure of a best practice is the leaders’ belief that there is truly one best practice and that implementing another organization’s successful practices is a sort of magic bullet (Sanwal, 2008).

However, the allure of best practices may create three organizational blind spots for leaders attempting to use change management best practice. First, despite the implication of the term, there is no consensus on one best way to implement change (Burnes, 1996, 2004; Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005) or agreement on the influence of any one factor on the success of a transformation (Sirkin, Keenan, & Jackson, 2005). Second, and perhaps more alarming, is the lack of a criteria or consistent definition of best practice. Todero (2000) in a review to define best practice identified three definitions. First, a best practice was a practice that was recognized as having helped another organization. Second, the practice had received industry acceptance and third, the practice had won awards. One well-known change management best practice study defines a best practice based on organizations’ self-identification of change management practices that worked (Prosci, 2007).

Similarly, in the change management best practice literature there appeared to be no consistent definition or criteria. For example Carter, Ulrich, & Goldsmith, (2005) in a study of leadership development and organizational change included eight criteria for best practice, encompassing elements such as the return on investment and money invested for the change as well as structural and cultural attributes such as openness to learning, collaboration, a regard for people’s needs and perspectives and, a passion for change. Carter, Giber & Goldsmith, (2001) identified four attributes to define best practice organizations, which included setting strategic objectives, ability to change perceptions, support from the top and use of a specific organizational development/effective model. Even organizations acknowledged for their best practice in change management used different and unique change management methods (Carter, Giber, & Goldsmith, 2001). The lack of a definition or criteria makes it difficult for

organizational leaders to evaluate which aspects of a change implementation represent the best practice.

The third organizational blind spot leaders must be aware of when using best practices is directly related to the lack of a clear criteria or definition. Best practices often evolve from a leader or specific organizational change, but the translation or codification of the practice from one organization to another, or even within the same organization, often lacks the full context of the change (Argyris, 2000; Karn & Highfill, 2004; Szulanski & Winter, 2002). This makes it almost impossible to validate which specific actions within the stated best practice were responsible for the organization's success. As result, subsequent users of the practice lack a true understanding of how to adopt and implement the best practice within their organization and achieve the same level of success. For example, the lack of context and documentation make it difficult to assess whether success was a result of the use of specific tools within a methodology, the approach to implementation, or even additional non-documented actions that may have been taken by leaders or other members of the organization or some combination of all these things. This is further exacerbated because it is not uncommon to have competing practices even within the same discipline both identified as best practices (Sanwal, 2008).

Many organizations attempt to adopt best practices based on the belief that they are proven and therefore less risky than implementing a change from scratch (Sanwal, 2008; Karn & Highfill, 2004). However, without knowledge of the context, the practice's value and clarity about the specific actions, the best practice becomes just a story about what worked or didn't work and may pose a greater risk to the organization (Argyris, 2000; Karn & Highfill, 2004; Sanwal, 2008).

The development of a global change management best practice definition or best practice criteria could help managers apply change management practices and achieve better results when implementing change. As Todaro (2002 p. 30) stated, "In this era of almost constant change, good best practices are sound investments of time and energy".

Towards a Global Definition of Change Management Best Practice

The model depicted in Figure 1 is based on Kurt Lewin's concept of action research (Alban & Scherer, 2005; Burnes, 2004) and action science (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985). Kurt Lewin stated "no research without action, no action without research" (Lewin in Alban & Scherer, 2005 p. 95). Action research recognized that change required action but in order to take the right action, data and information are necessary and finally once taken, action needs to be evaluated in an effort to define the next appropriate action (Burnes, 2004). Action science draws directly from action research and is a further attempt to bridge the gap between the development of knowledge and the action required. Argyris et al. (1985) stated "The action scientist is an interventionist who seeks both to promote learning in client systems and to contribute to general knowledge" (p. 36).

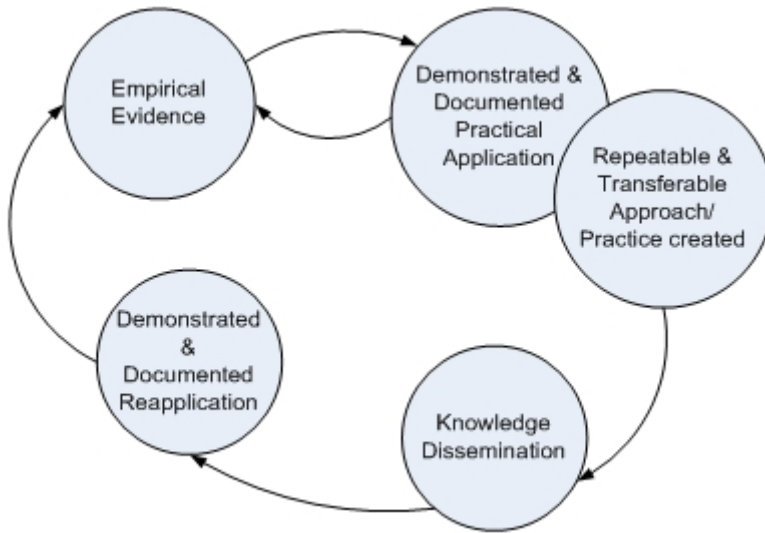


Figure 1: Proposed Model to Define a Global Definition of Change Management best Practice

In the model, (Figure 1) a practice becomes a change management best practice when the research is available to support its use, a criteria exists for its definition and the advice within the practice is actionable (Todaro, 2002; Argyris, 2000). This means there would be sufficient practical and empirical evidence to guide the decisions and actions needed to implement change successfully within an organization.

The double loop in the model proposes that the initiation of a change management best practice may be based on current scholarly or empirical evidence or it may initiate from current practices that require further testing and validation. During this initial phase of the cycle, validation of either the practice or the empirical evidence would be required through the use of case studies, ethnographic research and quantitative research that documents the practice’s ability to influence the outcome of an organizational change initiative.

Once the practice has been proven to be repeatable and transferable, it would, through the knowledge dissemination phase of the cycle be defined as a change management best practice. However, as depicted in the model the cycle becomes a reinforcing loop as further empirical evidence is gathered through additional research and the practical application of the practices. Ongoing and continued validation is required to ensure the practice and its associated evidence continues to demonstrate its validity and reliability.

The model represents a fundamental shift in thinking away from the concept of an undefined change management best practice toward a practice that is grounded in both empirical evidence and practical application. This concept of evidence-based practice is not new. Health care and more recently social science, social welfare and education have begun to adopt similar evidence-based approaches (Johnson, & Austin, 2006).

The shift toward a global evidence based definition of change management best practices will require five key elements. First, each practice defined as a best practice will need to be supported by trustworthy, documented empirical evidence. Second, the underlying change processes, tools or methodologies used to define and develop the best practice will need to contain a traceable set of values. Third, results demonstrating repeatable success across dif-

ferent organizational contexts will have to be documented and published. Fourth, the underpinning of the practice is grounded in change theory and made explicit for the use of organizational leaders using the practice. Finally, there will be a requirement for business-wide acceptance of the practice and the role of evidence in defining the practice.

Conclusion

Evidence-based practice offers a bridge between the science and practice of change management. However, the shift to evidence-based practice will require a balance between the practicalities of implementing change in an organization with the need to design and implement the research needed to evaluate and guide the effectiveness of change management practices. The purpose of this paper was to initiate discussion about the current state of change management best practices, and present a proposed model for moving away from the currently undefined concept of change management best practice toward evidence based change management practices. Further work is needed to examine the application of this or other possible models as a mechanism for the review, consolidation and dissemination of change management research and practices.

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She is currently President of Turner Change Management in Winnipeg, Canada. She has 15 years experience in the development, and implementation of change programming, transition planning and implementation. Her research interests focus on change readiness, and the development of techniques that help organizations apply change science to achieve greater success.

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Helen Haley is an experienced change management practitioner and professional coach. In 2005 after 10 years experience in the corporate sector, Helen saw an opportunity to start a consulting organisation that would partner with client organisations to help them through the ever-increasing amount of significant change many were facing. Allegra Consulting was formed and today is one of Australia's leading Change Management consultancies supplying end-to-end change management services including strategic advice, change implementation and other human capital related services. Helen is a qualified professional Life Coach and an accredited member of the Life Coaching Academy. Helen is also a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

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