

IMPACTFUL CO-AUTHORING OF NEW ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICE

A paper in progress by

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ABSTRACT

The main argument of this paper is that to understand the nature of a change process it does not suffice to study differences between two organizational states. To grasp the nature of a change we also need to account for the process of changing itself. This is important because focusing on desirable organizational end states blinds us to how different starting points might best be served with different theories of change. Collapsing the question of change into a generic model of change or a one-dimensional conception of organizational learning makes it very difficult to account for the diverse engagement in change that can be observed across a large organization.

Key words: theories of change, organizational learning, co-authored practice

INTRODUCTION

The model that we develop in this paper is based on observations and discussions with practitioners who struggle to deal with certain types of change. The backdrop is a 3 year participatory investigation into how practitioners in a large hospital organization develop their division of labor through processes of collaborative negotiation. One of the observations that emerged during the course of our investigation, and received considerable attention in subsequent discussions with the natives, was how the natives, often inadvertently, act on the basis of some more or less distinct theory of change. The aim of this paper is to develop a model to address the nature of different theories of change.

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Interestingly the word “change” itself, as it has come to be understood among the natives we met, tended to be associated with a “loss” of some sort (e.g. money, control, purpose etc). The word “change” was frequently linked to managerial interventions and often seen to be the fall-out of a performance oriented approach to organizational development where a competing rationality, typically motivated by concerns with economic efficiency, would overturn existing concerns and aspirations among people in the clinic. The clash of values between different professional groups in hospital clinics is much debated and has received considerable attention (e.g. Mintzberg). While the conflicts of interest have been much focused from a managerial perspective, the social dynamics of these conflicts have receive less attention, let alone their role in forging emergent practices.

On the surface it seemed as though the hospital clinic under study was fed up with being changed. All the while this was an organisation very much in the business of changing and adapting, although whatever change was happening was not necessarily labeled as such. There could be any number of initiatives, large and small, that looked like change and development, but sailed under different flags. The way practitioners seemed to be categorizing change lead us to ask how different theories of change among practitioners might explain the organizational impact of a particular change initiative. We began challenging both managers and employees as to their understanding of and experience with being part of organizational change. Through our sustained interaction with the natives we developed a theoretical model that we believe capture more of the nuances that may be observed when practitioners engage deliberately or inadvertently in change processes.

In this paper we contribute to the literature on organizational learning by showing that different types of organizational learning may be discerned by studying people’s “theories of change”. The complex social processes that bring new practices to the surface tends be presented as a one-dimensional organizational learning. In this paper we open the black box of organisational learning by exploring how people relate to change according to different theories of change. Change is not merely a matter of differences in end-states, but has to be understood in terms of the nature of the processes through which change occurs. Variations in people’s theories of change translate into different forms of organizational learning. We use rich empirical material from a long-term participatory investigation to map managers’ ways of being in the organization (modes of managing) against their conceptions of what it means to be an organization (modes of organizing). This is illustrated in Figure 1.

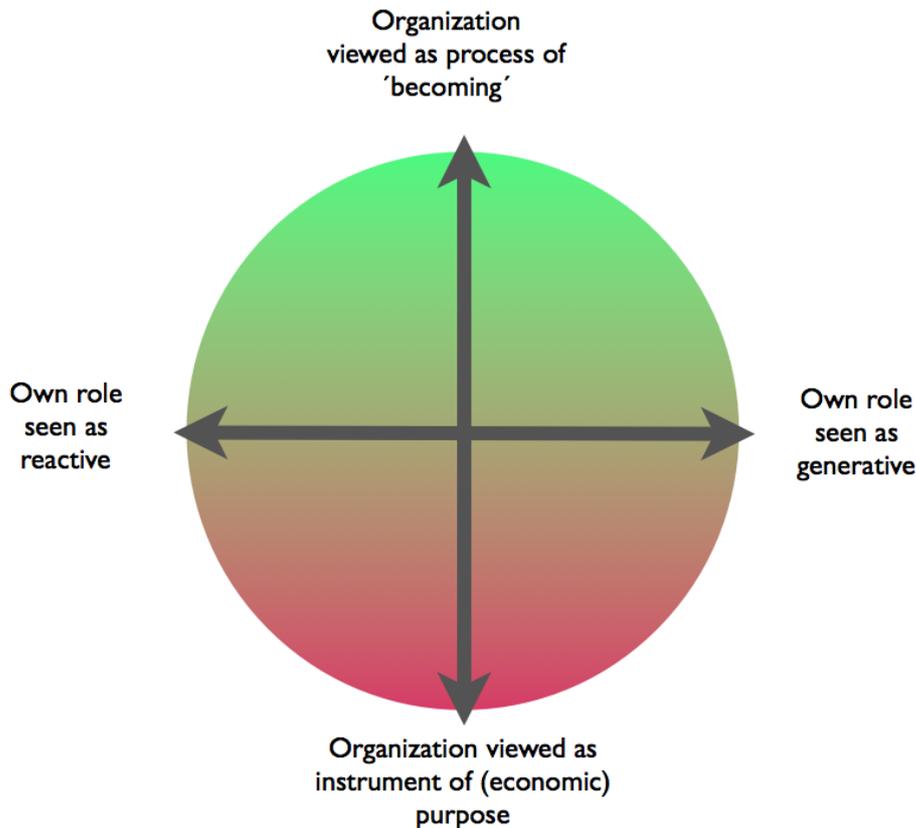


Figure 1: The quadrants reflect four “theories of change”.

The managers in our study fluctuate between generative and reactive modes of managing, while their approach to organization fluctuates between organization understood as a “process of becoming” and organisation understood as an instrument of economic purpose. The model has important implications as it outlines four different spaces for organisational learning reflective of four theories of change. Appreciating how different theories of change are reflective of different types of organizational learning has important practical implications because clashes between theories of change are likely to stir unexpected and adverse reactions to change initiatives suggesting a need to review how new organizational practices are co-authored through different types of organizational learning.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT

The idea of learning organization (LO) is frequently used to prescribe changes believed to be conducive to desirable organizational outcomes. OL has been considered to be an effective developmental initiative in organizations that have a mission to develop, to sustain and to advance. The concept of OL has attracted considerable attention from researchers, including Senge (1990), Argyris and Schon (1996) and Wang and Ahmed (2003) and there exists a wide range of beliefs about what OL is, how it occurs, how it is applied, and how it influences organizational development. There is still little clarity of definition and different perceptions of what constitutes an ideal learning organization continue to live side by side. Just as OL remains ambiguous so is the causal link between OL and its enabling factors. (Dynamic organizational learning: a conceptual framework Kris M.Y. Law and Angappa Gunasekaran).

March proposed that organizations need to balance “efficiency” against “flexibility” (March 1991 in Hatch 2006, p. 313). According to March the two represent different modes of organizational learning. Exploitation refers to the use of existing knowledge and resources while exploration is akin to rethink knowledge and redeploys resources in previously unforeseen ways. The exploration angle presents a challenge to traditional organizational change theories and introduces the metaphor of learning organization as a means to change the way we think about change. While organizational learning is seen as a mediating factor by management scholars OL seems to be relevant only as far as it is perceived to have some (positive) impact on the attainment of corporate goals and objectives. While we concur with March that it is useful to distinguish forms of management that are “reactive” from more “generative” forms of management we also concur with Easterby-Smith that we need to distinguish between “organizational learning” as a descriptive term (‘how organizations learn’), and that of “learning organization” to be understood prescriptively (‘how organizations should learn’).

Confusing the two will construct what we see as illegitimate problems for OL such as:

- Superstitious learning where organizations are said to learn the wrong thing or where the connections between actions and outcomes are incorrectly specified.
- Ambiguity of success where it is said to be difficult to know when organizational success has occurred because the indicators of success are constantly modified. In this context organizational politics muddies the water as success can be a political act that has little to do with the link between organizational behavior and organizational performance.
- Competency traps that turn out to lead to “improvements” in procedures that have limited or no competitive advantage.

All of the above are concerns representative of a specific theory of change that hinges on a neo-classical economic rationality. This is rationality where the organizational learning is understood in terms of ongoing effort to maximize the output from scarce resources, even human resources. The managerialist orientation of the learning organization literature stand in contrast to Kolb’s perspectives on social learning. Kolb argues that learning is best conceived of as a process and not in terms of outcomes. He argues that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience, a form of “relearning”, as everyone who enters the learning arena has at least some preconception of what is at hand. Unlike the instrumentalist view of learning organizations Kolb argues that the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. According to Kolb a major problem is a tendency to decontextualize the learning process. As a result the only way to apply the results would be to make the world more like the laboratory. (in *Learning Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall).

When developing a conceptual framework to capture people’s theories of change we understood OL descriptively, as a way to interpret different ways an organization might learn. Inspired by Kolb wanted to incorporate the potential for “relearning” as well as allow for perceptions of organization and organizational learning that were not fundamentally goal oriented in the traditional managerialist sense.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on an empirical study of several hospital clinics in Norway. The study is part of a 3 year research program where the overarching research question is how hospitals develop their division of labour. The project is not concerned with developing more efficient organizations or assessing the merits of any particular organizational configurations. Our inquiry adopts a much more dynamic approach where organizations are seen as processes of becoming (Chia, 2002).

The study was conducted according to a design for action science. Although it is difficult to find a single definition of action science there are a few defining traits. Action science is an inquiry into social practice and is interested in producing knowledge in their services of such practice (Argyris & al 1985, p. 232). The action scientist is an interventionist who seeks both to promote learning and contribute to general knowledge (Ibid, p.36). Action science focuses on creating conditions of collaborative inquiry in which people in organizations function as co-researchers rather than mere subjects (Argyris & Schon 1996, p .50). Integral to our study of the changes in division of labour, and building on the work of Friedman (2008, p. 131-135) we engaged in 1) the creation of a community of inquiry, 2) engaging with practitioners on equal terms in order to build theories in practice, 3) activities aimed at combining interpretation with rigorous testing, and 4) facilitating the creation of alternatives to the status quo and informing change in light of values freely chosen by social actors. We were concerned with the uniqueness of the situation and aimed at developing themes from which the practitioners might construct theories and methods of their own (Schon 1983, p.319).

Over a period of 2 years we spent a total of approx 4 months shadowing a broad spectrum of stakeholders (managers, doctors, nurses, office staff, technicians etc) in order to establish a firm understanding of everyday life in the clinic as seen from various positions within the organization. Our observations were fed into open discussions with the practitioners where researchers and practitioners developed a shared interpretation. Building on the mutual analysis we worked to co-develop a series of problem statement that were likely to represent the concerns of several groups of stakeholders. The problem statements represented actionable knowledge that paved the way for new practice. The process is illustrated in figure 2.

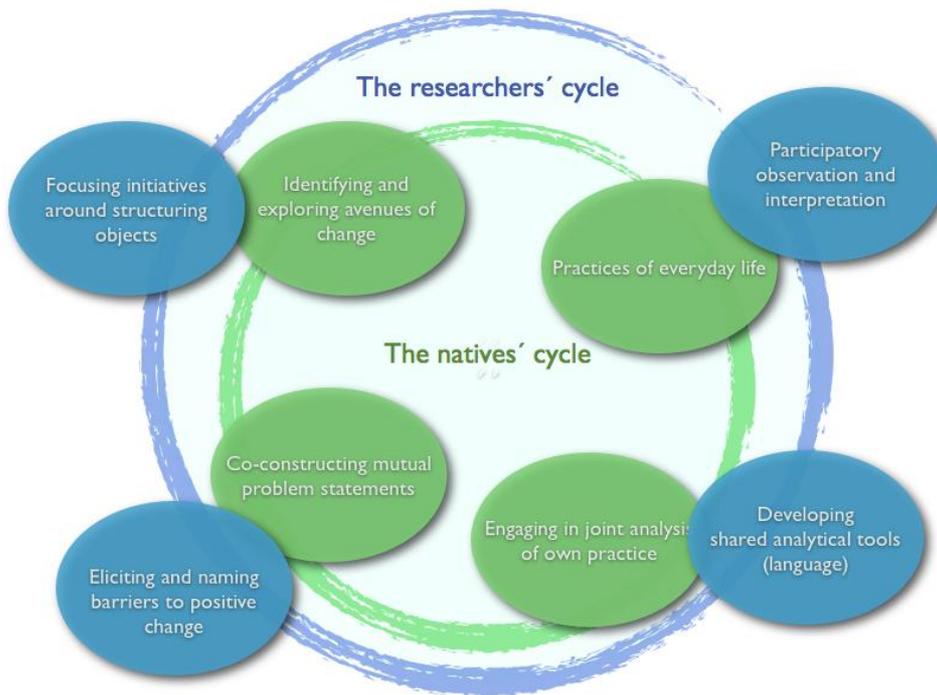


Figure 2. Research process.

A basis for the establishment of a functioning community of inquiry was the development of shared language in order for everyone involved to be able to engage meaningfully in an interpretation of practical experience. The team of researchers spent a great deal of time introducing analytical tools and adopting local language so as to avoid alienating the natives by using unfamiliar terminology. In the process a high level of trust was established where participants felt comfortable with sharing their thoughts. During the course of our engagement we realized that in everyday life there was a lot happening in terms of change that was not labelled as “change”. In fact “change” tended to be limited to a special category of developments. This realization inspired us to dig deeper into the ways natives conceptualize different types of change. In the process we were able to engage the natives in an open contemplation over how they believe they impact organizational development.

CO-AUTHORING THEORIES OF CHANGE

When we first began discussing topics such as “leadership” and “change”, the discussion seemed to follow an all too familiar pattern with all the hallmarks of mainstream managerialism. Leadership and change were perceived in terms of a technical rationality, and as generic concepts. During the course of our prolonged discussions it became clear that although change tended to be explicated in terms of a goal oriented understanding the frustration in the management team was obvious. They had seen their fair share of what was referred to as sabotage and resistance from the organization even though, in their

terms, the objectives were wholly justified and reasonable. When we engaged with employees we saw how the attribution of negative intentions worked both ways creating a climate of mutual distrust. The management team clearly felt that they were being alienated for all the wrong reasons and several of the team members reported a high level of distress over the level of conflict.

In order to develop a greater reflexive capacity among the members of the management team we introduced three simple assumptions and spent a great deal of time pondering the implications:

- 1) The clinic can house multiple realities. What a manager says is bound to be interpreted against a local backdrop, which means a manager may come across as saying something very different from what was originally intended.
- 2) Social “facts” about life in the clinic are relationally constituted. The voice of the manager is but one of many that struggle for recognition.
- 3) Social life is dynamic and as a result the organization is always changing. Change is present even when managers leave the office. It may not be turned on and off.

The purpose of the exercise was to challenge some of the positivist underpinning that characterized the management groups ways of rationalizing management. We returned to these assumptions on several occasions. The effect this had, first on people’s self perceptions, and later on the way they engaged with others was quite exciting. The members of the management team had to develop new histories as it dawned on them that to some extent they might even be constructing the resistance to change that previously perceived as a display of ill faith. Looking back at some of the changes that had taken place over the last couple of years some of the reactions began to take on a new meaning. Even though it was not always obvious how they could have acted differently they developed a realization that changing behaviours and attitudes takes time.

During the course of our work we observed how the word “change” had come to mean “loss” for many natives. However, this did not mean that change did not happen or even that change was not welcome. Much of the change simply was not referred to as change at all as the word “change” had come to represent a goal oriented theory of change. While the goal oriented theory of change assumed a particular relationship between individual and organization, we began wondering how alternative perceptions might express themselves differently. In a bid to develop the idea further we started mapping people’s perceptions of their own impact against their understanding of what organizations are. We conceptualized peoples own understanding of their role as ranging from “reactive” to “generative” i.e. free to change the rules of practice.

When we confronted the managers with how they saw themselves and their impact on the organization it became clear that “change” represented a particular theory of change in which their role was more or less confined by external circumstances. The organization too seemed to be reduced to a simple instrument of purpose, with little room to address alternative concerns and interests. Building on the spaces outlined in figure 1 we identified 3 alternative theories of change, and were able to use these to reflect together with the natives on different modes of engaging in change depending on whether they saw themselves and the organization bound by e.g. a neo-classical economic rationality and confined by narrow economic objectives.

Interestingly we were able to identify practices that displayed of a more dynamic understanding of organizational purpose as well as a more generative, rule breaking role

play. What also emerged was a tendency to unwittingly combine different theories of change in practice. The managers were quite good at siding with conventional managerialist wisdom while intermittently adopting a much more pragmatic approach in order to make things workable in practice i.e. to realize the official theory of change. In summary peoples theories of change, as they emerged through our analysis of the practice of everyday life, covered a broad spectrum ranging from deterministic and goal oriented to more emergent and ephemeral.

As an example of how the theoretical model was brought to bear we used it to decipher the performance cult that has come to characterize even hospital. The basic assumption being that to attain desired organizational outcomes i.e. have performance, organizations can form to some (generic) high-performance practices (Becker, Huselid). The health care sector clearly has competing values, and aligning practice to an objective measure of performance is therefore rather tricky. Using our theoretical model we tried to understand how different theories of change offers different perspectives on how the alignment paradox is handled. A summary of this analysis can be found in figure 3. Depending on the context into which managers want to introduce a new (high-performance) practice or a new measure of performance they need to appreciate that “implementing” might entail very different approaches. Managers even have to anticipate that their initial ideas will be transformed.

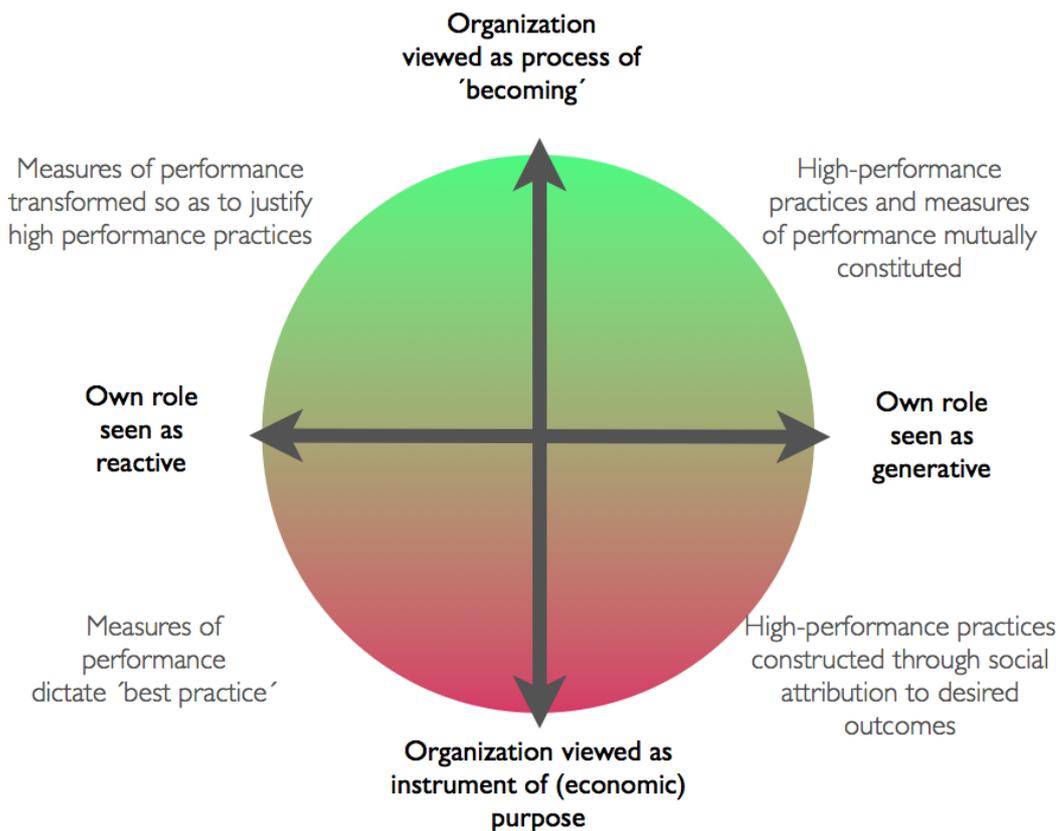


Figure 3. HRM-performance problem understood as a theory of change.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we contribute to the literature on organizational learning by showing that different types of organizational may be discerned by studying people's "theories of change". The complex social processes that bring new practices to the surface tends be presented as a one-dimensional organizational learning. Change is not merely a matter of differences in end-states, but has to be understood in terms of the nature of the processes through which change occurs. Variations in people's theories of change translate into different forms of organizational learning and we have developed a theoretical model to capture different theories of change. The managers in our study fluctuate between generative and reactive modes of managing, while their approach to organization fluctuates between organization understood as a "process of becoming" and organisation understood as an instrument of economic purpose. The model has important implications as it outlines four different spaces for organisational learning reflective of four different theories of change. Appreciating how different theories of change are reflective of different types of organizational learning has important practical implications because clashes between theories of change are likely to stir unexpected and adverse reactions to change initiatives suggesting a need to review how new organizational practices are co-authored through different types of organizational learning.

The managers discourse tended to gravitate towards a deterministic and goal oriented theory of change, while their practical repertoire seemed to far exceed this narrow understanding of change. Engaging the management team in a participative process allowed us not just to develop a richer conception of change. This also meant we were able to draw on the managers practical knowing in order to develop a more nuances understanding of how organizations learn and develop. As long as the managers practical repertoire remained tacit they seemed were less likely to anticipate many of the adverse reactions that their decisions and change initiatives generated. Confronting them with our theoretical modal afforded them a basis from which to reflect more explicitly on ways to broaden their theories of change.

The way we developed our theoretical proved to be a good way to have the mangers understand how they were undermining their own impact by limiting themselves to particular theories of change. Secondly our theoretical model motivates a wider and more interesting study of change in organizations as it alerts us to the risks of limiting the study to the narrow categories recognized within a goal oriented theory of change. Any change, irrespective of the particular theory of change that motivated the intervention in the first place, is likely to be open ended (in terms of organization) and generative (in terms of modes of management). Finally the model has important implications in that it offers a more integrated understanding of the relationship between manager and organization in which the managers is both an actor and acted upon.