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**Changing Organizations:
Strategic Choices**

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Abstract

Key strategic choices in the design of change efforts are considered. It is concluded that change efforts should be designed to incorporate such features as informed consent, reinvention, a combination of bottoms up and top down change, organization wide installation and motivation based on a positive view of the change to be installed.

CHANGING ORGANIZATIONS: STRATEGIC CHOICES

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The design of an organizational change process involves a number of strategic decisions. Many of these decisions involve picking either one option or another; there is no middle ground. In the case of some strategic choices, the evidence from the organizational change literature is rather clear. Consensus exists as to how change should be carried out. Not surprisingly in a field as young and under-researched as organizational change, this is not true with respect to many key strategic choices. At times, the literature seems to suggest dramatically different design decisions. In a case of the choices considered in this chapter, arguments can be made on both sides of the issue. These arguments will be reviewed and, where possible, positions taken on which approach is most likely to produce successful organization change.

Conceptual Approach

Before consideration is given to the specific strategic choices which will be considered here, a few words need to be said about the overall framework that will be used in analyzing them. It starts by accepting the view that organizations are complex, open social systems (Katz and Kahn, 1966). In this view, it is argued that organizations take input from the larger environment and subject it to various transformation processes which result in an output. As systems, they are composed of multiple interdependent parts. Changes in one element of the system result in changes in other parts of the system. Similarly, organizations have the property of equilibrium, that is, the

system will generate energy to move toward a state of balance in which the different parts of the system fit or are congruent with each other. Finally, as open systems, organizations need to maintain favorable transactions with the environment. That is, they need to effectively use the inputs from the environment in developing their outputs, or they will no longer exist.

A number of congruence models exist which build upon the open systems' thinking (see, e.g., Galbraith, 1973; Nadler and Tushman, 1977). In these frameworks, the organization is seen as being made up of systems such as tasks, formal organization structures, informal cultures, individuals, and various subsystems. Many of the critical questions concern the consistency or congruence among the internal components of an organization. For example, are the demands of the organizational task consistent with the skills of the individuals? Are the rewards well suited to the needs and desires of the individual and calculated to motivate the kind of behavior that is needed for organizational effectiveness? The basic hypothesis of these models is that organizations will be most effective when their major components are congruent with each other. Problems of effectiveness due to management and organizational factors are seen as stemming from poor fit or lack of congruence among the key organizational components.

Finally, contingency thinking is important to any analysis of organizational effectiveness. There is no one right way to manage, select individuals, and to develop strategies. What is effective differs greatly from organization to organization, and from environment to environment. It all depends upon the kind of transactions the organization wants to have with the environment, and, of course, the

characteristics of the environment. In order to produce certain kinds of products and/or offer certain kinds of services, an organization needs to be structured one way; while for producing others, an organization may need to be designed entirely different. What is common, however, is the assumption that congruence among the different parts of organizations is critical to the effectiveness of the organization.

With these general points in mind, we can turn to a consideration of some of the key choices that are involved in designing an organizational change process. Consideration will first be given to the issue of whether organizational change is facilitated or hindered by taking an experimental project approach.

Using Experiments

There are a number of reasons why, on the surface, it appears to make sense to take an experimental approach to organizational change (see e.g. Lawler, Nadler and Cammann, 1980). In essence, the major argument says that trying a new design on an experimental basis allows an organization to find out whether it is right, and gives it a chance to learn how to effectively utilize the new approach. In addition, it frees people to try things that they would not otherwise try; in effect, it gives them the right to fail. It is also argued that organizations can often be encouraged to try things that they would never try if it was not possible to run "experiments." Overall, the arguments in favor of experimenting are rather impressive, and at first glance, it is hard to argue with the idea of experiments. Indeed, it is based in the very scientific model that most organizational researchers subscribe to. It

also generally fits a learning model which says we try, learn, and improve.

Before we conclude that experiments are a good way to start a change process, we need to look at some of the down-side impacts of experimentation. An interesting one is suggested by the systems model and the congruence argument. Experimenting usually means trying something in a small part of a total organization, or changing only one component of an organization to operate in a new way. This, it is argued, gives a sense of how a larger, more comprehensive change will affect an organization. However, one of the dangers of this kind of experimentation is that it might give a completely false reading on how effective a new practice or a new design will be if it affects the total organization.

Having a small group within an organization operate in a new manner is both qualitatively and quantitatively different than having a total organization operate in a new, innovative manner. This comes about because of the environment the group faces. The internal environment the experimental group faces is radically different than the environment of a group which is operating in the same manner as the rest of the organization. Similarly, changing just one system in an organization to see how it works before changing other systems which are related to it and are part of the overall change effort (e.g., changing job design, but not the pay, selection, and training systems) can provide very misleading results. In essence, what is often being experimented with is sticking a foreign body in an organization, and judging how it survives in an incongruent and sometimes hostile environment. Because of the pressures toward equilibrium, new systems and approaches often

don't survive. This is an interesting piece of experimentation and can produce interesting data, but may tell little about how effective a new approach will be if it is installed on an organization-wide basis (Lawler, 1986).

Inherent in the point that experimentation gives individuals and organizations a chance to fail is a very dangerous feature of any change that is called an experiment. In many cases, successful organizational change depends on a high level of commitment. If the adopters know that they are involved in an experiment, and that if it fails things can revert to the status quo, there is real danger that they may not make the same kind of commitment to the change as they would if they felt they had to make it work. Thus, although the idea of experimentation sounds good on the surface, it may, in fact, lead to a lower probability of success than would a full scale, permanent, highly committed installation of the practice or new organizational system.

Finally, experimentation often inhibits the spread of seemingly successful ideas to the rest of the organization. Much of the research on organizational change suggests that part of the key to getting implementation is to have the adopters involved in designing and inventing the change (Beckhard and Harris, 1977). Once a practice has been subjected to an experiment in another part of the organization, it is very difficult to get individuals in other parts of the organization to feel that they had a role in inventing and developing it. Instead, they often feel that even though someone else has proven it successful, it does not fit in their part of the organization. This "not invented here" phenomena is particularly likely to occur where the new process or practice is in the area of human resource management, although it can

also appear in more traditional management practice areas such as accounting, production, and marketing.

Overall, there seems to be some strong pluses for experimentation, but also some strong minuses. What, then, is the right strategic choice? Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any straightforward answer to this question. Rather, what is needed is a contingency approach to thinking about whether to try an experiment or not.

In situations where nothing else is possible, and structures can be put in place to insulate the experimental group and to reduce the "not invented here" phenomena from occurring, it probably makes sense to go ahead with an experiment. On the other hand, where it looks like it is possible to do a system-wide change and install the new approach on an organization-wide basis, it makes sense to do this. However, if this is done, it is important to maintain a learning perspective that includes studying, evaluating, and improving the practice. What is being suggested, however, is that rather than doing this on a small unit basis or an experimental basis, it should be done on an organization-wide basis.

It is important here to distinguish between two different change situations. The first is where a large scale organizational transformation is being attempted. In this kind of change, a number of systems need to be changed for the organization to be more effective. The second is where just one or two systems or parts need to be changed to bring the whole organization into congruence. The congruence approach suggests that in the first type of change, experimentation is not advisable, but that in the second type, it is. In the first type, incongruence will be produced and the pressure will be great to

eliminate the errant or divergent practice of the group. In the second case where systems or parts are being changed to bring them into congruence, the pressures toward congruence will work toward adopting the new practice and spreading it to the rest of the organization.

There is one middle ground between the "experiment" and a full scale adoption of new practices and systems. This is to use the pilot approach. The idea of a pilot has some definite advantages over an experiment. Pilots can be defined as learning experiences for the total organization, thereby reducing some of the disadvantages of experiments. This is particularly true if, up front, it is stated that the piloted practice or program is intended for wide scale adoption, and that the issue is not one of trying it out to see if it works, but trying it out to see how it can be implemented, improved and adapted. The "not invented here" phenomena can be reduced if task forces from the rest of the organization have some say in developing and improving the practice after the pilot is complete. Pilots are particularly useful where major changes are being installed in large organizations. It is often impossible in these situations to change the total organization all at once. It simply requires too much in the way of resources and can create too much disruption. Running a series of pilots can create more manageable and practical change efforts.

In summary, despite its advantages, it often is not best to use an experimental approach. Often, either a total system installation, or the use of a pilot model is preferable.

Intervention and End State Congruence

The kind of change process that is used to install a new practice can either match or not match the way the practice or new system will

operate when it is fully installed. There are numerous arguments which favor the use of the same process for installing the innovation as it uses for its own operation (see, e.g., Argyris, 1970). This argument often is strongly made with respect to employee involvement practices. In essence, it is argued that they should always be installed in a participative way, because to do otherwise is hypocritical and, at the same time, represents a missed learning opportunity. Hypocrisy comes about because, of course, an organization would be telling people to do what they say, rather than what they do. The missed learning opportunity occurs because by installing the new practice in a way that mirrors the desired end state, the organization has a chance to practice and learn how to operate in the new way. There is no question that these arguments are rather compelling, and in many cases, it may make good sense to be sure that the installation process is congruent with the desired end state.

Before we conclude, however, that the installation process should always look like the desired end state, it is important to look further at the issue of how to install participative management systems in organizations. There are so many things working against the successful participative installation of participative practices in a traditionally managed organization that it may well be impossible to do so in a participative way. Part of the problem is that not only are all the systems and structures in the organization tuned to another way of managing, but many of the key power figures in the organization are tuned to a different way of managing and are tuned to respond to directives. Indeed, they personally have prospered in the traditional system. To expect many of them to democratically decide to abandon the

system under which they have gained power and rewards may be, at best, naive. In addition, many simply lack the skills and conceptual abilities to carry out the design and implementation of new, more participative organizational practices. Finally, they have also often learned that the only changes which matter are those which come down from the top with the strong leadership of senior management. The result is that they and the organization respond to power, clear direction and little else.

What may be needed to change a traditional organization is a clear indication from the top that the organization is going to change to a more participative system, and that the lower level managers are expected to cooperate. Some room can be left for employees and managers to design some of the details of approach. However, strong direction from the top, and changes in the reward and career systems that say this is the way the organization is going to be managed in the future, are vital. In other words, there is no choice in whether the organization will be participatively managed, there is only choice in how some of the systems will operate.

In summary, although on the surface it seems desirable to accept the view that the installation process should match the desired instate, this may not be the best way to install certain changes. Indeed, going back to the congruence argument stated earlier, it seems to violate the earlier congruence principal with respect to how organizations work. There the argument was made that in order to be effective, all the systems in an organization have to be congruent. If the change effort is working off of a different notion of power, it may be easily blunted by the other systems in the organization. In order to change, it is

necessary to start with an approach that is congruent with the dominant practices in the organization. If these practices are more traditional and more top-down, then a move to participative management, for example, may require initial moves which are congruent with the majority of existing policies and practices within the organization. Doing otherwise will fail to capture the attention and energy of the members of the organization.

Lag Lead Strategy

Particularly in the case of major changes in management style, organizations face a very heavy agenda for change. As was indicated earlier in our discussion of the congruence model, if an organization truly wants to change the way it manages, it may need to change all, or most, of its major systems. This can be an incredibly difficult, complex, and time consuming task. Just changing a system, like the pay system, is a major change effort. If the organization is also trying to change the way work is designed, the way it moves information, the way it trains employees, and so on, the change agenda can be overwhelming. Because of this, it is common to think in terms of a lag lead approach to organizational change in which certain key features of the organization change are put in first to be followed by others.

In some ways, the lag lead approach is a variant of the experimental approach, but it is noticeably different. It does not operate from a "try it and see what happens" approach, it operates from a "single system at a time" model of how you accomplish organizational change. The arguments in favor of it are rather impressive. It gives the organization time to effectively install each of the changes that are planned, and it does not overload the organization with new

learnings that must occur. It can also be argued that if the sequence of change is correct, it is possible to start with some high leverage changes which produce good initial results (Lawler, 1981). These can be followed over by other changes which support and add to the original ones. Ultimately, after a period of years, the total change will be in place, and because the change effort has been limited at any one point in time, there will not be a major disruption in the organization's performance. The lag lead idea of change is inherent in the kind of transition strategy which is contained in much of the writing on organizational change (see, for example, Beckhard and Harris, 1977).

The problems with lag lead strategies stem from the systems nature of organizations. Changing a single system may be more disruptive than constructive. All it is likely to do is put that system out of congruence with the rest of the organization and, as a result, cause the organization to function less effectively. Further, even with the greatest planning and forethought, it is often difficult to figure out which changes to implement first. There are no carefully prescribed road maps which say one should start with job design, compensation, or any other system. Therefore, there is a real risk that the wrong change lever will be pulled first and, as a result, the whole change effort will be a failure. Indeed, if some of the congruence arguments are right, it may be that there is no right initial change lever to pull. There is no right one, because no matter which one you pull, it inevitably puts the system out of balance. What is needed according to the congruence argument is a virtual simultaneous pulling of all the change levers in the organization.

There are few examples of existing organizations which have simultaneously changed all their parts in order to move to a dramatically different way of operating. There are, however, many examples of new organizations, particularly new plants, which have successfully started up with non-traditional employee involvement strategies (Lawler, 1978). Interestingly enough, the evidence seems to indicate that these are highly successful approaches to creating organizations which are participatively managed. This success suggests that more organizations need to look at a simultaneous all systems change approach, rather than a lag-lead model.

How feasible is it to think of a virtually simultaneous total systems change effort in an existing organization? It is one thing to start an organization with participative practices. It is quite another to take an existing organization and, almost overnight, change all of its practices so that they are congruent with a new approach to management. Most organizations probably would be unwilling to try this unless they are in severe financial problems and desperately searching for a new, more effective approach to management (Lawler, 1987).

Under the right set of conditions, however, it is possible to imagine an almost simultaneous change of all the old policies and practices of an organization. Clearly, considerable work would need to be done to develop a new model, and quite a bit of training would have to be done in the details to the new approach. There would also have to be some symbolic things done to highlight that the old has been completely abandoned. For example, changing the organization's name, physically rearranging space and bringing in new technologies, and even the possible symbolic burial ceremony of the old organization could

highlight the end the of the old and create a kind of "cultural cliff" that the organization could walk off as a way of freeing itself from the old. Another idea might be to have a kind of constitutional convention in which the organization would shut down until it could come up with a new total design that was ratified by the members of the organization. Obviously, a total change approach is an extreme one, but it may be preferable to incremental change that moves system by system, and condemns the organization to slow and ineffective movement toward a new way of operating.

Rejecting the Old

Much of the literature on organizational change emphasizes the importance of motivating individuals to change. It usually goes on to point out that change is only possible when significant levels of dissatisfaction exist with the current state of affairs (Beckhard and Harris, 1977). Practices such as highlighting problems with the current approach and benchmarking the organization against competitors are often recommended as ways to increase and highlight the dysfunctional features of the current system. The argument goes on to point out that it is also important to highlight the advantages associated with the new way of operating. Thus, change is viewed as needing a combination of dissatisfaction with the present state and an attractive, well articulated new way of operating.

It is hard to argue with the view that change needs to be motivated (Lawler, 1987). Giving up existing practices can be difficult, particularly when individuals are being asked to accept things they are not familiar with, and that potentially could have negative impacts on their careers and work lives. Concentrating too much energy on the

problems with the existing situation may, however, be counterproductive with respect to organizational change. One of the things that causes organizational change to fail is the resistance of organizational members. This resistance may come out of fear and hesitancy to give up the old, but it may also come out of a need to defend the past. Almost any change effort that criticizes the way things have been done in the past will produce defensiveness. Usually the people who have created the past practices and policies are still in the organization, and it is impossible for them to separate criticisms of their systems from criticisms of themselves. If they feel criticized, of course, they are quite likely to spend considerable energy explaining why things ended up the way they are, rather than concentrating on how new, better policies and practices can be implemented.

Perhaps the best way to motivate change, then, is to avoid focusing on the problems with the existing organization, and to concentrate on the advantages of the new. It remains an unanswered question whether change can be motivated simply by focusing on the perceived advantages of the new, better practices. From an expectancy theory point of view, it should be possible if the new state is seen as attractive enough (Lawler, 1987 Vroom, 1964). The key is to carefully outline the rewards associated with the new state, and to give individuals enough personal security so that they don't feel threatened by the move to the new state.

It is also possible that some types of dissatisfaction with the old should be highlighted. In particular, those having to do with environmental change should be highlighted because they will not produce as much defensiveness. For example, it can be argued that the reason

the practices or policies are no longer effective is because the environment has changed, rather than because they were wrong at the beginning. This should reduce defensiveness and make it easier for individuals to give up the past because they don't have to admit failure; they simply have to accept that there are external forces which are producing the need for change. Indeed, in this context, it may also be possible to make people feel good about the old. On the surface, this might seem to be counterproductive to change, but it may not be if it helps reduce people's need to defend and stick with the past. The key to doing this is to show that what was done in the past was, in fact, appropriate, and that people should feel good about their past but that times have changed, so it is no longer appropriate. In essence, the reason for the change gets put onto the outside world in order to produce less defensiveness and to help people accept the new.

Programmatic Approaches

A number of arguments can be made in favor of prepackaged programmatic approaches to organizational change. There is clearly a great deal of efficiency in capitalizing on what has been learned in other organizations, and putting in place well developed pieces of change technology. For example, quality circles, point factor job evaluation systems, profit sharing plans, gainsharing plans, and many other personnel practices lend themselves towards organizations simply adopting the well developed policies, practices, and procedures of other organizations and of consulting firms. This is easily done because many of the implementation materials and processes are readily available. Training programs, and even trainers, for example, are often easily obtainable.

The problem with trying to produce change through the use of standardized programmatic materials is that they allow little room for individual invention and re-invention. In the case of some types of change, this may not be a particularly serious issue, but it can be if the change effort is directed toward installing an employee involvement approach to management. Here the argument can be made that employee involvement needs to be at least partially re-invented in every part of the organization. If this is not done, then it runs the great risk of being a program rather than being part of the woodwork or part of the fabric of the organization. In organizational features such as the accounting system, it may not be critical that people have a strong emotional commitment to the type of system that is used; it is only necessary that they comply with the mechanics of the system.

In the case of an employee involvement program, this is not the case. In fact, effective implementation often requires an emotional and values oriented commitment to change. If managers simply comply, for example, with the wish that they be more participative in their management style, employees often quickly perceive that the behavior of the manager is not based upon a strong personal commitment. The management approach becomes seen as pseudo participation and not real. In addition, when stress or controversy develops in the organization, it is easily abandoned and managers revert back to their traditional way of operating (Perkings, NIEVA, Lawler, 1983).

Despite the problems with the programmatic type approaches, it is hard to argue that an organization should go to the extreme of allowing every part of the organization to invent its own approach. Doing this means failing to capitalize on the things that have been learned

elsewhere. Perhaps the best strategy here is to have each part of the organization do its own investigation, and then come to an informed choice about what is best for it. This might be called guided or educated reinvention of the idea. In a sense, people are given a conceptual box that they can design their system within. They also are given information about some of the design alternatives with respect to the freedom they have but it is up to them to develop a system which is within the box and that they are committed to. Obviously, the intent here is to reduce resistance to change, and to create a model which is sensitive to local conditions and avoids the "not invented here" phenomenon.

Bottom Up/Top Down Change

Closely related to the issues of "not invented here" and the kinds of processes that are used to introduce a change is the Bottom Up/Top Down issue. One line of argument says that the only viable approach to introducing participative management is a bottom up one. The bottom up one is congruent with the desired end state of participative decision making, and it allows individuals to invent their own version of participative management. Thus, the argument goes they should be highly committed to whatever kind of participative management results. This is an intriguing line of argument, but there is also much to be said for the top down approach. As was indicated earlier, in order to get a traditionally managed organization moving toward an employee involvement strategy, it is often necessary to use the power that already exists in the hierarchy, and that power, of course, is at the top. Indeed, it is possible to argue that without top down support or revolution, little change will ever occur in a large, traditionally managed organization.

Since a major change involves changing important systems of an organization, it is hard to see how change can go very far without some sort of top support for change.

But does this mean that no bottom up change is possible? There is no easy answer to the issue of whether there is a role for bottom up change in an organization. In the absence of the ability to change the top, it may make sense to do some bottom up change in order to show what can be done when new approaches are tried. However, demonstrations of this type are limited in their impact and usefulness because, as we pointed out earlier, what occurs in a single organization part or unit is not a good test and has a high chance of failure. In essence, bottom up change all too often ends up as a kind of guerilla warfare. In the political arena occasionally guerilla warfare succeeds, but in most cases the guerillas are captured and executed or banished from the country. Fortunately, in the case of large organizations, guerilla leaders are fired, not executed. This is just what happened in the well publicized case of the Topeka Gaines dog food plant.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine, given what has already been said about resistance, that a pure top down approach could ever work. As has been noted, it seems that the right answer is a combination of top down and bottom up change activity. The top certainly needs to support the change, encourage it, fund it, and call for it. Much of the details of the change needs to come in a bottom up manner. To a degree, the agricultural model may be appropriate here. (No, not the one about keeping people in the dark and throwing manure on them--that is the mushroom model.) In agriculture, farmers throw out a

number of seeds and do everything they can to see that they grow into satisfactory products.

In the case of organizational change, what the top can do is plant seeds in the organization that indicate support of change. They can provide resources for change and then do everything possible to see that the seeds grow. This can include providing funding, rewarding managers who are willing to take risks and start change efforts and ask people throughout the organization to present plans and strategies for implementing their own change efforts. Particularly, given what has been said already about the importance of multiple system change, it is mandatory that all change efforts at some point engage the top in serious and critical examination of what they need to do to support change and alter the way the organization operates. On the other hand, a pure top down control model for change implementation seems destined to fail in most situations where it is used to install participative management practices.

INFORMED CONSENT

Often organizational changes are influenced by consultants who are first in the role of convincing the organization to change and then helping the organization implement the change (Argyris, 1970). As has been stressed, major change often involves tremendous investments of time and effort and there is no guarantee of success. Indeed it is often hard for participants in the change process to imagine what is involved in a change until they are well into it. This raises a particularly difficult issue for the consultant, how much time and effort to spend and how fully to inform the organization of what is involved in producing the change.

The arguments against fully informing the organization about the difficulties of the change are rather self-evident. Full information may well scare the client off. In addition, even when told, it is often impossible for the client to understand what is involved in the change process and, indeed, how much they will gain from the change. Thus, the argument goes, it is best to ask them to trust the consultant and to gradually make them aware of the dimensions of the change process. This can be done incrementally and the organization can be given the chance to stop the process if they feel the commitment required is too great.

The arguments in favor of full and informed consent essentially center around two issues, ethics and level of commitment to the change effort. The ethics issue is probably the clearest. It simply argues that people should not be asked to undertake a change process without being fully informed of what is involved. This is much like the argument that is made with respect to the treatment of anyone who is about to undergo a major experience at the hands of a professional, whether the professional be a researcher, doctor, or lawyer. The argument holds that the person should have full information and freedom to decline the procedure (Argyris, 1970).

The commitment issue is different but nonetheless important to consider. It essentially argues that once individuals have committed themselves to the totality of a change effort, they are more likely to stick with it from beginning to end because they have made an informed consent to do it. Obviously the validity of this point depends on the ability of the consultant to communicate to the organization and the individuals in it just what is involved in the change effort. Informed consent would seem to mean little if the organization cannot appreciate

what is involved in the change effort, even though they have full information.

Despite the problems of acquainting somebody with what is involved in a change effort and the possibility of frightening off individuals it still seems best to act from a full disclosure approach. The key issue here is one of ethics. Particularly when somebody is acting in the role of consultant. It is important that they inform the client of all that is involved in their consulting activities. "Hooking them" based on limited or misinformation simply is not a valid way to relate to an organization that is paying for the services of a professional. The point that full and informed agreement to proceed is likely to lead to a longer and stronger commitment probably is valid but not compelling. There are numerous cases on record where as individuals have proceeded through a change process their commitment has grown even though they did not know how much commitment would be required at the beginning.

Strategic Overview

The strategic design of a change process for an organization is clearly a complex, multi-faceted process. Few general principals of change management emerge as valid. It does seem, however, that more often than not change efforts should include the following design features:

- A combination of bottoms up and top down change
- Encouraging limited reinvention of the change
- Organization-wide installation or starting with a pilot
- Moving as rapidly as feasible to install the total change

- Motivating change primarily through emphasizing the positive outcomes that can be expected if the change is installed making the organization aware of what is needed to make the change successful.
- Informed consent

As has been discussed so far, any change effort needs to consider a number of the features of how organizations operate, as well as the kind of change that is being implemented. Because of its complex nature, organizational change typically does not lend itself to simple prescriptions about how various change processes should be designed. The answer often appears to be to look at each situation and develop an appropriate strategy.

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