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Organizational Change and Leadership: Out of the Quagmire

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MAD statement

The intention of this annual editorial is to Make A Difference (MAD) through outlining suggestions to where we need to direct future organizational change and leadership discourse, research and practitioner efforts. Engaging in immensely important fields of study and practice, we have a responsibility to assist the sustainable development of organizations and the wider society. Much good work is undertaken in support of the further development of both theory and practice. However, I do observe in my role as editor-in-chief a sustained tendency amongst both scholars and practitioners of being stuck in a quagmire peddling a dominant orthodoxy that is somewhat lacking in progress, initiative and imagination (it still sells articles, books, courses and seminars though...). Becoming unstuck through reframing the challenges faced is required for our work to stay relevant, and it takes real and conscious effort to make this happen. Or blood, toil, tears and sweat as Churchill would put it.

KEYWORDS

Organizational change;
leadership; MAD;
anticipation; reframing

Introduction

As always, thanks for your ongoing support of *Journal of Change Management*. That being as a submitting author, reviewer, reader, colleague citing our work, editorial board member, librarian, member of the Routledge family and/or as a practitioner – it is invaluable, and the Journal would be nowhere without you.

This year I take the opportunity to first reflect on a personal journey that came about as a direct result of changes in higher education and beyond. Although being a highly subjective reflection, it is shared by many and is believed to be relevant to our work and role in society. Second, I address the need to reframe the challenges facing organizational change and leadership scholars and practitioners. Referring to the current state of play as a quagmire, I mean no disrespect to anyone undertaking good work and practice with the best of intention. Rather, I observe and respond to the urgent need to catalyse a change in direction of our combined efforts for our work to stay relevant. Breaking the mould is tough – and it is those that dare to do so who will truly make a difference and be remembered beyond the latest change initiative or publication.

A Personal Journey

In 2019, I returned to Norway, my birth country, after 20 years of living, studying and working in England and Scotland. My experience of the UK and those living together in this diverse melting pot is overwhelmingly positive and I would never be without it. Bringing people together from all over the world, UK higher education provides opportunities to learn together and from each other and to co-create new knowledge and innovations. It creates opportunities to challenge assumptions, broaden horizons, accept and even thrive on differences. Hence, to me, higher education is in many ways a facilitator for peace and progress.

However, something happened. First, a politically motivated sneak-privatization of higher education. Through ever-increasing levels of marketization and subsequent managerialism based on utterly flawed and outdated New Public Management (NPM) principles, our purpose of contributing to the betterment of society through the creation and dissemination of knowledge is undermined. Ongoing developments in support of this marketization not only stifles academic work and freedom but drives down the quality of higher education through, for example, increasing levels of unconditional offers at the recruitment end of the student-journey (BBC, 2019; The Guardian, 2019a) and fuelling unprecedented levels of first-class degrees at the graduating end (BBC, 2018; The Guardian, 2018a). Some would argue that what we are currently observing in the UK is the dismantling of the traditional academic role and purpose and an inflation of marks that will eventually damage the quality and value of higher education and even undermine the esteemed position of British seats of learning. I happen to agree with this view, and what sends shivers down my spine is observing how policymakers focusing on efficiency gains and short-term wins in other countries are looking towards the UK when wishing to reform their own higher education sector. My prediction is that those deciding not to follow in the UK higher education footsteps will outperform them in the future, and my advice is: Let's take the long-term view for once.

Second, thanks to a poorly executed Brexit process many European contributors to the British society no longer feel as welcome as we once did. A previous overwhelmingly welcoming society is increasingly being perceived as hostile and that has consequences with regard to who wants to stay or seek opportunities in and contribute to the British society (The Guardian, 2019b; 2018b; 2017). What is experienced is a sad and backward process of well-orchestrated alienation fuelled by cynical rhetoric and grandeur for political gain. Whilst these political voices are currently representing the British people, they do in no way, shape or form reflect the countries and people I have come to know and love.

As a direct result of these developments, I found myself in an emotional space with little choice but to leave the UK to seek opportunities for academic service elsewhere. The subsequent return to Norway reinvigorated my love for academia and reinforced my belief in what should be at the very core of any [academic] job anywhere in the world: to be MAD – to make a difference.

Out of the Quagmire

Informing its vision, values and profile my new university – University of Stavanger, Norway – has a clearly defined community assignment: *to challenge the well-known and*

explore the unknown. After a decade in the caretaker role as editor-in-chief of *Journal of Change Management*, I know that much great work has been undertaken and published both here and in other journals. However, I also observe that we as professionals working in the field of organizational change and leadership are somewhat slow at initiating and embracing change ourselves. Rather than challenging what is well-known, many of us keep exploiting it. This is made obvious by the way we frame challenges reported on hardly having developed over the years. As was the case in my early days as an editor, much of what is currently submitted for consideration for publication refer to the same old illusions as if they were unequivocal facts:

Illusion 1) 70% of all change fail

Illusion 2) We exist in a reality of managers versus employees

Illusion 3) Successful organisational change is led by individual change agents – often being the managers

Illusion 4) Change resistance amongst ‘employees’ is the cause of much change failure and as such must be better managed by managers

Illusion 5) Continuous change is the only option

Illusion 6) Leadership is something [formal] leaders do

These illusions represent rather unimaginative framing and underdeveloped anticipation abilities, and to me, they crystallize the quagmire stagnating our work. As a direct result of this rather unfortunate and self-inflicted situation, we get stuck and mired in much research and practice of little real value. It takes effort to get out of this quagmire in order to get ahead, and unless we do so, our contributions will become less and less relevant – and so will we.

Let's visit each of these illusions one at a time:

70% of all change fail: Apart from the obvious but more technical questions regarding how to define change and how to measure success/failure, this illusion has been identified as unsubstantiated by Hughes (2011). Still, many articles, books, change leadership development programmes and sessions, and change initiatives start with this unchallenged assumption. It is hardly a message of encouragement and acts as an early displacement of blame often removing responsibility from the decision-makers. However, as a species, we have been rather successful because of our capability and capacity to change, evolve and innovate – not because of our resistance to it.

We exist in a reality of managers versus employees: We still receive a surprisingly high volume of article submissions referring to a conflict between ‘us and them’ often phrased as ‘managers and employees’. However, most managers are hired and can be fired and are as such employees just as much as non-managers – they simply have other areas of responsibilities. No matter organizational role we should all be on the same team pulling in the same direction, and no roles can function nor deliver in isolation. Framing organizational development, delivery and success as a tension between us and them – managers and employees – does not encourage a team approach nor a sense of shared responsibility. What it does encourage is trench-war, a focus on vested interests, and the inability to deliver on our full potential.

Successful organizational change is led by individual change agents often being the managers: Organizational change and leadership theory and practice have a debilitating tendency of focusing on nouns rather than verbs (see for example 2001; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Barker, 1997; Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993). However, it is not *who* that is important, but *what*. Hence, in order to progress, the focus should shift from agents (noun) to agency (verb) as the doing is not monopolized by any one organizational role.

Change resistance amongst 'employees' is the cause of much change failure and as such must be better managed by managers: Again, on the technical side, we must define what constitutes 'resistance'. Is it questions posed; the proposals of alternatives; the sharing of past experience; valid challenges to the facts and assumptions, management fads and fashions many change initiatives are based on; or attempts to hold decision-makers accountable for what is often change for the sake of change? If so, I believe organizations and society at large need more resistance and not less. However, the word *resistance* has not had positive connotations since the Second World War, and the less dividing theoretical and practical framework of change readiness is at our disposal (see, for example, Armenakis & Harris, 2009). The option of building and sustaining high levels of organizational change readiness rather than demolishing 'resistance' gets my vote every time.

Continuous change is the only option: This goes too often without saying. However, change is only required when linked to organizational purpose and in line with organizational values. Change for the sake of change is harmful and will result in change fatigue. Not to change can often be the right option, but in a political environment driven by the increased appetite for change and short term, measurable financial gains at the cost of long-term financial and human pain is often the harder decision as you can so easily be branded a change resistor facing a sudden halt in your career. However, deciding not to change organizational purpose (see By, 2019 for further references to purpose) and values should go without saying.

Leadership is something [formal] leaders do: Having previously challenged the illusion leadership = leaders in our 2016 editorial (By, Hughes, & Ford, 2016), little has changed in theory and practice. Although there is some movement in peripheral areas of study such as critical leadership studies and leadership as practise – where the focus is on power structures and relationships between the haves and the have nots rather than the essentials of leadership – the outdated orthodoxy stands as firm as ever. I know this through reading the most recent articles in both academic and practitioner outlets specializing on leadership, and from inviting executives, students and colleagues to define 'leadership'. Nine out of 10 times they define 'leaders' rather than 'leadership'. They define the peripheral *who* rather than the essential *what*. Nothing represents the quagmire we currently find ourselves in as organizational change and leadership scholars and practitioners more than this. Although most of us claim to oppose the old Great Man theory, we have only made slight adjustments to the protagonists in practice. Moving forward, a focus on the essentials of leadership (Barker, 1997; Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993, 2001), leadership as purpose (Kempster, Jackson, & Conroy, 2011), leadership as process (Crevani et al., 2010), and the ethics of leadership (Burnes & By, 2012) is urgently required in order to help us reframe the challenges faced now and in the future.

Conclusion

If we decide to stay the course we are currently on as organizational change and leadership scholars and practitioners, much of our work will quickly become obsolete and irrelevant. Consequently, we will become obsolete and irrelevant. In order to stay relevant and make a true difference we must work our way out of the current quagmire of illusions in which we are stuck. Through actively enabling change within our midst and rejecting illusions that have been allowed to fester for far too long we can reframe organizational change and leadership challenges in order to anticipate new imaginative and progressive ways forward. For those interested in this calling, my advice is fivefold: (1) stop referring to change as something we fail at – history suggest otherwise; (2) cease referring to ‘us and them’ – often through the reference to ‘management and employees’ – as this approach only fuels division, trench wars and a focus on vested interests; (3) further explore how we can build and sustain high levels of change readiness rather than how we can demolish change ‘resistance’; (4) prioritize, enable and support only change in support of defined organizational purpose and in line with organizational values; and (5) facilitate a better understanding of the essentials of agency and leadership rather than the characteristics, skills and traits of formal agents and leaders.

Notes on contributor

Rune Todnem By returned to his local University of Stavanger Business School, Norway in the role as Professor of Change Leadership in August 2019 after having served at universities in England and Scotland since 2005. Being an internationally acknowledged organizational change and leadership expert, he is currently dedicating himself to the development and introduction of a new theoretical leadership lens with a focus on purpose, and to working with students, practitioners and academic colleagues on his EPICally MAD leadership framework (By, 2019; please also see 2019 TEDx contribution <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nno1faLhoWk>). Email: rune.t.by@uis.no

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