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Bernard Burnes [a]
[a] University of Manchester , UK
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Introduction: Why Does Change Fail, and What Can We Do About It?

BERNARD BURNES

University of Manchester, UK

> 'Change? Change? Why do we need change? Things are quite bad enough as they are.'
>
> - Lord Salisbury, 19th century British Prime Minister, to Queen Victoria (as cited in Wilson, 1999, p.).

In an era when politicians can only get elected by promising change, it seems strange, as the above quote shows, that there was time when their inclination was to resist, rather than promote, change. However, the above quotation, though over 100 years old, neatly sums up many people's attitude to organizational change: 'we don't like it; it'll just make things worse'. Yet, even though many people are doubtful that change will be for the better, we live in an era where change is seen as essential if organizations and, indeed, the human race are to survive (Dunphy *et al.*, 2007; Kanter, 2008; Sackmann *et al.*, 2009). Such is the importance now given to change that it is seen as the prime responsibility of those who lead organizations, as the rise of the transformational leader shows (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1995; Yukl, 2010).

A global survey by McKinsey & Company (2008) concluded that only by changing constantly could organizations hope to survive. There is nothing remarkable in this finding; it echoes what most writers and commentators have been saying for the past two decades (Kanter *et al.*, 1992; Kotter, 1996; Beer and Nohria, 2000; Stacey, 2007). However, the McKinsey survey also claimed that some two-thirds of all change initiatives failed, which may account for why so many people appear to have a negative perception of change. Whilst two-thirds seems

Correspondence Address: Bernard Burnes, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB, UK. Email: bernard.burnes@mbs.ac.uk

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to be a staggeringly high rate of failure, it is not out of line with the majority of the change literature which regularly quotes failure rates of between 60% and 90% (Burnes, 2009). For example, Bain & Co. claim the general failure rate is 70% (Senturia *et al.*, 2008), but that it rises to 90% for culture-change initiatives (Rogers *et al.*, 2006). In a survey of the change literature, Smith (2002, 2003) found similar failure rates. Nor does this level of failure appear to be new. In the 1990s, Hammer and Champy (1993) claimed that 70% of all BPR initiatives failed. In the 1980s, the failure rate for the introduction of computer-based technologies was estimated at around 60% (Bessant and Haywood, 1985; A. T. Kearney, 1989;), and in the 1970s, Crosby (1979) claimed that 90% of quality-improvement initiatives failed.

It seems, therefore, that for the last 40 years, at least, far more change initiatives have failed than have succeeded. However, this raises an important issue – how reliable and representative are these figures? Claims of high failure rates tend to fall into three categories. The first contains writers who cite a high failure rate, but offer no evidence to support the claim (e.g. Hammer and Champy; 1993; Kotter, 1996; Beer and Nohria, 2000). In the second category, claims of high failure are substantiated by reviews of the change literature (e.g. Smith, 2002, 2003; Burnes, 2009). The final category of claims are those which are based on empirical evidence collected by the authors themselves (e.g. Whyte and Witcher, 1992; Rogers *et al.*, 2006; Senturia *et al.*, 2008; Tarokh *et al.*, 2008).

Obviously, the first category, regardless of the experience and standing of the authors, has to be treated with a degree of caution. Though one might assume that the second category of claims, those based on reviews of the literature, could be treated with a greater degree of confidence, this rather depends on the literature surveyed and how the survey was conducted. For example, a survey which was heavily weighted in favour of category-one evidence would have much less validity than one which was based on category-three. Similarly, a survey which merely accepted the headline claims of the studies it included would have less validity than one which examined the studies in detail. This brings us to category three claims – those based on evidence collected by the authors themselves. Such evidence, one might think, can be relied upon. However, this is not necessarily the case. It depends on the nature of the research and the evidence that is produced to support claims of a high failure rate. For example, is enough evidence presented to judge the methodological rigour of the survey? Does the research cover change in general or is it specific to one form of change? Who is the evidence collected from and are they in a position to judge?

As can be seen, at a time when the received wisdom appears to be that most change initiatives fail, a questioning of the validity and nature of the various claims of change failure is timely. However, though we need to question estimates of the level of failure, it would be wrong to deny that many organizations do seem to struggle to implement change successfully. This raises a second important issue – why do change initiatives fail? Strangely enough, this is a question which has attracted only limited attention (Buchanan *et al.*, 2005). Some writers point to shortcomings in either the planning or execution of the change process (Burnes and Weekes, 1989; Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001;

Hoag *et al.*, 2002). Others identify a lack of competence or commitment by those commissioning or managing the change process (Boddy and Buchanan, 1992; Kotter, 1996; Kirkman and Shapiro, 1997; Caldwell, 2003, 2006). However, the evidence for any of these explanations is limited.

Nevertheless, this raises a third important, and related, issue – how can organisations manage change successfully? In looking at the change literature, implicitly or explicitly, there is an assumption that there is a 'one best way' to manage change and that failure arises from not adhering to it (Burnes, 1996). Confusingly, there are quite a few 'one best way' approaches to change (Collins, 1998; By, 2005; Boje *et al.*, 2011). For example, Kanter *et al.* (1992) offered their 10 commandments for successful change, Pugh (1993) has his four principles of change, and Kotter (1996) put forward his eight-step model. There are two approaches to change, however, which have stood out from the rest: organization development (OD) and emergent change (Beer and Nohria, 2000). Though its fortunes have waxed and waned, from its origins in the late 1940s, OD has tended to dominate the change field (French and Bell, 1999; Cummings and Worley, 2005; Burnes, 2011). In the 1980s and 1990s, the emergent approach posed a significant challenge to OD, at least among academics (Dawson, 1994; Orlikowski, 1996; Weick, 2000). Nevertheless, it is difficult to support the notion that one or even two approaches to change can cover the full gamut of change situations (Storey, 1992; Stickland, 1998; Pettigrew, 2000). Instead of seeking a 'one best way' approach to change, Dunphy and Stace (1993,p. 905) argue that:

> . . .managers and consultants need a model of change that is essentially a 'situational' or 'contingency model', one that indicates how to vary change strategies to achieve 'optimum fit' with the changing environment.

Academics and practitioners are continually producing studies of, and offering, supposedly new approaches to change. Some of these do offer new and useful insights into organizational change others stress academic rigour but lack practical relevance and vice versa, whilst some appear to contain neither. The problem is that it is difficult to see how the field of organizational change can progress effectively unless it addresses the three issues raised above - the reliability of failure data, the causes of failure, and how to manage change successfully. We also have to recognise that these three issues are interrelated: unless we have reliable data on failure, we don't know the size of the problem and how concerned we should be; unless we know why change fails, we may be offering change approaches which address the wrong problems; and unless we can provide a range of appropriate approaches to change and identify their strengths and weaknesses, organizations are unlikely to be able to address change successfully.

The purpose of this special issue is to encourage research and debate about these issues by posing the following questions:

1. How reliable is the data on change failure? Does the data show whether or not some types of change and organizations are more prone to failure than others?
2. Why does change fail? Is each change failure due to the unique circumstances in which it is undertaken or are there common causes?

3. What can organizations do to improve their success rate? Are some approaches more successful than others? Should, and can, organizations undertake less change?

In order to start this debate, this special issue offers three articles which each contributes to addressing these questions.

The article by Mark Hughes examines a number of claims that the failure rate for change is 70%. He reviews five separate published instances identifying a 70% failure rate. In each instance, the review highlights the absence of valid and reliable empirical evidence in support of the espoused 70% rate. Hughes goes on to question the utility of inherent rates of failure and stresses the need to take account of that context within which change takes place and the different views of participants as to whether change has been successful. Provocatively, he also raises the issue of whether it is even appropriate to seek to prove or disprove an inherent failure rate, given the disparity between types of change between, and within, organisations.

John McClellan, in his article, examines the role of communication in the failure of organizational change. The article adopts a discourse-and-power perspective on change. McClellan argues that change fails because those who manage it often suppress the emergence of conflicting organizational meanings, rather than seeing them as a method of allowing participants to constitute new organizing discourses. In support of this argument, McClellan presents a case study of organizational change at a college of art and design. This illustrates how the suppression of conflicting narratives contributes to failing change practices. McClellan maintains that organizational scholars and practitioners need to consider how the complex relationship between communication and change not only provides insight as to why change fails, but can also enable alternative ways to promote successful change practices.

In the final article, Jonathan Raelin and Christina Cataldo examine the crucial role of middle managers in the change process. They argue that though middle managers were once seen as obstacles to change, they are now seen more as facilitators of change. However, a lack of empowerment, due to executive constraints, means they are often ineffective in promoting change. Raelin and Cataldo present a case study of a failed change initiative at a large financial services firm. This shows that the failure can be attributed to the evolution of closed-executive and rank-and-file systems, leaving middle managers powerless. Raelin and Cataldo argue that empowerment is critical for middle managers involved in change as it helps ensure that interaction will cross systems, resulting in cascading empowerment that can prevent change failure.

Whether one likes it or not, organizational change plays a significant role in our lives. In our own organizations, it affects the nature of our jobs, or even if we have a job. In our everyday life, it impacts on the cost, quality, and availability of the services and goods we rely upon. In the broader scheme of things, the ability of organizations to manage change successfully may have profound implications for global warming, and the availability and cost of energy, food supplies, and other vital raw materials. Few would doubt that we do not always manage change as well as we should, but what is the scale of the problem? Is it just certain types of change or certain organisations where problems occur or does failure occur on a much wider scale? What causes change to fail? Are there common causes or is each failure unique? Just as importantly, what can organisations do to improve their success rate? The intention of this special issue is to raise these questions and encourage scholars and practitioners to debate them. Each of the three articles in this special issue makes, in its own way, an important contribution to this debate. The *Journal of Change Management* now offers an open invitation to others to respond and contribute.

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