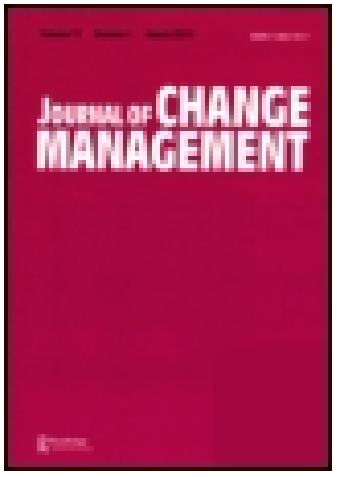

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From Change Management to Change Leadership: Embracing Chaotic Change in Public Service Organizations

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ABSTRACT *The objective of this article is to describe a way for public services leaders to lead chaotic change. By chaotic change, it is meant changes in an organization when the external and internal complexity and uncertainty is high which is the case for most public organizations. Suggestions are made on how to lead chaotic change by influencing the patterns of human interaction and to focus change management on people, identity and relationships by changing the way people talk in the organization. Building on experiences from the private sector, the authors contend that change management effectiveness is low because leaders underestimate the complexity of change, focusing on tools, strategy and structures instead of paying attention to how human beings change by forming identities through relating. Also, in public services, the complexity of change is high as it equally deals with the transformation of complex patterns of interaction and relating. Successful change management practices in public service organizations should therefore take better account of unpredictability, uncertainty, self-governance, emergence and other premises describing chaotic circumstances. For a leader, this necessitates paying attention to how people form identities in organizations and avoiding design-oriented managerial interventions, as well as keeping at bay the anxiety caused by not being in managerial control.*

KEY WORDS: Chaotic change, human interaction, public services management

Introduction

Public services management is in flux, thanks to the increasingly rapid pace of social, political and technological change. Economic crises, privatization, budget cuts, the continuing evolution of e-government and increasing scrutiny from citizens mean that the public services' organizations have embraced change. In the last two decades, public services have been swept up in the

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current of management philosophies – new public management – meaning that public sector governance has become increasingly based on quasi-market mechanisms (see for instance McAuley *et al.*, 2000; Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001; Deem, 2001). At present, it seems that there is no dominating management theory that challenges the new public management wave (Diefenbach, 2007) although this managerial thinking has been criticized by several (see for instance Dent *et al.*, 2004; Saunders, 2006). This is perhaps why public service executives in a recent survey say that borrowing best practice from the private sector is among the ways that their organizations will change (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005).

It is then alarming to learn that change management in private services has a poor track record. A survey shows that less than 10% of change programmes have been successful (IBM, 2004). According to the view of the current authors, these change initiatives do not fail because of lack of visions or designs: they fail because leaders do not understand the complexities they are facing. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to argue that leading people amid chaos, uncertainty and complexity is the main challenge for public service organizations due to the very nature of today's society. This management challenge has less to do with structures and strategies than with the nature of human beings and our instinctive reactions to change and to those leading change. Such arguments are supported by Diefenbach (2007). The solution is retraining; not of skills but of mindset, emotions, values and assumptions.

The article will challenge the concept of managing change in the public sector. It argues that leading people in what we call chaotic change is a way of leading people by influencing patterns of human interaction. The term chaotic is borrowed from the complexity sciences. Chaotic change means changes in an organization, when the external and internal complexity and uncertainty is too high to predict or control the future development by management of the organization. This is the case for many public service organizations where issues and dilemmas caused by conflicting values and multiple opinions, and a variety of stakeholders are the norm.

After decades of academic thinking, management consulting and a steady flow of new theories and concepts, leaders seem to struggle with managing change. Why is this management challenge such an enduring one? The authors contend that this is because of our tendency to professionalize all types of human interaction into 'tools' of change management – a too mechanistic and instrumental approach to human beings, to change and to leadership in general. It is our view that leaders far too commonly blame change failures on so called 'people issues', but it is the leadership of those people – the management part of change management − which is the challenge.

The Management Part of Change Management

The mainstream practice of change management is dealing with organizational complexity by adding more complexity – by the use of sophisticated change management tools, concepts and models. This is arguably a paradox. It may be suggested that when we accept the societies in which we live, we realize that

reality is fragmented and complex. For public organizations, this fragmented and complex reality are characterized by some of the following:

- Public service organizations operate in a complex external and internal environment; vital assumptions tend to change due to dynamic developments in society.
- Public services have multiple accountabilities, such as the government, ministers, media and citizens; and need to balance the ongoing power play and influence of all these.
- Public sector is not valuated on the basis of its profit making ability, but by its capacity to create sociality for its citizens. The valuation of the amount of social value created in the public sector is a more complex and ambiguous undertaking, than that of valuating an organization's profit making ability.
- Public services organizations are rich in people diversity, structure, activities, processes and culture, and it is not possible for a management team, or a single leader, to understand cause-effect loops, as well as systemic connections.

If uncertainty, vagueness and ambiguity are features of public organizational environments and how we construct these features further influences the nature of organizations, then it is our argumentation that we will need alternative ways to make sense of public organizational life and change. According to Weick (2001), the objective of management thinking and practice is to construct a way of making sense of organizational life. In management, we are concerned with the control and manipulation of social systems. During the past two decades, physicists, meteorologists, chemists, biologists, economists, psychologists and computer scientists have worked across their disciplines to develop alternative theories of systems. Their work goes under such titles as chaos theory, dissipative structures, complex adaptive systems and nonlinear dynamics, disciplines commonly referred to as complexity sciences. Independently of this work in the natural sciences, similar ideas have been appearing in sociology and psychology related to social systems. The social sciences do not have anything comparable to the physical elements of the natural sciences. The whole structure that makes up the foundation of human interaction is a construct of the human mind (North, 2005).

This article suggests that complexity sciences develop our understanding of the human interaction in organizations, including public service organizations. Change initiatives in public services are not about rational responses but about influence, personal interest, power and control (Diefenbach, 2006). In complexity theory, organizations are regarded as responsive processes of relating and communicating between people, describing a psychology based on relationships and power between people (Stacey, 2003). Complexity thinking related to social sciences therefore focuses attention not on some abstract system, but on what people are actually doing in their power influenced relationships with each other on a micro-level (Shaw, 2002). For public organizations undergoing change, such a way of understanding organizational life (see for instance Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003; North, 2005; Beinhocker, 2006; Hjorth and Bjerke, 2006) will entail that:

- Public organizations behave like ongoing reality construction entities – there is no one reality that managers in public service organizations can decide on.
- People in public service organizations together construct a future and a case for change that is a function of their history, their identity and their own agenda, but which is always open to further shaping as people continue to communicate and interact.
- People in public service organizations construct their future not as a single 'vision', 'values' or 'strategy', but in terms of what actions become possible and sensible for them, given their circumstances.
- People in the public services influence and affect each other, through loops of interaction that create individual and collective motivation, behaviour and identity. These influences arise in dynamic relationships between people – in specific and changing contexts.
- People are constantly shaping and shifting the width and depth of their relationships, depending on the context, and individuals and groups form and are formed by each other simultaneously.
- People are not the rational actors that leaders wish them to be; people behave and react in a number of unpredictable ways.

The Concept of Organization

Leaders and employees view change differently. Leaders on the top level in public services see change as an opportunity to strengthen and renew the organization. They also see change as a way to take on new professional challenges and risks, and to advance their careers. For many employees (including middle managers), change is neither sought nor welcomed. It is disruptive and it upsets the organizational balance. If we simplify the issue and regard change at a meta-level as movement in organizational space and time; from the 'old' to the 'new', change will happen only when people's own agenda overlap (a critical mass) with the organizational agenda. Organizational change is therefore better understood as a socially constructed reality with negotiated power relationships (Grant *et al.*, 2005). Diefenbach (2007) argues that it is about personal interests. According to Stacey (2003), this way of understanding change is an identity question. It can therefore be suggested that when people find traces of identity issues (for instance roles, values, competences, positions, tasks and the like) in the 'new' which matches their own agenda or interests, they will slowly begin the process of changing by relating and talking to one another. This relating and talking is about finding meaning, as well as performing actions which will take them as individuals or a group towards the 'new'.

Forming of Identities in Organizations

Organizations are reflections of our identities (Stacey, 2003; Covey, 2004). According to Shaw (2002) the way we talk in the organization reflects how we see ourselves in the organization. New ways of talking are new ways of making sense of the organization and of ourselves (Weick, 2001). The real threat when

a leader is designing and implementing a grand change programme is to more than economic wellbeing and a job; the threat is to people's identities.

All organizational change creates winners and losers in an organization. Diefenbach (2007) claims that most people do not openly resist change but have learned to cope with it on a tactical and operational level. They find ways to bypass it in their daily routines. Resistance to change and individual fear of the unknown are well known for being a major barrier to the introduction of change (Ellis, 1998). People only want to change when the forces are so strong that people themselves see no other solution than to change (Diefenbach, 2007). Some biologists have argued that part of the human brain is wired to defend against loss (of identity), an argument which has been confirmed by neuroscientists (see for example Cozolino, 2006). Therefore, feelings about identity, and physical and emotional territory, have a biological basis. Few circumstances cause as much breakdown of normal behaviour patterns as intrusion into private space. According to work by the research psychologists Rock and Schwartz (2006), people therefore resist change and certain forms of leadership. People are not against change per se, but they are against managerialistic change management initiatives (Diefenbach, 2007). According to a survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2005), overcoming cultural resistance to change will be the management challenge in public service organizations. This kind of resistance is based on survival mechanisms related to human biology and psychology. People will save energy and resist changes that is not necessary for their 'survival', argues Csikszentmihalyi (1996). 'Survival' in this context means economic and social survival; a type of survival, the current authors will claim, that has strong links to the way people form their identity in organizations.

Changing the Way People Talk

Change in organisations is the shifting of identities and relationships accomplished by communication. This is a view supported by several authors (see Shaw, 2002; Charan, 2006). The experimental psychologist, Kurt Lewin, was the first to write about the importance of the group in shaping the behaviour of its members (Burnes, 2004). Individuals form groups and are also being formed by the groups. The important aspect, according to the philosopher Hegel (1807), the sociologist Elias (1991) and the neurobiologist Cozolino (2006), for example, is that the self is relational and change is the shifting identities accomplished by organizational conversations.

Shared understanding occurs by people testing and checking each other's communication, questioning and challenging it, reformulating and elaborating it. Understandings are developed or negotiated between people in organizations over a period of time (Shotter, 1993). People are communicating in order to couple their practical activities in the organization with those around them, to create meaning and to express identity. In these attempts, according to Shaw (2002), people are constructing relationships. The character of these conversationally developed and developing relationships, and the events occurring within them, are at times of greater importance than the shared ideas to which they might (or might not) give rise. For it is from within the dynamically

sustained context of these constructed realities that what is talked about is getting its meaning.

What is interesting is how people develop and sustain certain ways of relating to each other in their conversations and, then, from conversations, make sense of their surroundings and themselves. The authors contend that what matters are not so much the conclusions arrived at as the boundaries within which arguments are conducted. When people change the way they talk in organizations, they construct new forms of relationships and to construct new forms of relationships is to construct new ways of being for ourselves (see Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003).

The process of changing the way people talk in organizations is not linear and straightforward, but can be defined as a complex and chaotic process of human relationship development. This process of human interaction is not a planned move from one stable state to another, but a process in which the journey is more important than the destination, stability is fluid and outcomes cannot be predicted but emerge by trial and error between people. Such a view is supported by Stacey (2003), North (2005) and Beinhocker (2006). The authors argue that changing the way people talk is a collision between the 'universes' of order and chaos. For a leader, this collision between different paradigms is a collision between the notions of being in control versus not being in control (Streatfield, 2001). In the 'world' of order, designs, plans, structures, management tools, rationality, linearity and predictability govern, and leaders have a sense of being in control. Yet in the 'world' of chaos, complex interaction processes between people dominate the stage – these are self-governing, non-linear, dynamic and emergent – and leaders are not in control.

The planned, or rather unplanned, fluctuation between the 'universes' of order and chaos add change momentum. Phases of chaos (in the form of unpredictability, uncertainties, diversity, self-organization, disagreements, tensions) are needed for change to happen in organizations (Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003). The forecast for most public service organizations is continued change. The challenge is getting comfortable with it. This is hard because the human organism normally cannot tolerate too much uncertainty and stimulus (Schein, 1992). It is also difficult because modern public services were created explicitly to resist chaos, complexity and uncertainty. Chaos, complexity and uncertainty originally have no place in the management and design of modern public organizations. The discipline of management is fundamentally about seeking to control such organizations. So what then constitutes a discipline of leadership that needs to embrace complexity in order to succeed in changing?

Chaotic Change

According to a survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2005), lack of leadership will greatly hinder change in public services. Traditional leadership in public service settings involves a preoccupation with the structural administration of power and authority. Leading people in change requires alternative ways of leading. In an era of turbulence in societal environments, leaders will continue to launch change initiatives. In doing so, they should remember that it is not possible to design people's response to these and predict how people in the

organization will react to change. It is our recommendation that leaders should instead lead by loosening control, and focus precious leadership time on forming identities and relationships in the changing organization. Such arguments are supported by Streatfield (2001), Griffin (2002) and Stacey (2003).

When control, design, management interventions and micro-management are loosened, phases of chaos and uncertainty will emerge. These chaotic phases contain important elements of self-organization, self-governing, uncertainty, surfacing of new ideas, confusion related to making sense of a new context, frustration, disagreements and diversity – all necessary for change. Experiences suggest that if a leader wants to utilize chaotic phases constructively he or she needs to influence the patterns of human interaction (and, thereby, the dominant organisational conversations), and keeping at bay anxieties of not being in control (see Streatfield, 2001; Shaw, 2002).

Leaders struggle to hold on to a sense of order which is linked to a wish to reduce anxieties associated with disorder and unpredictability. In their anxieties, leaders and employees in organizations want to believe that someone, somewhere, is in control (Griffin, 2002). Managerial anxiety in public services has also become associated with a perceived need to be responsive to the political initiatives of others. However, the notion of the leader as one who is in control is not consistent with reality, as argued above. Instead, leaders may find that they have to live with the paradox of being in control and not in control simultaneously when leading people in change. There is still plenty of space and need for leadership. Leading chaotic change comes from a position of choice, not from position or rank (this applies even if the leader already has the rank or position). This argument is supported by work from Covey (2004). Leading chaotic change is the role of sustaining and changing the identity and purpose of any group or organization, in order to make sense of its interaction with its environment – which according to the authors is an enabling art.

Leaders should find ways of leading change that influence the development and direction of change by changing the ongoing communication in the organization. Change management failures in private service organizations have demonstrated that it is not yet more or different theory that we need in change management but, instead, a better understanding of what people in organizations are already and always have been doing. There is no change management tool or concept available to leaders when leading chaotic change, but if leaders lead from a position of choice and address identity and relationships in their organizations, they will find ways of influencing chaotic change. Leaders also need to discover their own ways of influencing chaotic change in organizations. This article will, however, suggest some ways and the issues discussed below attempt to highlight some leadership ways that may be useful for leading people in chaotic change.

Leading Chaotic Change by Paying Attention to Identity Formation

With respect to identity formation, a leader might find that role modelling influences the development and direction of change, as well as communication of the core purpose of the organization. Role modelling is a leader's own modelling of behaviour, character and values, and presents a powerful way of sending signals

about a leader's identity in the organization (see for instance Badaracco, 2006). To be credible as a role model, the leader must either be an example of the embodiment of the new through his or her communication and actions, or show both the will and ability to change and transform his or her own identity.

Role Modelling

Role modelling is a matter of paying attention to one's own behaviour by self-reflecting. Does the leader master him or herself before trying to lead others through chaotic change? Are they really committed to the change initiative? Are they ready to take full responsibility for the change, including all consequences this may have? How do they, as a leader, live with the paradox of being in control and not in control at the same time?

The above questions serve as a form of private role-play of the mind (see Mead, 1934). It should be kept in mind that individuals form groups and are also being formed by the groups. The important aspect is that the self is relational (Hegel, 1807; Elias, 1991; Cozolino, 2006), and identity movement resulting from the influence of leadership is the shifting identities accomplished by conversations between people.

Purpose

When changing, people need to hear stories and other forms of communication about the core values and purpose of public service organization (Senge, 2001). This is a matter of communicating organizational essentials, such as the values and fundamental purpose for which the organization exists. A fundamental purpose in this context can be any of several things, for instance the set of assumptions that make up the culture of the organization, or rationalizations for essentially unexplained behaviour (Schein, 1992). These may serve as principles to anchor decisions and inspire people – serving an emotional and motivational purpose. Stories of the 'new' may also help to make sense of seemingly chaotic realities. Stories and anecdotes often have the quality of pointing to possibilities for new interpretations of identity and purpose. In the interpretations also lies the potential for influencing. Whoever first tells stories of the 'new' that makes sense to a critical mass in the organization will also be the 'owner' of the new reality and will be looked to for leadership and guidance.

Leading Chaotic Change by Paying Attention to Relationships

The shifting relationships between people in the organization are governed by dynamic, social, cognitive and power-related psychological processes. As we previously have argued, these processes are not manageable given a traditional definition of change management but emerge between people influenced by communication. Accepting the premise that they should lead chaotic change by loosening controls and micro-management, leaders may find that he or she can influence the development and direction of change by paying attention to issues that may shape relationships in organizations. Relationships in an organization

are a complex mixture of motivation, trust, feelings, emotions, group norms, knowledge acquisition, learning, sense making, as well as hard and soft power play (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 1996). Memes, involvement, and symbols and forms are of particular interest.

Memes

The human mind often assembles ideas that fit the context. The researchers Rock and Schwartz (2006), think that behaviour change is primarily a function of leaders ability to induce others to focus their attention on specific and simple ideas – often enough and for a long enough time. The authors claim that such ideas may be 'spread' by a leader or others by using the principle of evolution by selection in the organization. A meme is, thus, the social equivalent of biological DNA and is a cognitive, affective and behavioural pattern that can be transmitted from one person to another. By spreading important change ideas in the form of memes, a leader may, in our opinion, spark conversations without micro-managing the discussion about the organizational reality and without dampening people's involvement. Such ideas may contain seeds of change and include, for example, important assumptions or new ideas about the public environment, the users, the political, the organization, certain strategic issues and so forth. Such spreading without directing or commanding will, to a larger degree, allow for self-organization, diversity of opinions and emergent processes between people.

Involvement

Public services are about democracy, the public good and the collective interest. Democracy is a process and process means involvement. 'The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas, but to make them forget their old ideas,' the economist John Maynard Keynes once said (Kets de Vries, 2001). According to the work by Kim and Mauborgne (2005), people undergoing change have to overcome cognitive hurdles. They argue that people are seeking recognition that their ideas are sought after and reflected on. They also seek involvement as a way of finding opportunities to maximize their own individual potential (and not 'transform mental models' or 'reorient their souls', as suggested by certain change theories). This will lead to self-organizing, tensions, disagreements but, also, important conversations about the 'new'. There are also emotional hurdles involved causing uncertainties, diversity and uncontrollable events in the organization. This is in our view because people seek to discover if their identity matches the 'new' organizational reality. In processes of involvement, therefore, most seek individual recognition; not as 'labour', 'personnel', or 'human resources', but as human beings who are treated with dignity and respect (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005).

What precisely is 'being talked about' in a conversation is often unclear; people must be offered opportunities to create meaning by going through phases of uncertainty, unpredictability and disagreements. People are more easily motivated to adjust their behaviour if they have the opportunity to contribute in the making of

common meaning, if they believe in the purpose, and if they understand the wider implications of their individual tasks. If this does not happen, people will resist change regardless of any alignment tactics the leaders might use.

Symbols and Forms

People in changing public service organizations need to know what heroic and sinful behaviours are. They learn this through communication of what is to be rewarded. Every change initiative will have its sponsors and opponents. An average of 20% of an organization's employees tend to support a change from the start, 50% are sitting on the fence, and 30% are opponents (Saunders, 2005). Leadership efforts should be directed towards the supporters and opponents in order to deal with uncertainty, tensions, disagreements and diversity of opinions. The ones who 'profit' in terms of identity from the 'new' order will eventually support the change agenda (and develop into a critical mass) and, conversely, the ones who lose will fight and resist the changes. Leaders need to seek out those supporters. They will need to be given formal and informal rewards and incentives. Rewards and incentives may come in the form of a pay increase, new position, new lines of work, access to sensitive information, higher formal or informal status, leadership recognition and attention, new responsibilities, advancement, training, education or coaching.

The way in which people in organizations use and interpret symbols, designs, rituals, myths, stories and other cultural artefacts symbolize the way people in the organization talk. This is a view supported by Senge *et al.* (1999) and Weick (2001). Most people love to hear stories: stories stick in our minds and most of us are natural storytellers. People in public service organizations undergoing chaotic change learn and develop best by telling and retelling the organization's success stories and myths. These stories are constantly being co-authored by the people in the organization – the past, present and future are sources of learning, inspiration and interpretation. Physical and cultural artefacts are other sources of organizational conversations. Changing the artefacts will influence the way people talk and relate in the organization, a view supported by Schein (1992). Symbolic forms of organizational values and behaviour – such as rituals, celebrations and ceremonies – influence change and, therefore, changes to the symbolic forms will influence the way people talk and relate.

Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to challenge the concept of managing change in the public sector. This is because change management practices in the public services should learn from private service organizations, by taking better account of unpredictability, uncertainty, self-governance, emergence, all describing chaotic circumstances in organizations.

The authors suggest that a way for leaders to change organizations successfully under chaotic conditions is to influence the patterns of human interaction. Change management in public services has to be centred on people, identity and relationships. Leading change has to deal with developing people's ability to solving tasks

in new ways, by changing the way people talk in the organization. Clearly, changing the way people talk will not in itself bring about change. Leaders also need to consider 'hard' factors but this is outside the scope of this article.

This article offers no concept or change leadership tool because tools should not be the primary focus in public services change management. Instead, it is recommended that leaders focus attention not on what people in a public service organization should do in terms of change, but on what they already, and always have been, doing. This necessitates paying attention to how people communicate in organizations – a reflection of how we form identities in organizations. This is a leadership process of influencing the patterns of people's interaction and avoiding design-oriented managerial interventions.

Leaders of change in public services should therefore accept the complexities of reality and pay attention to the forming of identity and relationships in organizations. Leaders may then influence (but not control) the development and direction of change by addressing and paying attention to issues affecting the way people talk in organizations. Leaders may also find that they have to live with the paradox of being in control and not in control simultaneously. It is the ability to live with this paradox and find the courage to continue changing that constitutes leading people in chaotic change in public services.

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Notes on Contributors

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