

# Organisational Change Management: A Critical Review

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**ABSTRACT** *It can be argued that the successful management of change is crucial to any organisation in order to survive and succeed in the present highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment. However, theories and approaches to change management currently available to academics and practitioners are often contradictory, mostly lacking empirical evidence and supported by unchallenged hypotheses concerning the nature of contemporary organisational change management. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to provide a critical review of some of the main theories and approaches to organisational change management as an important first step towards constructing a new framework for managing change. The article concludes with recommendations for further research.*

**KEY WORDS:** Critical review; theories and approaches

## **Introduction**

Change management has been defined as ‘the process of continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers’ (Moran and Brightman, 2001: 111). According to Burnes (2004) change is an ever-present feature of organisational life, both at an operational and strategic level. Therefore, there should be no doubt regarding the importance to any organisation of its ability to identify where it needs to be in the future, and how to manage the changes required getting there. Consequently, organisational change cannot be separated from organisational strategy, or vice versa (Burnes, 2004; Rieley and Clarkson, 2001). Due to the importance of organisational change, its management is becoming a highly required managerial skill (Senior, 2002). Graetz (2000: 550) goes as far as suggesting ‘Against a backdrop of increasing globalisation,

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deregulation, the rapid pace of technological innovation, a growing knowledge workforce, and shifting social and demographic trends, few would dispute that the primary task for management today is the leadership of organisational change.'

Since the need for change often is unpredictable, it tends to be reactive, discontinuous, ad hoc and often triggered by a situation of organisational crisis (Burnes, 2004; De Wit and Meyer, 2005; Luecke, 2003; Nelson, 2003). Although the successful management of change is accepted as a necessity in order to survive and succeed in today's highly competitive and continuously evolving environment (Luecke, 2003; Okumus and Hemmington, 1998), Balogun and Hope Hailey (2004) report a failure rate of around 70 per cent of all change programmes initiated. It may be suggested that this poor success rate indicates a fundamental lack of a valid framework of how to implement and manage organisational change as what is currently available to academics and practitioners is a wide range of contradictory and confusing theories and approaches (Burnes, 2004). Guimaraes and Armstrong (1998) argue that mostly personal and superficial analyses have been published in the area of change management, and according to Doyle (2002) there is even evidence to suggest that with only a few exceptions existing practice and theory are mostly supported by unchallenged assumptions about the nature of contemporary organisational change management. Edmonstone (1995: 16) supports this observation when stating 'many of the change processes over the last 25 years have been subject to fundamental flaws, preventing the successful management of change'.

Even though it is difficult to identify any consensus regarding a framework for organisational change management, there seems to be an agreement on two important issues. Firstly, it is agreed that the pace of change has never been greater than in the current business environment (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004; Burnes, 2004; Carnall, 2003; Kotter, 1996; Luecke, 2003; Moran and Brightman, 2001; Okumus and Hemmington, 1998; Paton and McCalman, 2000; Senior, 2002). Secondly, there is a consensus that change, being triggered by internal or external factors, comes in all shapes, forms and sizes (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004; Burnes, 2004; Carnall, 2003; Kotter, 1996; Luecke, 2003), and, therefore, affects all organisations in all industries.

While there is an ever-growing generic literature emphasising the importance of change and suggesting ways to approach it, very little empirical evidence has been provided in support of the different theories and approaches suggested (Guimaraes and Armstrong, 1998). The purpose of this article is, therefore, to provide a critical review of theories and approaches currently available in a bid to encourage further research into the nature of organisational change with the aim of constructing a new and pragmatic framework for the management of it. In order to do so the article has adopted Senior's (2002) three categories of change as a structure with which to link other main theories and approaches. These three categories have been identified as change characterised by the rate of occurrence, by how it comes about, and by scale. Although total quality management (TQM), business process re-engineering (BPR) and other change initiatives embrace several of these characteristics (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004; Pettinger, 2004) this article will concentrate on the main characteristics

of change and not on individual change initiatives. Finally, the article identifies some areas for further research.

**Change Characterised by the Rate of Occurrence**

The early approaches and theories to organisational change management suggested that organisations could not be effective or improve performance if they were constantly changing (Rieley and Clarkson, 2001). It was argued that people need routines to be effective and able to improve performance (Luecke, 2003). However, it is now argued that it is of vital importance to organisations that people are able to undergo continuous change (Burnes, 2004; Rieley and Clarkson, 2001). While Luecke (2003) suggests that a state of continuous change can become a routine in its own right, Leifer (1989) perceives change as a normal and natural response to internal and environmental conditions.

Table 1 identifies the main types of change categorised by the rate of occurrence to be discontinuous and incremental change. However, different authors employ different terminology when describing the same approach. While Burnes (2004) differentiates between incremental and continuous change, other authors do not. Furthermore, to make it even more confusing, Grundy (1993) and Senior (2002) distinguish between smooth and bumpy incremental change.

Grundy (1993: 26) defines discontinuous change as ‘change which is marked by rapid shifts in either strategy, structure or culture, or in all three’. This sort of rapid change can be triggered by major internal problems or by considerable external shock (Senior, 2002). According to Luecke (2003) discontinuous change is onetime events that take place through large, widely separated initiatives, which are followed up by long periods of consolidation and stillness and describes it as ‘single, abrupt shift from the past’ (Luecke, 2003: 102).

Advocates of discontinues change argue this approach to be cost-effective as it does not promote a never-ending process of costly change initiatives, and that it creates less turmoil caused by continuous change (Guimaraes and Armstrong, 1998). Nelson (2003: 18) states that ‘Change cannot be relied upon to occur at a steady state, rather there are periods of incremental change sandwiched between more violent periods of change which have contributed to the illusion of stability once assumed to be the case.’

**Table 1.** Change characterised by the rate of occurrence 1

Type of change	Balogun and Hope Hailey (2004)	Burnes (2004)	Grundy (1993)	Luecke (2003)	Senior (2002)
Discontinuous			✓	✓	✓
Incremental		✓			
Smooth incremental			✓		✓
Bumpy incremental			✓		✓
Continuous	✓	✓			
Continuous incremental				✓	
Punctuated equilibrium	✓	✓			

Although the discontinuous approach to change is still employed in recent change initiatives (Duncan *et al.*, 2001) there seems to be a consensus among contemporary authors that the benefits from discontinuous change do not last (Bond, 1999; Grundy, 1993; Holloway, 2002; Love *et al.*, 1998; Taylor and Hirst, 2001). According to Luecke (2003) this approach allows defensive behaviour, complacency, inward focus, and routines, which again creates situations where major reform is frequently required.

What is suggested as a better approach to change is a situation where organisations and their people continually monitor, sense and respond to the external and internal environment in small steps as an ongoing process (Luecke, 2003). Therefore, in sharp contrast to discontinuous change, Burnes (2004) identifies continuous change as the ability to change continuously in a fundamental manner to keep up with the fast-moving pace of change.

Burnes (2004) refers to incremental change as when individual parts of an organisation deal increasingly and separately with one problem and one objective at a time. Advocates of this view argue that change is best implemented through successive, limited, and negotiated shifts (Burnes, 2004). Grundy (1993) suggests dividing incremental change into smooth and bumpy incremental change. By smooth incremental change Grundy (1993) identifies change that evolves slowly in a systematic and predictable way at a constant rate. This type of change is suggested to be exceptional and rare in the current environment and in the future (Senior, 2002). Bumpy incremental change, however, is characterised by periods of relative peacefulness punctuated by acceleration in the pace of change (Grundy, 1993; Holloway, 2002). Burnes' (2004) and Balogun and Hope Hailey's (2004) term for this type of change is punctuated equilibrium.

The difference between Burnes' (2004) understanding of continuous and incremental change is that the former describes departmental, operational, ongoing changes, while the latter is concerned with organisation-wide strategies and the ability to constantly adapt these to the demands of both the external and internal environment. In an attempt to simplify the categories, Luecke (2003) suggests combining continuous and incremental change. However, it can be suggested that this combination makes it difficult to differentiate between departmental and organisation-wide approaches to change management. Therefore, for the purpose of this article Table 2 suggests a combination of the above-mentioned change characteristics.

**Table 2.** Change characterised by the rate of occurrence 2

Type of change
Discontinuous change
Incremental change
Bumpy incremental change
Continuous change
Bumpy continuous change

Smooth incremental change has been deleted from the list as it is seen as an outdated approach to change (Grundy, 1993). Furthermore, Burnes' (2004) and Balogun and Hope Hailey's (2004) punctuated equilibrium model has been merged with Grundy's (1993) bumpy incremental change model as they both are describing the same approach. Furthermore, Table 2 distinguishes between incremental change and continuous change to enable the differentiation between operational, on-going changes, and strategies implemented throughout the whole organisation to enable it to constantly adapt to the demands of both the external and internal environment. Bumpy continuous change is suggested as an additional category with the assumption that just as there will be periods of relative serenity punctuated by acceleration in the pace of change when it comes to operational changes (Grundy, 1993; Senior, 2002), the same can arguably be the case for organisation-wide strategies.

**Change Characterised By How It Comes About**

When characterised by how change comes about, there are several different approaches, as identified in Table 3. However, the literature is dominated by planned and emergent change (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). Even though there is not one widely accepted, clear and practical approach to organisational change management that explains what changes organisations need to make and how to implement them (Burnes, 2004) the planned approach to organisational change attempts to explain the process that bring about change (Burnes, 1996; Eldrod II and Tippett, 2002). Furthermore, the planned approach emphasises the importance of understanding the different states which an organisation will have to go through in order to move from an unsatisfactory state to an identified desired state (Eldrod II and Tippett, 2002).

The planned approach to change was initiated in 1946 by Lewin (Bamford and Forrester, 2003), who was a theorist, researcher and practitioner in interpersonal, group, intergroup, and community relationships (Eldrod II and Tippett, 2002). Lewin (1946 in Burnes, 2004) proposed that before change and new behaviour can be adopted successfully, the previous behaviour has to be discarded. According to Lewin (1952 in Eldrod II and Tippett, 2002) a successful change project must, therefore, involve the three steps of unfreezing the present level, moving to the new level and refreezing this new level. This model of change recognises the need to discard old behaviour, structures, processes and culture before successfully adopting new approaches (Bamford and Forrester, 2003).

**Table 3.** Change characterised by how it comes about

Type of change	Burnes (1996)	Dunphy and Stace (1993)	Senior (2002)
Planned	✓		✓
Emergent	✓		✓
Contingency		✓	
Choice	✓		

Even though this three-step model was adopted as a general framework for understanding the process of organisational change, it is rather broad (Eldrod II and Tippett, 2002). Several authors have, therefore, developed Lewin's work in an attempt to make it more practical (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). By reviewing more than 30 models of planned change, Bullock and Batten (1985) developed a four-phase model of planned change that splits the process into exploration, planning, action and integration. According to Burnes (2004) this is a highly applicable model for most change situations. The model looks at the processes of change, which describe the methods employed to move an organisation from one state to another, and the phases of change, which describe the stages an organisation must go through to achieve successful change implementation (Bullock and Batten, 1985).

Although the planned approach to change is long established and held to be highly effective (Bamford and Forrester, 2003; Burnes, 2004), it has come under increasing criticism since the early 1980s (Kanter *et al.*, 1992; Burnes, 1996). Firstly, it is suggested that the approach's emphasis is on small-scale and incremental change, and it is, therefore, not applicable to situations that require rapid and transformational change (Burnes, 1996, 2004; Senior, 2002).

Secondly, the planned approach is based on the assumptions that organisations operate under constant conditions, and that they can move in a pre-planned manner from one stable state to another (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). These assumptions are, however, questioned by several authors (Burnes, 1996, 2004; Wilson, 1992) who argue that the current fast-changing environment increasingly weakens this theory. Moreover, it is suggested that organisational change is more an open-ended and continuous process than a set of pre-identified set of discrete and self-contained events (Burnes, 1996, 2004). By attempting to lay down timetables, objectives and methods in advance it is suggested that the process of change becomes too dependent on senior managers, who in many instances do not have a full understanding of the consequences of their actions (Wilson, 1992).

Thirdly, the approach of planned change ignores situations where more directive approaches are required. This can be a situation of crisis, which requires major and rapid change, and does not allow scope for widespread consultation or involvement (Burnes, 1996, 2004; Kanter *et al.*, 1992). Finally, the critics argue that the planned approach to change presumes that all stakeholders in a change project are willing and interested in implementing it, and that a common agreement can be reached (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). This presumption clearly ignores organisational politics and conflict, and assumes these can be easily identified and resolved (Burnes, 1996, 2004).

In response to this criticism of the planned approach to organisational change, the emergent approach has gained ground. Rather than seeing change to be top-down driven, the emergent approach tends to see change driven from the bottom up (Bamford and Forrester, 2003; Burnes, 1996, 2004). The approach suggests change to be so rapid that it is impossible for senior managers effectively to identify, plan and implement the necessary organisational responses (Kanter *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, the responsibility for organisational change has to become increasingly devolved (Wilson, 1992).

The emergent approach to change emphasises that change should not be perceived as a series of linear events within a given period of time, but as a continuous, open-ended process of adaptation to changing circumstances and conditions (Burnes, 1996, 2004; Dawson, 1994). The emergent approach stresses the unpredictable nature of change, and views it as a process that develops through the relationship of a multitude of variables within an organisation. Apart from only being a method of changing organisational practices and structures, change is also perceived as a process of learning (Altman and Iles, 1998; Davidson and De Marco, 1999; Dunphy and Stace, 1993).

According to the advocates of the emergent approach to change it is the uncertainty of both the external and internal environment that makes this approach more pertinent than the planned approach (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). To cope with the complexity and uncertainty of the environment it is suggested that organisations need to become open learning systems where strategy development and change emerges from the way a company as a whole acquires, interprets and processes information about the environment (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). The approach stresses a promotion of 'extensive and in-depth understanding of strategy, structure, systems, people, style and culture, and how these can function either as sources of inertia that can block change, or alternatively, as levers to encourage an effective change process' (Burnes, 1996: 14). Furthermore, Burnes (1996: 13) argues, 'successful change is less dependent on detailed plans and projections than on reaching an understanding of the complexity of the issues concerned and identifying the range of available options. It can, therefore, be suggested that the emergent approach to change is more concerned with change readiness and facilitating for change than to provide specific pre-planned steps for each change project and initiative.

Although Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) argue there are no universal rules when it comes to leading and managing change, several advocates of the emergent approach have suggested sequences of actions that organisations should comply with. However, many of these suggestions tend to be rather abstract in nature and difficult to apply (Burnes, 2004). There are some authors who offer more practical guidance to organisations and managers. Three of these authors are Kanter (1983, 1989), Kanter *et al.* (1992), Kotter (1996) and Luecke (2003). Table 4 combines Kanter's (Kanter *et al.*, 1992) Ten Commandments for Executing Change, Kotter's (1996) Eight-Stage Process for Successful Organisational Transformation, and Luecke's (2003) suggested Seven Steps in order to identify similarities and differences between these models.

As the emergent approach to change is relatively new compared to the planned approach, it is argued that it still lacks coherence and a diversity of techniques (Bamford and Forrester, 2003; Wilson, 1992). Another criticism of the emergent approach is that it consists of a rather disparate group of models and approaches that tend to be more united in their scepticism to the planned approach to change than to an agreed alternative (Bamford and Forrester, 2003; Dawson, 1994). However, according to Burnes (1996) the general applicability and validity of the emergent approach to organisational change depends on whether or not one believes that all organisations operate

**Table 4.** A comparison of three models of emergent change

Kanter <i>et al.</i> 's Ten Commandments for Executing Change (1992)	Kotter's Eight-Stage Process for Successful Organisational Transformation (1996)	Luecke's Seven Steps (2003)
1) Analyse the organisation and its need for change		1) Mobilise energy and commitment through joint identification of business problems and their solutions
2) Create a vision and a common direction	3) Developing a vision and strategy	2) Develop a shared vision of how to organise and manage for competitiveness
3) Separate from the past		
4) Create a sense of urgency	1) Establishing a sense of urgency	
5) Support a strong leader role		3) Identify the leadership
6) Line up political sponsorship	2) Creating a guiding coalition	
7) Craft an implementation plan		
8) Develop enabling structures	5) Empowering broad-based action	
9) Communicate, involve people and be honest	4) Communicating the change vision	
10) Reinforce and institutionalise change	8) Anchoring new approaches in the culture	6) Institutionalise success through formal policies, systems, and structures
	6) Generating short-term wins	
	7) Consolidating gains and producing more change	4) Focus on results, not on activities
		5) Start change at the periphery, then let it spread to other units without pushing it from the top
		7) Monitor and adjust strategies in response to problems in the change process

in dynamic and unpredictable environments to which they constantly have to adapt. If so, Burnes (1996: 14) argues 'the emergent model is suitable for all organizations, all situations and at all times'.

Dunphy and Stace (1993) do not agree with this view and argue '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' (Dunphy and Stace, 1993: 905). They advocate an approach that reflects not only that organisations are operating in ever-changing environments, but also that there is a range of approaches to change. Furthermore, it is argued that the planned and emergent approaches to



change should not be seen as the entire spectrum of change events. An approach of contingency to change that supports a 'one best way for each' organisation approach rather than a 'one best way for all' approach is therefore suggested. The contingency approach to change is founded on the theory that the structure and the performance of an organisation are dependent on the situational variables that it faces (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). No two organisations are alike, and will not necessarily face the same variables. Therefore, their operations and structures may be different (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). However, contingency theory in general has been criticised for the difficulty of relating structure to performance and that the theory assumes that organisations and managers do not have any significant influence and choice over situational variables and structure (Burnes, 1996).

Burnes (1996: 16) suggests that an organisation does not necessarily have to adapt to the external environment, and advocates an approach of choice by suggesting 'there is certainly evidence that organizations wishing to maintain or promote a particular managerial style can choose to influence situational variables to achieve this. The point is that rather than having little choice, rather than being forced to change their internal practices to fit in with external variables, organizations can exercise some choice over these issues.'

### **Change Characterised by Scale**

When it comes to change characterised by scale there is less confusion as there seems to be some wider agreement. According to Dunphy and Stace (1993), change identified by scale can be divided into four different characteristics: fine-tuning, incremental adjustment, modular transformation, and corporate transformation. Fine-tuning, also known as convergent change (Nelson, 2003), describes organisational change as an ongoing process to match the organisation's strategy, processes, people and structure (Senior, 2002). It is usually manifested at a departmental or divisional level of the organisation. The purpose of fine-tuning is, according to Dunphy and Stace (1993), to develop personnel suited to the present strategy, linking mechanisms and create specialist units to increase volume and attention to cost and quality, and refine policies, methods and procedures. Furthermore, the fine-tuning should foster both individual and group commitment to the excellence of departments and the organisation's mission, clarify established roles, and promote confidence in accepted beliefs, norms, and myths (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). According to Senior (2002) incremental adjustment involves distinct modifications to management processes and organisational strategies, but does not include radical change.

Modular transformation is change identified by major shifts of one or several departments or divisions. In contrast to incremental adjustment this change can be radical. However, it focuses on a part of an organisation rather than on the organisation as a whole (Senior, 2002). If the change is corporate-wide and characterised by radical alterations in the business strategy it is described as corporate transformation (Dunphy and Stace, 1993). According to Dunphy and Stace (1993) examples of this type of change can be reorganisation, revision of

interaction patterns, reformed organisational mission and core values, and altered power and status.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Drawing on the reported poor success rate of change programmes in general, the lack of empirical research on change management within organisations, and an arguably fundamental lack of a valid framework for organisational change management, it is recommended that further research into the nature of change management is conducted. The first step in this process should be to carry out exploratory studies in order to increase the knowledge of organisational change management. Such studies should enable an identification of critical success factors for the management of change. Furthermore, in order to construct a valid framework for change management it is arguably necessary to enable measurement of the success rate of change initiatives. Methods of measurements should, therefore, be designed.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from this article that change is an ever-present element that affects all organisations. There is a clear consensus that the pace of change has never been greater than in the current continuously evolving business environment. Therefore, the successful management of change is a highly required skill. However, the management of organisational change currently tends to be reactive, discontinuous and ad hoc with a reported failure rate of around 70 per cent of all change programmes initiated (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004). This may indicate a basic lack of a valid framework of how to successfully implement and manage organisational change since what is currently available is a wide range of contradictory and confusing theories and approaches, which are mostly lacking empirical evidence and often based on unchallenged hypotheses regarding the nature of contemporary organisational change management.

By providing a critical review of current change management theories and approaches, applying Senior's (2002) three categories of change as the focal structure, this article has made an attempt to highlight the need for a new and pragmatic framework for change management. In order to construct such a framework it is recommended that further exploratory studies of the nature of change and how it is being managed should be conducted. Such studies would arguably identify critical success factors for the management of change. The article also suggests that methods of measuring the success of organisational change management should be designed in order to evaluate the value of any new frameworks suggested.

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#### **Notes on Contributor**

**Rune Todnem By** is a lecturer at the School of Business and Enterprise, Queen Margaret University College. His research interests are strategic management, change management and organisational learning. This is the first in a series of articles where the author hopes to highlight the need for further qualitative and quantitative studies into the management of organisational change, the methodologies utilised and the findings of empirical studies currently being undertaken.