Applying Change Management Practices in Government Organizations: A View from the Field

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PREAMBLE

In this paper, we argue that conventional change management paradigms that work effectively in corporate settings have limited impact in Government engagements. The entire rhythm, motivation and environment of the Government sector are different and require enhanced sensitivity and preparation on the part of the Change Management agents. The communication plan, workshop design and execution, client sponsor engagement and follow-up techniques must take into account a different reality. Corporate and government organizations are both exposed to economic, technological and social forces. Yet the implications of change – its reception and process of acceptance - differ substantially. In commercially-driven enterprises, some intuitively understands issues like survival, the need to adapt and be continuously relevant through continuous training; this is not true for those who work in the Government sector.

Government organizations, rooted in social objectives, may become atrophied by process-orientation over time; employees thereby respond more to process changes than the objective of the organization. Often, these changes are driven by legislative action, which happens very rarely. This, coupled with an environment where careers are deemed safe and longevity in the system gives seniority, creates an employee who feels cocooned from external pressures and has no obvious need to respond to process and organizational change since there is no financial measurement of organizational success with direct implications for him. In brief, it is practically impossible for a Government employee to lose his job if the organization does not fulfill its organizational objective; its financial performance being generally irrelevant.

In the face of inexorable external pressures and internal inertia, the strategies of change management in Government organizations have to be modified for making an impact. This paper proposes a methodology (‘TYOC’) based on the experience of the authors in implementing change management programs for Government clients. A case study is included as a reference and a practical checklist is also provided as a tool to help someone navigate through a change management effort in a Government organization.

COVENTIONAL MODEL: POSITIONING CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Conventional change management paradigms have been following Prosci’s ADKAR model. It is widely accepted as a comprehensive model that addresses how individuals and organizations go through a change process. Specifically, the acronym expands to:
• Awareness - Why is this change necessary?
• Desire - What motivates a person to desire change?
• Knowledge - Now that motivation exists, what specifically needs to be done?
• Ability – Knowing what needs to be done, how should this knowledge be applied
• Reinforcement - Once is not enough - repeated application of this knowledge is necessary for sustaining change.

The well-known change management curve takes the ADKAR model into the realm of visual understanding and addresses emotional aspects. From the initial shock that comes with awareness of an impending change, a person (and by extension a large group) retreats into denial (that this announced change isn't necessary at all). As the awareness and sensitization process gathers steam and gains support via internal campaigns and communications, a person finally reconciles with the inevitable, either as an enthusiastic participant or as part of a larger group that goes with the flow, acquiring the new skills needed to cope with the change. The final positive upswing in emotions would witness experimenting with ideas, searching for a degree of comfort and finally fully integrating with the new reality.

Along the way, Branding, communication strategies such as internal newsletters, workshops, identification of enthusiastic acceptors and active resistors and celebration of important transitioning milestones are part of the whole change management strategy. Given that the vast majority of consulting engagements involve changes of some kind, it is unwise to dive in without giving thought to the change management process. Change Management is not a nice, optional, feel-good layer; it should be a tangible thread through every single consulting intervention. If carried out with persistence by the change management team and with senior management support, most change management initiatives have every chance of success; we call this the Power of Two.
And indeed, since there is a universal ethos today where employees understand that a company needs to be profitable and competitive to survive, programs that cleverly integrate change management initiatives are likely to succeed. In *The Business Impact of Change Management* by Petouhoff, Chandler and Montag-Schmaltz published in the Pepperdine University's Graziado Business Review, we find compelling referenced data: an ROI of 143% where an OCM program was in place and a mere 35% where an OCM program was not in place. This and other studies are directed at commercial enterprises, where the constituents are sensitized, at a deep level, that constant change is a fact of everyday life. For such constituents, communications about organizational structural changes, strategic directional changes, workforce reduction or enhancement via acquisition, technology infrastructure alterations and so on are endemic.

**GAPS IDENTIFIED: NEED FOR A GOVERNMENT-ORIENTED MODEL**

Our description so far has been relevant to the corporate world. How different is it in the Government Organization?

Change in the Government follows different dynamics. By implication, government organizations work towards fulfilling a social purpose. This can range from law enforcement, military preparedness to visible citizen services like licenses, permits and social security; tax revenues are gathered and dispensed to provide services to a citizen. There is a subliminal patriotic theme to such services - a citizen’s emotive need for social association is addressed if he feels that his taxes are coming back to him in the form of certain basic services that enable him to be effective in society.

In doing so, government organizations are often driven by legislative authority and have clearly defined boundaries within which they operate. Like corporate entities, they too have to be process-oriented in order to deliver.

But the similarity ends there. A corporate employee who has been programmed over global, national and sectoral economic cycles to "change-with-the-times", government employees are buffered, or presume they are, as discussed earlier. Thus the approach to achieve the desired impact through the introduced change needs to be different. This is a particularly sensitive task when the change consultant has been brought from the corporate world and a cultural clash is possible - the trainer is likely to come across as overconfident, lacking knowledge of their sensitivities and context.
A CASE STUDY

The historical charter of this organization was offering social security and health services to a specific category of beneficiaries. It was a department with a social objective with an extended customer base stretching to 50 million citizens; the organization had a long history, which was managed by career bureaucrats and had a legally mandated mission.

This department was facing tremendous challenges in achieving transparent and efficient process in delivery of citizen service; complaints of poor customer service, procedural delays and rigidity were common. An IT solution was adopted by this Department to meet the need for speed, transparency and accuracy. The IT revolution brought functional changes which impacted employees both at the personal and the organizational levels.

As the department focused on finding and implementing the solutions best suited to their needs, deployment, integration, infrastructure issues became a priority over and above the pressure created on the employee who had to learn and adapt to the new ethos. From an employee's standpoint there were several reasons to be resistant to this change. One, in Government setups, the schemes or the projects are mandated at either the federal or the central level and these decision makers are generally away from the day-to-day functioning of the employee. As a consequence, this became the first point of resistance, where the senior management at the state level did not approve of the scheme.

The middle management was informed of the approaching change through a circular or notice asking them to do the needful, hence lacking the clarity of action/purpose thereby creating the second layer of resistance. Three, the information spread further down the ranks in a diluted and unspecified manner over-the-tea sessions and the ‘afternoon walk discussions which created the image of change as an impending threat to the employees function and job security. The third point of resistance was most complicated and the employees were backed by a strong union and interest groups. A situation was created where the project was also challenged.

The organization’s executive board decided that the best way to tackle resistance was to roll out a comprehensive change management intervention program. The roll-out was delivered by a dedicated team of facilitators and Change Management experts from Wipro Consulting Services (WCS). To lend a positive, non-threatening image to the workshops WCS designed and created a forum called 'Element - A Forum for Leaders and Mentors'. This helped in addressing employee resistance as they felt involved in the change. The outcomes of the workshops were frequently shared with the organization’s senior management. An effective knowledge sharing tool was put in place to be a responsive and pro-active system to integrate the action plan emerging from the workshops. In summary, the participants -

- recognized the importance and essential role that New IT Project plays in the development and reforms in service delivery
- recognized the importance of aligning government orders and policies in the integration process
- appreciated the need to make the details of the new IT Project better known to external employers and workers who subscribed to the organization’s mission

During the workshops a pre- and post-stakeholder diagnostic study was conducted through structured questionnaires. The objective was to assess the change in levels of project awareness, project preparedness, and no fear of technology and most significantly, change in attitude. The overall analysis at the end indicates that those involved in the project not only knew more about what the project is, the importance of it, but they were able to see the significance of their role in it, and were better prepared for the change to come. By the end of the change management workshops, the overall progress was as follows:
In all, 600 officers from the Department were direct participants of the change management workshops and another 7000 through the ripple effect created by these change ambassadors. These changes were possible only because the leadership at the implementing agency Wipro, and the client were committed to the successful rollout of the project and believed in the change management intervention as a critical component of their strategy.

Our experience also shows that in dealing with change, the strategy must take into account the fact that leadership styles are different in the corporate world and in the Government.

In Government organizations, hierarchies are well defined and administrative system is designed to give power to a person of seniority in tenure, irrespective of the individual's capability to lead. For managing change, the sensitization of the person in power and his critical role to lead outside his normative leadership function is very important. In the face of change some situational leaders may arise but most will rely on Government mechanisms of issuing orders, conduct meetings and arrange training programs for the employees undergoing a process change.

More often than not, even this individual may be unaware of the perturbations that may affect his organization. The change management exercise has to be designed to prepare the senior management to anticipate and lead by keeping an eye on apparently all minor events in the external environment and understand the effect of those events on their organization. A new law, economic changes, a new competitor, an unusual technology - the slightest blip could have massive implications. If the rate of change within an organization is faster than the rate of change outside, the organization will survive and thrive. A complacent ‘settled’ organization that is convinced of its permanence will die.

The theory of the ‘butterfly effect’ can be used to illustrate the astonishing effect that a single - almost inconsequential - act could have on the larger system. Formally, the butterfly effect is a metaphor that tries to show how a single tiny event - say the flapping of a butterfly's wings - could have an astonishing effect on a larger system - say the creation of a tropical storm or cyclone. A sense of paranoia - watching for the flapping of the smallest metaphorical butterfly - is essential in a leader, for he then works to adapt and morph, not allowing for even a moment’s complacency.

In our context then, change management should not be considered as a single project with a defined start and end, but as a continuous strategic imperative.
THE PROPOSED MODEL

The proposed TYOC methodology of implementing change management practices in the Government sector is based on the distilled experience of the authors personally running many initiatives.

Tracing

We found that tapping organizational history and evoking pride in it can be a powerful and compelling force to propel a group towards the change objective. People seek meaning in their careers and a sense of association and acceptance and these symbols provide structure and context. The consultant must identify the basis for the organization’s existence and events that the organization has immortalized via stories and symbols. Demonstrating this critical knowledge will help the consultant come across as an insider and not a corporate interloper. We call this exercise “The TRACING” of Organizational History”.

Being knowledgeable about the following aspects are critical in connecting with the constituents

- **People** – who mattered and figured in organizational folklore.
- **Events** – acts of the legislature that created the organization’s territory, and other defining events including first office-bearers, MoUs, groundbreaking research, the first office and so on.
- **Recognition** – Organizational and individual recognition by others in the press, external entities and so on. This is particularly useful because a provocative question that can be asked during introduction rounds at workshops - ”What has been your significant contribution to the organization?” This triggers a renewed sense of positive association and sets the tone for participation during the workshop and thereafter.
- **Pioneers** – identify prior direction-changing and path-breaking events from the past; there usually are, and incongruously, employees are usually proud of them. The point is to underline that “this organization is not foreign to change”

After setting the context and creating an atmosphere of confidence and pride, you have to move on to the reason for change. Failing to execute this step will make the whole exercise alien and will cause a sense of resentment. Patience is the key.

Y

Taking some literary license here, the ‘Y’ stage involves the articulation of the reason for change.

The consultants must not spell out and introduce the drivers for change. But she should have the checklist of the changes that she hopes that the group should come out with; this is usually done in prior consultation with the executive sponsors who have called for assistance. The executive sponsor must clearly spell out to the consultant what he is looking for, but the consultant, as a master facilitator, must use tools and techniques to elicit precisely those drivers for change. A typical group is usually aware of the need for change, at least at a subliminal level. Thus, asking provocative questions and encouraging group activities and inducing participants to speak out. The consultant’s job then is simply to listen with great attention and respect. Probing questions that she could ask may include:

- **What is the competitive environment around your organization, in your opinion?** [drawing attention to market forces]
- **Would you like to talk about that last turning point - when the Act of 2005 was passed? How did things change after that?** [reminder about milestones in history and evoking a sense of association]
- **Your organization is greatly respected and admired as being progressive and pioneering. Do you have any examples that you would like to share with us?** [positive reinforcement about the proposed changes - a can-do attitude]
- **I'm sure we'd all love to know of one critical initiative you implemented that made a difference to your organization.** [getting the participant to see himself as a change agent with a track record of success]
• I can sense that you will have a key role to play in implementing the proposed change. How do you think your role and responsibility will evolve? [calling attention to the career enhancement opportunity this change might present]

Such questions are open-ended and still put some gentle pressure on the respondent, as he will - generally - wish to be seen as progressive in the eyes of his colleagues. Usually, participants understand the need for change but often feel the proposed change has a few flaws ("no one asked me") and would like an opportunity to express their objections. Once expressed, such individuals usually become votaries for change.

Office Orders

In Government Organizations, 'Office Orders' Circulars/Notices/Memorandum/Government Orders are more sacrosanct than any other communication.

One must know, at all times, the official orders circulated pertaining to the project that is being implemented. There are amendments and communications that may have been issued which must be brought to the participants notice. Due to the long-winded manner of dissemination of paper-based communication, there may be delays in getting the message out to the right audience; the relevant information may be known to only a handful of employees.

The Change Management consultant must therefore collate a Compendium of GOs (Government Orders) taken out with respect to the project and must be printed or sent via mail to all the participants. Further, one workshop session must be built around the theme of need for issuing Enabling Orders for employees to achieve success in their departments.

Continuity

Change Management workshops create a psychological high. The energy of a well-executed workshop has a viral effect and may last for up to a month. Unless efforts are made to sustain the new energy, it is possible that the status quo will continue thereafter.

The plan to sustain the initiative must be planted in the workshop. Rather than see the government participants as (passive) recipients of change management principles, the effort must involve a leap of faith and treat them as change ambassadors. Many years in the government, well established routes for growth and few opportunities for individual brilliance to be highlighted results in a feeling of helplessness - where the 'system' seems to have its own independent life and "there is nothing I can do". The change ambassador idea gives a tangible feeling of leadership provided the vision is challenging and inspirational enough.

What is often missing are the tools. The job profile of government functionaries may not often include mass communication, workshop execution and program management.

First, Change Ambassadors need communication platforms and knowledge of methods required to make an impact. The change management workshops must have a special section during which they are trained on the principles of running workshops. Second, communication channels and platforms need to be leveraged constantly. E-Newsletters or websites celebrating the initiative and reporting workshops and other events across the system - especially by change ambassadors - must circulate often in the community. Content developed by the staff of the organization must be given as much of newsletter or website as possible. Seeing oneself quoted in print is tremendously encouraging and extends the reach of the initiative incrementally. Third, a Program Management Office (PMO) must establish metrics, constantly monitor and manage related activities and report the progress of the initiative from time to time. The consultant must remain visible within the PMO and remain relevant to the project until the artifacts created through change management are handed over to the organization to own.

Figure 5 gives a graphic perspective.
CONCLUSION

Government change is driven by the needs of society for better services in areas the Government feels it needs to exist. In many countries, the Government forays into areas where private enterprise might rationally be better suited; this is often due to political compulsions. In India, for example, the Government privatized banking and placed tremendous restrictions on private banks. It also ran Aviation for many years; today private airlines have more than 80% of the aviation market. Running postal services have long been assumed to be something a Government must do; yet, as an example, the Dutch Government has successfully privatized the postal services.

Today’s citizen does not wish to distinguish between the corporate and the government and expects the same level of service and responsiveness from both. He will stick to government services in the following circumstances:

1. There is no alternative
2. The free-market alternative is not affordable
3. The free-market alternative does not provide precisely what he needs
4. Mistrust of the alternative because of a lifetime of expectations that the government exists to provide certain kinds of citizen services, which may vary from country to country.

Where government-driven institutions are able to react quickly and change for the better, the consumer is willing to return, often because he may view the alternative as risky and the government as ‘safe’. He will be willing to tolerate slower service from a Government institution to a point equivalent to his tolerance of perceived risk of the corporate alternative.

Moreover with Government Organizations making public announcements about various schemes and projects, a citizen is also more aware about beneficial schemes available for him. If the Government employee is not suitably ready to deliver his expanding roles, then there is a fear of public outrage as well. The demanding and impatient consumer may therefore be the true trigger for government institutions to change. Inertia and atrophy cause this change to come about slower than expected; change management consultants need to spend time on understanding organizational dynamics and the profile of a Government employee.
Our TYOC methodology underscores an appreciation of the peculiarities of government functioning which the ADKAR framework does not adequately address, that framework being rather generalized.

Tracing, the proper communication of "Why", the real world of Government Orders and the need for continuity (tuned to the special dynamics within the Government) are the key ingredients of a successful Change Management campaign in a Government organization.

REFERENCES

[i] Change Management Learning Centre by Prosci, 2010 ADKAR – A model for change in business government and our community, Change Management Learning Centre by Prosci, 2010


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