

# **Managing Change in Regionally-based Organisations – understanding the need for individual and organisational unlearning**

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# **Managing Change in Regionally-based Organisations – understanding the need for individual and organisational unlearning**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines three issues. Firstly, do those driving change understand the reasons for change and their role within this change? Secondly, is individual ability and readiness to learn and unlearn given sufficient consideration when implementing organisational change? Finally, do regionally-based organisations present additional challenges when implementing change and expecting individual learning, development and unlearning? Whilst there has been a great deal of research done on organisational change, and on adult learning, there is a need to draw these two concepts together and understand the interrelationships.

**Keywords:**     *Unlearning*  
                      *Organisational change*  
                      *Individual change*  
                      *Human resource management*  
                      *Regional organisations*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It appears that implementation and management of organisational change is often lacking in any consideration for individuals and their role in change. In addition, much of the organisational change literature, (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Mento, Jones, & Dirndorfer, 2002) considers organisations in a very broad sense. Some unique, additional issues need to be addressed when implementing change in regionally-based organisations.

This paper examines three issues. Firstly, do managers and those driving change understand the actual reasons for change and their role within this change? Secondly, is individual ability and readiness to learn and unlearn given sufficient consideration when implementing organisational change? Finally, do regionally-based organisations present additional challenges when implementing change and expecting individual learning, development and unlearning? These issues are examined by considering some examples of changes made in regional areas and the need to consider additional or different issues to those changes being implemented in larger centres.

## **CHANGE – THE NATURE, DRIVERS AND ROLES**

Several researchers working in the area have attempted to categorise change. For example, Stace & Dunphy (1996) discuss the difference between incremental or discontinuous change or, in other words, continuous improvement versus radical transformation. This terminology is now widely accepted and

referred to by many researchers in the area (Graetz, Rimmer, Lawrence, & Smith, 2002; Hayes, 2002). Regardless of the exact term chosen, incremental change or continuous improvement are small changes implemented over a period of time, building on existing practices within the organisation. Discontinuous change or radical transformation is change within the organisation that could be considered a significant departure from current or existing practices and procedures, often within a relatively short space of time. There has also been a third suggested model of change by Perrick (cited in Zaugg & Thom, 2003) referred to as punctuated equilibrium and offered as an alternative to continuous improvement or incremental change. It is suggested that in the process of continuous improvement, there occurs periods of change punctuated by periods of stability, rather than being considered as ongoing evolutionary process with no periods of continuity.

It can be argued that regardless of the type of change, certain elements need to be given consideration. Many models have offered these elements, such as Kotter's (1995) eight steps of; establishing a sense of urgency, forming a powerful guiding coalition, creating a vision, communicating the vision, empowering other to act on the vision, planning for and creating short-term wins, consolidating improvements and producing still more change, and finally institutionalizing new approaches. However, a change with wide-reaching impacts requiring significant unlearning, will have more of an impact on individuals than those requiring only minor adjustments to current practices.

There also exists a different view of organisations emerging as suggested by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), whereby the organisation is seen as a living organism rather than a machine, as is the traditional Taylorist view held by many managers. Some writers give the impression of striving to ensure that change is implemented and then stability is achieved. For example, Lewin's model (cited in Thornhill, Lewis, Millmore, & Saunders, 2000), simplified to unfreeze, change, refreeze offers some hope in terms of the upfront consideration to acknowledging what is and allowing some time to unfreeze the organisation and its current practices. What is also implied however, is that by refreezing, not only does it ensure that the change remains, but the process is back to a state of equilibrium. This is a very hopeful viewpoint, if somewhat unrealistic. It is recognised that no

organisation can afford to consider it has implemented change and can then maintain status quo. In a dynamic globalised market, no organisation will survive with this outlook.

Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) argue that the ambiguity and lack of clarity that many organisations strive so hard to overcome, is not only useful, but essential in terms of organisational change and development of knowledge. "...new knowledge is born out of chaos" (Nonaka et al., 1995: 14). Others have also considered that perhaps our quest for control of change is a futile effort and that we instead should be encouraging individuals to embrace opportunities for creativity that is born out of this chaos (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Stacey, 2003; Wheatley, 1992). Eisenhardt & Brown (1998) suggest that the use of a chaos model and complexity theory may assist; identifying a point known as the edge of chaos where organisations become able to adapt within a short space of time. At this point, the organisation has sufficient structure to ensure people and processes are held together, yet enough flexibility to allow for innovation and adaptation as the need arises.

It would be tempting to decide that there is little that can be done in terms of organisational change, and planning for its implementation if this is the case. On the contrary, there is a great deal that can be done to plan for change, and to assist individuals in the transition. Conner (1993) proposes that many view change as something mysterious, lacking structure or a predictable sequence, and that time and energy is wasted being confused by common reactions to transitions. Further, that effectiveness could be increased if change is viewed as a manageable process, and structures and outcomes are established that can be anticipated.

In addition to considering the type of change required, it is also important to consider the drivers of the change. Robbins et al (2001) have gone so far as to categorise the forces for change as falling into a number of categories: changing nature of the workforce, technology, economic shocks, competition, social trends or world politics. One could assume that depending on the severity and impact of this force for change, there would then be a decision made as to the nature and extent of the required change – whether it is to organisational systems, processes, structures, or a mix of these.

In addition to considering the type of change and reason for change, there is a final consideration. The role which employees within the organisation will play in the change process, is also considered a key element for success. Jick (cited in Mento et al., 2002) suggested the existence of three key roles in a change process; strategists, implementers and recipients. The strategists are responsible for creating a vision of change, a strategy for change, and identifying those to lead the change effort. The implementers have the responsibility for ensuring the change occurs, and facilitating the process. Finally the recipients are those whom the change will affect and will need to adapt to the change. It would seem that in all these key roles, there are important considerations, and that allowances for individual change and its development is essential. In organisations where change competences exist, there is middle ground where change can be planned for, and yet individuals are given sufficient freedom to unlearn old ways and adapt to the changes being implemented. For this to occur, adult learning principles and particularly the concept of unlearning must be further understood.

## **LEARNING AND UNLEARNING**

A change in practice or procedure requires those within the organisation, to behave differently for the change to be sustained, whether they are defined as the change strategist, implementer or recipient. In order to do this, it means relinquishing old ways prior to, or at least at the same time as, learning the new. Unlearning is a concept mentioned in passing by a number of writers in a number of different ways (Hedberg, 1981; Magrath, 1997; Mariotti, 1999; Soroohan & Petrini, 1994). There are only a few who have provided some research regarding unlearning.

Hedberg (1981) suggests that new knowledge simply replaces old knowledge as an individual learns more. It is also reinforced that this process is not the same as forgetting where information is lost regardless of its usefulness. Hedberg (1981) sees the two processes as happening simultaneously proposing that knowledge both increases and becomes obsolete, or is discarded as the situation changes. This discarding activity often referred to as unlearning is seen to be as crucial as gaining new knowledge, and the lack of ability to engage in unlearning is reported as a “crucial weakness of many organizations.” (Hedberg, 1981: 3) However Klein (cited in Delahaye, 2000) put forward a parenthetic model of unlearning suggesting that the old knowledge is not erased, but maintained (in

parentheses as it were) for situations where an individual believes the new knowledge does not apply. As Delahaye (2000) correctly points out, even though this theory may seem to fit our experiences a little more comfortably, it does not consider sufficiently the effect of Thorndike's Law of Exercise (cited in Delahaye, 2000); if we do not use or exercise knowledge for some time it may be lost.

This concept of unlearning on the whole however, is relatively new in the area of adult learning. Markoczy (1994) speculates that there may be a number of different reasons to account for underlying resistance toward unlearning and relearning, including a cautiousness on behalf of managers to give up well-tried practices and the security found in unchanged routines, or because they gained their authority whilst holding this particular belief system. From a different perspective, it is also suggested that resistance encountered in unlearning and relearning could be explained as simply related to limited capacity to cope with the change (Markoczy, 1994). This in itself is an interesting perspective noting that middle managers (often considered to play the role of implementer) can often be the ones most likely to resist unlearning of old ways and show an unwillingness to embrace change. Many times it is the employees in general (or change recipients), accused of unwillingness or inability to unlearn, who readily accept change.

The concept of unlearning and the discussion so far, has failed to recognise the different nature of "knowledge" itself. Many writers in the area (Durrance, 1998; Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002; Nonaka et al., 1995; Roy & Roy, 2002) have identified the difference between explicit and tacit knowledge, both at the individual and organisational levels. Explicit knowledge refers to easily expressed and easily documented knowledge or information. Therefore, this type of knowledge is generally found in organisational procedures and processes. Tacit (or implicit) knowledge, on the other hand, relates to information not easily explained or documented, and is often referred to as know-how. Importantly, it is this tacit knowledge which often makes the difference between an average and an excellent employee – not necessarily what they do, but how they do it. Newell et al (2002) suggest there are a number of reasons why this tacit knowledge is not easily explained or documented; it may be difficult to explain or document, there may be uncertainty as to whether it is correct in all circumstances, it may be so dynamic that it changes almost as soon as it is documented, it

may be context-dependent and therefore rely on the individual to assess the surrounding circumstances, it may be too costly to worry about documenting, or there may be political reasons not to document or widely share such knowledge.

When considering individual unlearning and organisational change, tacit or implicit knowledge must be more difficult to unlearn than explicit knowledge, as the latter is easier to articulate and to identify. In the case of tacit knowledge, it must first be acknowledged that the knowledge is being applied before it can be questioned or changed.

## **LEARNING AND UNLEARNING AS PART OF THE CHANGE PROCESS**

Little information currently exists on individual change in organizations as most approaches to managing change take a macro or group approach (French & Delahaye, 1996). It would seem that whilst there has been a great deal of research done on organisational change, and on adult learning, there is now a need to draw these two concepts together and understand the interrelationships. But even deeper than this, are the issues of allowing for individual learning and importantly unlearning in the process of organisational change. Many organisations need to give more consideration to this issue, which can often have far-reaching implications for successful implementation of change. Often it is the case that those changes requiring a great deal of unlearning require time to question paradigms and long-held assumptions. As Anderson & Boocock (2002) explain, “Some learning may make very little difference to the perspective of the individual whereas more significant learning may lead to a reconceptualisation of his/her underpinning assumptions and values” (Anderson et al., 2002: 8). It is this reconceptualisation which often must occur before change within an individual (and following from this, an organisation) can be sustainable. Some writers (Lewin, cited in Thornhill et al 2000) in the area of organisational change have indirectly considered unlearning when they advocate time for unfreezing an organisation or when they include steps in the change process to allow for letting go (Hayes, 2002). However, usually in these contexts, they are still referring to the organisation as a whole rather than the individuals within the organisation. So, at the same time as considering these issues, it is also worth questioning whether change is the same in all organisations, whether they are regionally-based or not.

## **LESSONS IN CHANGE AND UNLEARNING IN REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

The following examples serve to highlight key considerations for regionally-based organisations, believed to be additional to those generic considerations mentioned previously. These examples originate from in-depth exploratory case studies conducted within organisations in a variety of regional industries, where the researcher was a participant observer. The data collection involved a series of interviews, focus groups and observation in the work environment. The aim of this research was the observation and analysis of various change initiatives within the chosen organisations, and the extent to which these organisations allowed for individual learning and unlearning. Exploratory case studies such as these allow for the generation of hypotheses on a particular phenomenon which can then be used as the basis for further research (Yin, 1994).

### ***Lesson 1. Do Not Assume Organisational Assimilation***

The first case comes from a regionally-based not-for-profit welfare organisation with a lengthy history. The organisation came from a background of individual agencies based in regional and remote locations, having been amalgamated. The organisation was struggling with lack of cohesion and complaints about management style, and was seeking assistance to facilitate organisational culture change. What the management (and change strategists) in this case failed to recognise in their planning of changes, was the fact that most middle managers and employees in their organisation based in rural and remote locations identified firstly with their community and secondly with the central organisation. They believed that first and foremost, their role was to advocate for their community and therefore when organisational policies or procedures hindered this effort, they would not take an organisational standpoint. The staff were struggling with unlearning old ways of dealing with issues in relation to their areas of responsibility. In this case it was clear that unless the organisation first dealt with assimilation issues, and gave their change recipients a sense of belonging in the organisation, their change efforts were doomed for failure.

### ***Lesson 2. Culture Change Needs To Consider All Stakeholders***

Consider the coal mining organisation embarking on a performance management system implementation process following a number of months of protracted strikes by a highly unionised workforce. The organisation itself was owned by a large multi-national, and the operation is based in



a small regional town with a population of approximately 8000, most of whom are connected with coal mining operations and related support services.

The rationale behind the introduction of a performance management system linked to incentives was to address cultural issues relating to a lack of emphasis on individual rather than combined performance and outputs. The senior management team saw performance management as a tool to assist in changing organisational culture; in encouraging supervisors to interact with employees and vice versa; in encouraging employees at all levels to discuss performance and importantly to strive to improve performance. They saw performance management as a vehicle for more widespread cultural change. What they also had to recognise however, was the consideration of a background of mistrust and community concern due to the preceding strikes and the impact this would have on the change process. In this case, the change recipients were not just the employees, but also their families and the community at large, as is often the case in smaller towns.

They spent a large amount of time and effort in explaining why a performance management system was a useful tool for managers, supervisors and employees alike, and a large amount of funds and energy in involving large sections of the workforce in the design of the system. They used the opportunity to provide training and facilitation which importantly addressed “old ways” and why they were no longer appropriate in their organisation. The payoffs to this organisation were substantial not only in terms of productivity but also in terms of relationships within the organisation, and the “culture” as a spinoff. This organisation saw the link between allowing individuals the important step of unlearning old ways prior to (and alongside) the implementation of the new system. It took time and effort but proved to be worth the effort for the sustainability of their organisation.

### ***Lesson 3. Allow Room for Individual Identity in The Process***

There is also need for consideration of individual identity in a process of change. One large mining organisation with multiple sites in regional areas embarked on a process of implementation of a performance feedback and employee development system. Unlike the previous example, the emphasis of this system was on development of the individual employee and was not in any way linked to extrinsic incentives. Again, the multiple sites were located predominantly in regional locations with

small communities from which the organisation drew its employees. The new system however was project managed and driven from a corporate level in a capital city. It became clear that the different sites believed they had individual needs and were extremely reluctant to embrace the change unless they could be assured that their individual needs were considered and they could shape the system being implemented to suit their particular culture and circumstances. In this case, some of the learning needed to take place at strategist level – to recognise that externally enforced systems which appeared to treat all sites equally was never going to be accepted and embraced by those taking on the role of change implementer.

#### ***Lesson 4. Consider The History Of The Industry***

Finally, it is no accident that the industries used as examples have a long history in Australia. Generations of Australians have now been involved in these industries. What these examples serve to illustrate is that particularly where a great deal of the knowledge within the individuals is tacit knowledge and therefore not easily accessed, and as a result, not easily changed, it is imperative that “unlearning” is considered in the context of introducing any change. In other words, what is being considered to assist or encourage individuals within an organisation (or indeed an entire industry) to remove past practices in favour of new practices? What reinforcement is given to those who choose to “unlearn” as opposed to those who do not? Reinforcement may well be a vital step in this unlearning process.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Three issues were identified in this paper. Firstly, that managers and those driving change often do not understand reasons for change and the role they play within this change. Secondly, individual ability and readiness to learn and unlearn needs to be considered when implementing any change. Finally, regionally-based organisations appear to present additional challenges when implementing change and expecting individual learning, development and unlearning. It appears that there is a great deal more to be understood in the area of unlearning, particularly in relation to its role in organisational change, and whether regionally-based organisations present change management issues in addition to those identified in this paper. Whilst unlearning is a concept being more widely discussed, there have been few studies focussing on how individuals unlearn and how to assist this process in order to facilitate

organisational change. Recognition is given to the need for more empirical research into the impact of unlearning ability on the implementation and acceptance of organisational change. Until such time as this is given consideration, those planning and implementing change will continue to insist on adoption of new ways without giving sufficient consideration to letting go of the old.

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