

New Research on Effecting Change in the Organization

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. — Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist

This quote is equally true in business. The difficulty, however, is in knowing how closely to integrate your change team with your organization to achieve change that works.

While successful change should always be tied to an organization's business strategy, researchers Paivi Lehtonen and Miia Martinsuo of the Helsinki University of Technology wondered about the most effective route to change. Should change programs and projects be closely aligned to the parent organization so that they will be more easily accepted and implemented? Or will this hamper the change team's freedom to effect radical change?

To find out, Lehtonen and Martinsuo studied two major organizational change programs to identify the different ways in which they were integrated into their parent organizations and the different management practices that kept them distinct from these organizations—referred to as boundary-management practices. Their research involved almost two dozen interviews with senior program staff and executives at a public-sector and a private-sector organization.

They discovered that while both organizations used similar integration mechanisms, they differed in their levels of integration. For example, both used boundary-management activities such as information scouting, boundary shaping, and ambassadorial and protecting activities, but they used them to different effect.

Information scouting involves active entry into the parent organization to gather as much information as possible relevant to the change program. This could involve pre-design workshops to understand current practice satisfaction surveys or requests for suggestions for improvement.

Boundary shaping involves choosing areas in which to involve and integrate the parent organization. For example, deciding which parts of a change program will use leaders from the line and which will be the responsibility of the project team. Or deciding when to use planning tools commonly used in the parent organization and when to use project-specific tools.

Ambassadorial and protecting activities are partly in tension. Ambassadorial activities promote the change initiative and its benefits to key stakeholders including sponsors, line managers and the proposed end users. Protecting activities keep the program safe from the parent organization's or stakeholders' premature criticism and attack. For example, the projects may

decide to release new ideas and concepts only when they are sufficiently developed and when they will be best received by the parent organization.

The researchers found there are three types of activities required to effectively integrate a change program into the parent organization:

- A. Integration activities: These bind the change program and its constituent projects into the parent organization. These activities relate to formal, higher-lever decisions about organizing and managing the organization's connections. The researchers observed four integration mechanisms:
 - 1. Organizational structures and formal control mechanisms. For example, steering groups, management groups and reporting procedures.
 - 2. Human resources mechanisms: strategic decisions related to recruitment, location and work-time.
 - 3. Establishment of links between the program's goals and content and the organization's strategic goals, business processes, supportive functions, daily activities, and other projects. This provides requirements and channels for communication and collaboration.
 - 4. Implementation of the same methods and procedures used in the wider organization. For example, using organizational project-management models as well as existing planning tools, document templates and communication channels.
- B. Boundary-management activities: These define and protect the change program's distinct existence and autonomy. These activities include creating legitimacy via ambassadorial activities, defining responsibilities and collaborations, information scouting and negotiating, ensuring continuity, and guarding and isolating the program from external disturbances.
- C. Isolation activities: These go further than boundary- management activities and assert the change program's separateness from the parent organization. These necessary activities co-exist with, and complement, integration. They prevent program-related issues from getting out of the program, and block external influences from disrupting the program.

"Learning to use such activities skillfully is a key requirement for change-program managers," says Lehtonen. "For example, change-program managers who are skilled at using isolative

activities can protect the emerging program and reserve time for building momentum and readiness for change.”

The researchers also found three distinct contextual factors that can affect integration and boundary-management activities:

1. factors related to the organization’s unique characteristics,
2. factors stemming from the nature of the change programs, and
3. individual-level factors based on the characteristics of a program’s key actors.

The secret to implementing a change program successfully, say the researchers, involves understanding how and when to use integration mechanisms, and how far to exploit integration dynamics, boundary management and isolation. Their research results suggest that integration should not only be examined from the change program’s viewpoint, but is also something that the parent organization may enable or prohibit.

While the researchers don’t give a definitive answer on how integrated a change program should be, they do feel their research raises issues that executives and program managers should consider as they think about the challenges of integrating or isolating their change program.

SOURCE:

Lehtonen, P. and Martinsuo, M. “Integrating the change program with the parent organization”, *International Journal of Project Management* 27:2, Feb 2009, pp. 154-165.

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PMPerspectives.org is a website which connects project managers and sponsors with project management researchers. Our mission is to understand and improve project management practices. The research team comprises Dr. Blaize Horner Reich and Dr. Andrew Gemino from Simon Fraser University, Canada and Dr. Chris Sauer from Oxford University, UK.

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