PLANNING DEEP CHANGE THROUGH A SERIES OF SMALL WINS

HANS VERMAAK
Twystra Group / Sioo
Stadhouderskade 147 hs, 1074 BB Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This paper argues that planning is anything but an innocuous support activity for change efforts, especially when tough issues are at stake: it can either frustrate or enable the depth of change required to succesfully address such issues.

ADRESSING COMPLEXITY WITH ACTION RESEARCH

I define 'tough issues' as complex challenges that often persist in organizations despite repeated efforts to fix them. Their complexity is multifaceted: not only is their content ambiguous and multidimensional, but also they require the involvement of many actors with different interests, viewpoints and affiliations. The history of failed efforts refers to a 'competency trap' (Levitt & March, 1988) of habitual ways of acting and thinking that are unsuitable for tackling the issues effectively, and to institutional mechanisms that keep dysfunctional practices in place. Such histories may invoke a sense of powerlessness amongst those involved. This is reflected in Rittel & Webber's (1973) labeling them as 'wicked problems'. Because complexity is often greatest at the heart of primary processes where organizations add real value, however, these issues are especially relevant to the outside world and are also capable of triggering workers' pride and passion. This framing has prompted Kunneman (2005) to refer to them as 'slow questions,' because taking the time to 'get it right' when issues matter is a reward in and of itself that should be savored as the effort adds meaning to life. The persistence of such issues calls for change that is not 'more of the same,' while the complexity of such issues calls for more than standard recipes. Both imply that first-order change – using existing rules and procedures fitting dominant mental frames to deal with well-understood issues – will not suffice. People need to go the extra mile as the issues require higher order change where new ideas and new repertoires are actively sought to address the issues more effectively; contrasting realities are used to fuel innovation; and playfulness is sought out in the face of complexity (e.g. Engeström (2004).

The paper is based on six years of action research on change dynamics in the Dutch diplomatic arena and focuses specifically on tough issues, the success of which were always ambiguous, for example dispensing foreign aid to reduce poverty (Vermaak, 2009). In 2003, I was asked to lead a change initiative to assist the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to increase its external impact, to build its capacity to do so sustainably, and also to create knowledge about how such innovation works. To this effect change efforts, professionalizing initiatives and academic research were intertwined over a period of six years. All three were highly participative processes that involved hundreds of people directly and indirectly touched many more. Most activities took place in the context of multi-year engagements with Dutch foreign embassies located in developing countries; other activities involved communities across organizational divisions. This paper focuses on the planning aspects of this complex change endeavor. In this abbreviated version of the paper I summarize some of the main ideas at the expense of case illustrations and an elaboration of the research method.

HOW PLANNING FRUSTRATES DEEP CHANGE

Planning is generally associated with an engineering mindset: a blueprint that is designed once before embarking on a change and is adhered to during implementation; a linear, episodic and goal oriented plan created by a few to effect the many. We have found that such plans do little good when dealing with tough issues. This is because clarity about what works best comes from addressing each issue individually rather than from studying generalities beforehand. Trying to pin down ambiguous traits can lead to singling out arbitrary aspects at the expense of others that may be more relevant. This not only adds fuel to already heated debates, but also runs the risk of reductionism resulting in a focus on 'parochial issues' (Morgan, 1986). Studying the issue preceding planning offers little because on its own, it only leads to more study: a condition known as 'analysis paralysis'. As each layer is peeled back more complexity is revealed. Yet if action is not taken, much remains hidden. We have found that such paralysis often breeds impatience, and that this tempts those involved to forego problem definition and analysis altogether and, instead, to create ambitious plans that offer temporary reassurances rather than true innovation. Hirschhorn talks about the lure of 'magical solutions' which increases when solutions are presented as 'state of the art', backed by opinion leaders and accompanied by technocratic bells and whistles. In its most extreme form this leads to copying N-step guides from other organizations or management fashions. In the consultancy sector, this 'initiative-itis' (Hendry, 1996) is jokingly referred to as the 'our product is your problem' approach. Such plans however lose sight of the unique complexity of tough issues: poverty reduction or conflict resolution in Yemen turns out to be quite a different challenge than in Kenya. Rivkin (2000) refers to this as an imitation barrier to complex change strategies. When obstacles (or opportunities) emerge during implementation, this is not welcomed because they point to the plan's shortcomings, requiring that analysis and planning be redone. Rather than being recognized as a gateway for learning, obstacles are seen as a disruption of an efficiently planned linear process. This can also lead to a reflex to trivialize real life experiences, further thwarting efforts to address issue complexity. Perhaps this is why 'best practices', once made public, rarely seem to achieve performance results comparable to when first developed. As our research demonstrates: there is no algorithm for complex change, no blue print for exploration, no institutionalized form for expansive learning: such ways of thinking are not only irrelevant, but destructive as well (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999).

HOW PLANNING ENABLES DEEP CHANGE

Higher order change does not make planning superfluous; there is still a need to make explicit choices and to structure activities. Rather than a one-off exercise to create a plan that reduces complexity and needs to be adhered to, planning should be understood as an ongoing effort that allows for those involved to opportunistically take up any ideas, experiences, contributions and sponsoring on the spot when they are deemed to assist participants to address the complex problem at hand (Brunsson, 2007). Analyzing, design and implementation are combined to become an iterative and emergent process concurrently co-produced in multiple local contexts. Key to the process is working with 'small wins', which Orlikowski (1996) defines as "continuous changes in the form of situated micro-level changes that actors enact as they make sense of and act in the world." Small wins allow people to entertain large questions in small incremental steps.

Each step offers a controllable opportunity that produces visible results. These steps are a mix of exploitation, exploration and learning: a process of figuring out a concrete issue experimentally without simplifying it. It is hard to experiment with a tough issue when it remains abstract and massive. We observed that concrete obstacles encountered in individual embassies that at first did not stand out as significant, later turned out to represent one 'face' of a tough issue that regularly reappeared at many embassies. What seemed somewhat unimportant regularly proved to be a systemic manifestation of an issue's underlying complexity, presenting a door for further investigation. With this incremental approach, participants not only learn to expect to run into trouble, they also come to appreciate finding out about it sooner rather than later. They search for obstacles, knowing that adversity is part of deep change and may fuel rather than disrupt it.

Engeström (2004) refers to such concrete situations as 'microcosms'. An example would be the cultural misunderstandings, language barriers or power differences between expatriate and local staff within an embassy that mirror the complexity of their diplomatic endeavors within the host country. We found such microcosms a very powerful instrument to directly experience and address complexity in small incremental steps. They are available everywhere, all the time and to everyone. Grasping the complexity and innovative ways of addressing large questions such as safe neighborhoods, good education or high quality health care come within reach when approached via such microcosms. These microcosms are found in meaningful moments or critical events. Closely examining the rich details of such events brings underlying patterns to the surface. The small-scale of microcosms also limits the extent to which a lack of experience blocks further innovation. People can experiment in step with their change capacity.

A counterargument to working with small incremental steps is that what is gained in depth of change seems to be lost in terms of the grandeur of change. However, small changes can and do combine into substantial change over time. One small win will spark others; such wins can be created at the same time in many parallel experiments and likeminded colleagues will be collectively inspired to start their own similar change. In all three ways small wins become the building blocks for spreading change: the wins may be small, but they are deep and many. Such an infectious approach to change makes it robust and, once underway, there is no easy way to stop it (e.g. Reay et al, 2006). Hoverstadt (2004) refers to such subtle interchange between emergent planning and deep change as 'planned organic change'.

TENSION BETWEEN SIZE AND DEPTH OF CHANGE

The research sheds some light on a recurring confusion in organizational change practice and theory in which ambitious change sometimes gets equated with the size of change (the whole organization changes) and sometimes to the depth of change (we are now doing things fundamentally different). I argue that these two contrasting meanings do not go together (figure 1) More provocatively, I suggest there is no such thing as large-scale deep change, nor has there ever been, nor does there need to be.

When a change objective can be addressed effectively with approaches already familiar to people (a first-order change), there is no reason to keep it slow or small. The restructuring of organizations is a good example. Many have gone through more than one during their work life and the process is generally predictable and has proven sufficiently effective. First-order changes

are also viable for parallel small-scale initiatives, but it seems a bit of a waste when it is also possible to role it out over the whole organization in a standardized way. In contrast, ambitious change can also refer to the depth of change: to organize a small-scale third-order change. This makes sense when addressing tough issues requires challenging existing cultures, dominant rationalities and habitual practices. Our findings emphasize the desirability of a small wins approach. By 'keeping it small,' it is also easier to avoid institutional pressures to conform, freeing up time and energy to explore innovative approaches that are often seen as controversial. It thus makes more sense to decenter such 'small-scale controversies' away from prying eyes.

One large coherent change process — Macro, global, distant, planned, consistent throughout the organization, goal oriented, clear beginning and end, short term

Impossible

Desirable

Size

Possible

Many small seeds of change — Micro, local, close, self-organizing, parallel seeds of change within networks, incremental, exploratory, contagious, long term

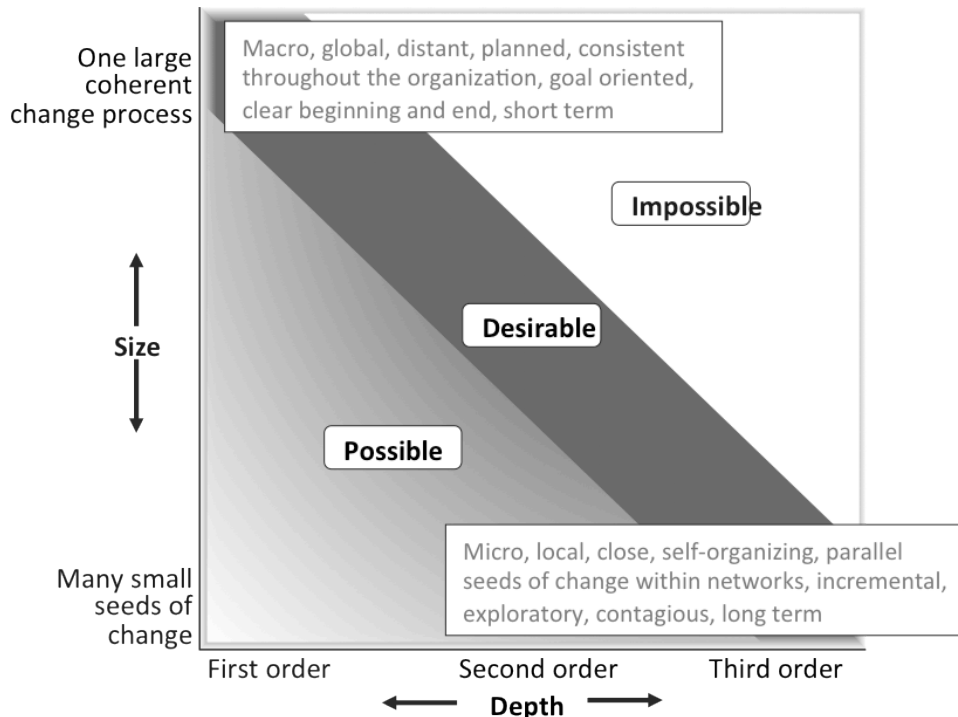First order Second order Third order

Depth

Figure 1. Size and depth of change are at odds with each other

A constructive way to handle the tension between size and depth of change is by making use of the contagiousness of successful small-scale innovations. As 'positive deviants' (Warren, 2003) share their successes with colleagues, new ideas spread to others ready to initiate their own deviated approach, thereby becoming second-order interventions. Within a few years of initiating our first change initiatives, the positive experiences within the three first embassies gave rise to many more embassies initiating there own change processes with or without our involvement. In this, we see how the size of the change can organically grow as experience aggregates and ideas become less controversial. As long as the spreading of innovation is not so fast as to erode quality or lead to backlash from non-adopters, small-scale change can be a prelude to larger changes (McGrath & Krackhard, 2003). Eventually, when the innovative ideas and practices are no longer controversial, the change can be formally adopted and institutionalized; it then becomes a first-order change that even late adopters will have to abide by (Reay et al.,2006).

In contrast, a destructive way of handling the tension between size and depth of change is to falsify change history. Such falsifications are common because organizational memory is biased

towards formal changes, such as when management rubber-stamps an innovation after it has been successfully developed under the radar and spread organically to like-minded actors. In such instances, changes are remembered as being brought about by management creating a deep cultural shift in one fell swoop. Such misinterpretations are destructive because when a need for deep change arises in the future, people may not only mistakenly assume change is only possible by way of a large-scale effort directed by a charismatic leader, they may also have lost sight of the change dynamics that actually created the previous successes (Weick & Quinn, 1999). As such, we argue there is great value in organizations learning from and about their own change histories.

CONCLUSION

Our research shows that planning is not merely an innocuous support activity for change efforts; it is also an object of the change effort itself and prevailing ideas about planning need to be revisited. The findings further suggest that the complexity of issues needs to be matched by a similar complexity of change: when tough issues are at stake, the planning of change needs to be a subtle and even playful affair. The way change is planned can both enable and frustrate deep change. Whereas the first allows change agents to understand, support and initiate more effective ways to plan change, the second allows change agents to understand, abstain and problematize dysfunctional routines. As negative experiences can easily overshadow positive ones, deep change requires both problematizing that which hinders change as much as reinforcing that which facilitates it (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

A final comment: I have found it deeply encouraging as a practitioner and researcher to deconstruct my lingering beliefs that small incremental steps might not suffice to bring about deep change. I have learned to see and appreciate that small, sustained efforts can create miracles and that microcosms can become sites of transformation. By focusing on small scale situations and contexts where tough issues are found, fertile questions arise and greater value is added in the outside world. This process remains transient and never permanent: such is the nature of third-order change. But this does not make it less real, less inspiring or less powerful.

REFERENCES

Amabile, T. & S. Kramer (2011). *The progress principle. Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement and creativity at work.* Boston: Harvard Business Review Press

Brunsson, N. (2007). *The Consequences of decision-making*. Oxford: Oxford University Press**.**

Cartwright, T.J. (1987). The lost art of planning, *Long Range Planning*, 20, 92-99.

Crossan, M.M., H.W. Lane, R.E. White (1999). An organizational learning framework: form intuition to institution. *Academy of Management*, 24, 3, p. 522-537

Engeström, Y. (2004). *Learning by expanding: An activity – theoretical approach to developmental research*. http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/toc.htm

Hendry, C. (1996). Understanding and creating whole organizational change through learning theory. *Human Relations*, 49, 621-641.

Hoverstadt, P. (2004). Mosaic transformation in organisations. *Journal of Organisational*

Transformation and Social Change, 1(2-3), 163-177.

Kunneman, H. (2005). *Voorbij het dikke-ik. Bouwstenen voor een kritisch humanisme* [Beyond the thick-I. Grounds for a critical humanism]. Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press.

Levitt, B. & J.G. March (1988). Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, 319-340.

McGrath, C. & D. Krackhardt (2003). Network conditions for organizational change. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 39(3), 324-336.

Morgan, G. (1986). *Images of organizations*, Beverley Hills: Sage Publications.

Orlikowski, W.J. (1996). Improvising organizational transformation over time: a situated change perspective, *Information Systems Research*, 7, 63-92.

Reay, T., K. Golden-Biddle & K. Germann. (2006). Legitimizing a new role: small wins and microprocesses fo change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49 (5), 977-998

Rittel, H.W.J. & Webber, M.M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155-169.

Rivkin, J.W. (2000). Imitation of complex strategies. *Management Science*, 46(6), 824-844.

Vermaak, H. (2009). *Plezier beleven aan taaie vraagstukken: Werkingsmechanismen van vernieuwing en weerbarstigheid* [Enjoying tough issues: Dynamics of innovation and stagnation]. Deventer, Netherlands: Kluwer.

Warren, W.E. (2003). Constructive and destructive deviance in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(4), 622-632.

Weick, K.E. & R.E. Quinn (1999). Organizational change and development, *Annual Review Psychology, 50*, 361-386.