



Large-scale transitional procurement change in the aerospace industry

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Abstract

The importance of a socialised perspective when involved in a change programme is demonstrated through an empirical study of large-scale purchasing transition in an aerospace company. Alternative change management frameworks are employed to assist in the sense making of intended actions and realised outcomes to re-configure purchasing activities. Sequential stepwise frameworks are critiqued showing the context-driven political and social factors that impinged on the implementation of a planned change strategy. The findings illustrate the complexity of change, and conclude by highlighting the importance of synthesising shifting contexts with action.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the small number of studies of large-scale transitional change in purchasing and supply that go beyond the hegemony of rational change ‘management’. Conversely, there are many accounts of ‘recipe’-style programmes of transition neatly broken down into structured linear steps. Such clinical accounts share a common view about how the purchasing field has evolved in the Western world in that an intensified change mantra must be addressed by performing planned strategies in a sequential fashion (for examples, see Pooler and Pooler, 1997; Smeltzer, 1998; Laaper, 1999; Humphreys et al., 2000; Kearney, 2002; Anderson and Woolley, 2002; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2002). There is a resulting paucity of theoretical and empirical material in purchasing that shows the temporal and contextual character of transitional change programmes, an approach that is not

directed at the development of illusory grand theories of change (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 270).

According to Pettigrew (1990, p. 269), an under-socialised, a historical view of change has also been apparent in the wider field of management and organisation studies (for examples, see Peters, 1987; Leigh, 1988; Handy, 1989; Gray and Smeltzer, 1990). Typically, a ‘battle cry’ is made for a revolution in the world of current practice by adopting flexible work processes that engender participation, creativity and responsiveness to market requirements. This ‘scientific’ approach can be contrasted with insights (see Knights and Willmott, 2000), which argue that ‘change’ couched in numerous management nostrums may be levers for augmenting managerial control.

Other perspectives on change such as Kanter (1985) highlight the role of leadership in change. According to Kanter (1990, pp. 359–365), seven key managerial skills can be adopted: an ability to achieve results without relying on organisational status; the ability to be self-confident and humble; maintaining high ethical standards; attaining sustainable competitiveness; gaining

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satisfaction from holistic results rather than just financial targets; to be able to work across functions to find synergies; and the need to be aware of the process, as well as the outcomes of change.

However, the prime necessity for change and so-called ‘*n*’ step processes (Collins, 1998) has been questioned for being undersocialised and poorly context aware (Burnes, 1996). Whilst there are numerous models of change available for structuring the process of organisational change (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Greiner, 1972; Doz and Prahalad, 1987), few adopt a level of sophistication beyond that of Lewin (1951). According to Dawson (1994), the common flaw across models based on Lewin (1951) is that they do not share a definition of change as a complex and dynamic process which should not be wholly solidified.

This paper will relay the findings from a longitudinal company study of the aerospace industrial sector (the company will be referred to under the pseudonym Keele Aero). The data will show change as a complex, multi-factor phenomena. It will show how managers responded to the issues that developed from implementing a strategy that, after observation in context, was a complex mix of planned and emergent action. The large-scale transitions at Keele Aero relate to a fundamental change in the organisation and control of working practices in the purchasing function of the firm.

In undertaking such a large re-examination of purchasing organisation, staff at Keele Aero adapted a framework for temporal sense making based on Kotter (1996). Although critiqued as an ‘*n*’ step model, it provided a communications medium and insight into how the operation of new practices and procedures were introduced. Rather than being used as a ‘recipe’, the eight stages of Kotter’s framework acted as a retrospective temporal marker for engendering reflexivity about a complex, non-linear and ‘black box’ process (Dawson, 1994, p. 37).

This paper will conclude by arguing that ‘*n*’ step theories (or ideologies of management) for change give the illusion that transition is a straightforward, ‘painless’ project management process that can be negotiated without recourse to reflexive evaluation (Collins, 1998). We show that being reflexive about transitions in procurement can assist the practitioner in navigating emergent change episodes that may seem counter-productive to the initial planned trajectory of transformation.

2. Kotter’s framework and an ‘*n*’ step critique

John Kotter’s (1996) book, provocatively titled ‘Leading Change’, can be juxtaposed against theories of change as bottom-up processes. Kotter (1996) devotes the first chapter to a series of ‘problems’ that cause firms

to fail in their change efforts. He bases his opening gambit, and indeed the rest of the text, on his consulting and academic experience of directing change programmes of different magnitudes. He argues that a concerted effort at change can be assisted by following eight steps, with much of the text devoted to outlining the principal tasks involved in them (Fig. 1).

It is apparent that Kotter’s (1996) approach is very much top-down, with a central role played by leaders who are ready to ‘manage’ the process of transition. He adopts a project frame of reference using this as an underlying framework for navigating change from start to finish along the eight steps. He argues that the initiation of such programmes should be managerially incited, basing his approach on the concepts of managed and planned change (see Levy, 1986, p. 6). The distinguishing factor between these two concepts is the type of people to whom they refer. Planned change refers to the way in which internal and external experts can help the organisation cope with difficulties and plan and implement changes. Managed change usually refers to the way in which managers can plan and implement changes (Levy, 1986, p. 6).

Kotter (1996, pp. 35–49) outlines what he perceives to be the creation of what Dawson (2003, p. 25) terms critical junctures for change using the phrase ‘the creation of a sense of urgency’. This potentially disruptive means of creating situations for creativity and new thinking is what Levy (1986) would term

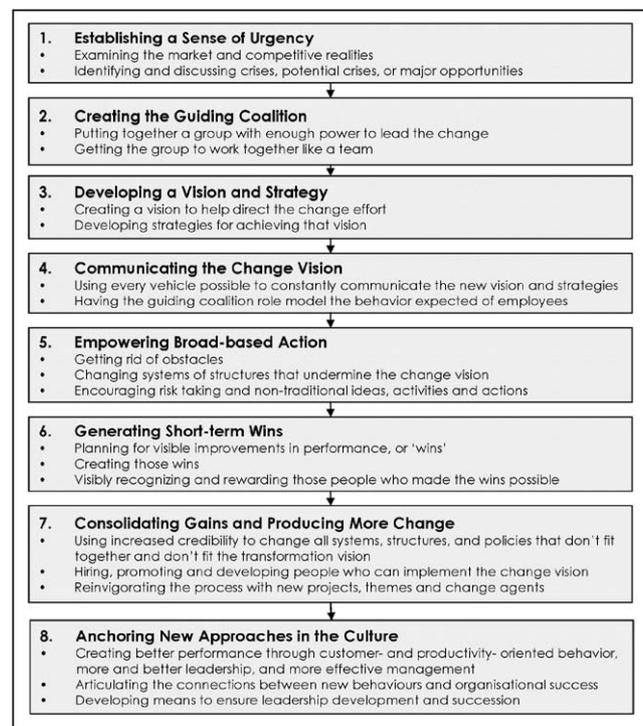


Fig. 1. Kotter’s eight-stage process of creating major change (Source: Kotter (1996, p. 21)).

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