



The effectiveness and specificity of change management in a public organization: Transformational leadership and a bureaucratic organizational structure



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ABSTRACT

There is an extensive private sector literature on organizational change management. However, recent studies have suggested that the specific context of public organizations may have consequences for the management organizational change. This study examines to what extent different change approaches and transformational leadership of direct supervisors contribute to the *effective* implementation of organizational change in public organizations, and to what extent the bureaucratic structure of public organizations makes the implementation of organizational change *specific*. The implementation of an organizational change in a Dutch public organization is studied using quantitative methods and techniques. The results indicate that bureaucratic organizations may effectively implement organizational change with both planned and emergent change approaches. The contribution of transformational leadership depends on the type of change approach and organizational structure. Transformational leadership behavior of direct supervisors contributes little to planned processes of change, but is crucial in emergent processes of change in a non-bureaucratic context. Although the literature on change management mostly emphasizes the leadership of senior managers, the leadership role of direct supervisors should not be overlooked during organizational change in public organizations.

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Introduction

There is an extensive private sector literature on organizational change management (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Burke, 2010; Self, Armenakis, & Schraeder, 2007). However, recent studies have questioned to what extent private sector change management techniques are applicable in a public sector context, and have suggested that the differences between the public and private sector could play a role (Boyne, 2006; Karp & Helgø, 2008; Kickert, 2013; Klarner, Probst, & Soparnot, 2008; Rusaw, 2007). Several authors have suggested that the specific context of public organizations may have consequences for the management organizational change (Burnes, 2009; Coram & Burnes, 2001; Isett, Glied, Sparer, & Brown, 2012; McNulty & Ferlie, 2004), but there is little empirical evidence concerning this issue. A recent literature review of research on change management in the public sector by Kuipers et al. (2013) found that most studies emphasize the content and context of change, instead of the implementation process. Moreover, Kuipers et al. conclude that many studies did not address the outcomes or success of a change intervention. Although there is substantial evidence that the implementation

of organization change often fails (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Burke, 2010; Burnes, 2011; Kotter, 1996), there is relatively little evidence about how organizational change can be effectively managed in the public sector (Fernandez & Pitts, 2007; Kickert, 2010).

This study aims to contribute to research on change management in public organizations by addressing the effectiveness and specificity of change management in public organizations. First, this study aims to identify what factors contribute to the *effective* implementation of organizational change in the public sector. As the implementation of organizational change ultimately depends on the support of employees (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007). The concept of employee willingness to change is used to assess the degree to which employees support the implementation of change (Metselaar, 1997). Following the emphasis on the role of leadership in the change management literature (e.g. Gill, 2002; Higgs & Rowland, 2005, 2010; Karp & Helgø, 2008; Kotter, 1996), this study examines to what extent leadership contributes to employee willingness to change in the public sector. Attention is focused on the transformational leadership behavior of direct supervisors. In addition, this study accounts for the effects of different change management approaches that are outlined in the literature on change management (Beer & Nohria, 2000; By, 2005). We refer to these approaches as planned and emergent change (cf. Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Burnes, 1996, 2004; Kickert, 2010).

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Secondly, this study aims to examine to what extent the specific nature of public organizations makes the implementation of organizational change *specific*. A detailed literature exists about the specific characteristics of the objectives, environment, organizational structure of public sector organizations and the characteristics of their employees (e.g. Allison, 1979; Boyne, 2002; Farnham & Horton, 1996; Rainey, 2003; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). In this study, attention is focused on the organizational structure. Public organizations typically operate under a strict legal framework and are confronted with high demands for accountability (Rainey, 2003). Because of this, public organizations tend to avoid risks by formalizing the operations and centralizing decision-making in the organization (Mintzberg, 1979). The organizational structure of public organizations is therefore generally said to be relatively bureaucratic (Boyne, 2002; Farnham & Horton, 1996). The organizational structure has traditionally been highlighted as a determinant of how organizations change (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1979). Moreover, Coram and Burnes (2001) and Isett et al. (2012) have argued that the bureaucratic organizational structure of public organizations may have a bearing on the management of change, but there is limited empirical evidence regarding this issue.

To summarize, the first objective of this study is to assess to what extent transformational leadership and different change management approaches contribute to willingness to change in a public organization. The second research objective is to examine to how these relationships are affected by bureaucratic organizational structure. The central research question is: *How is the effectiveness of transformational leadership behavior of direct supervisors in planned and emergent change affected by a bureaucratic organizational structure?*

In order to address the research objectives, the implementation of an organizational change in a Dutch public organization is analyzed using quantitative methods. In the next section, the literature concerning organizational change in the public sector is reviewed. Moreover, the relationships between leadership, processes of change and the organizational structure are discussed in order to formulate hypotheses. Methods, sample and measures provides an overview of the methods, sample and measures of this study. Results are presented in Analysis and Results, followed by a discussion of the results in Discussion, limitations, and implications for future research. In this section, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are also discussed. The main conclusions are given in Conclusion.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Organizational change in public organizations

Public organizations are often confronted with the need to implement organizational changes. However, the processes through which organizational change in public organizations come about have received relatively little attention in academic research (Kickert, 2010; Kuipers et al., 2013). A prominent line of research that focuses on organizational change in public organizations is the public management reform perspective (e.g. Boyne, Farrell, Law, Powell, & Walker, 2003; Kickert, 2007; Ongaro, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). This perspective focuses on “the deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better” (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, p. 8). However, the public management reform perspective is focused on the content and effects of organizational changes on the sector or national level (e.g. Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, & Walker, 2007; Heinrich, 2002; Pollitt, 2000), rather than on the implementation processes

in individual organizations. As a consequence, the reform perspective has contributed little to insights about how the implementation of organizational change in the public sector is managed.

Theory on the management of organizational change management has traditionally been based on private sector research, cases and examples (Stewart & Kringas, 2003; Thomas, 1996). Change management research has addressed the role of contextual factors during organizational change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Pettigrew, Ferlie, & McKee, 1992; Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001), but not the specific contextual characteristics of public organizations (Kuipers et al., 2013). In the past decade, the issue of change management in public organizations has received increased attention (Fernandez & Pitts, 2007; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Recent studies have focused on organizational changes in different types of public sector organizations, such as health care organizations (Chustz & Larson, 2006; Isett et al., 2012; Klarner et al., 2008; McNulty & Ferlie, 2004), local government organizations (Liguori, 2012; Seijts & Roberts, 2011; Zorn, Page, & Cheney, 2000) and central government organizations (Coram & Burnes, 2001; Ryan, Williams, Charles, & Waterhouse, 2008; Sminia & Van Nistelrooij, 2006; Stewart & Kringas, 2003; Stewart & O'Donnell, 2007).

Despite the increased attention for organizational change in public organizations, the literature has two considerable shortcomings. Based on a review of the literature on organizational change in public organizations between 2000 and 2010, Kuipers et al. (2013) state that most of the studies were based on case-based design using qualitative methods. Such studies often emphasize the importance of leadership during change in public organizations (Karp & Helgø, 2008; Klarner et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2008). Other than research conducted in the private sector (e.g. Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Higgs & Rowland, 2005, 2010; Liu, 2010), little research has studied the effects of leadership during change in public organizations (Fernandez & Pitts, 2007). A first shortcoming is thus that existing research has little attention for the *effectiveness* of leadership and different approaches to change. An exception is Hennessey (1998), who studied the influence of leadership competencies during the implementation of ‘reinventing government’ changes in the United States.

A second shortcoming concerns the lack of empirical evidence about the *specificity* of organizational change in the public sector. A central point of view in public management research is that private sector insights may not be applicable in public organizations (Boyne, 2006). There is a large literature on the specific characteristics of public organizations (e.g. Boyne, 2002; Rainey, 2003). In addition, many studies have suggested that the specific public sector context may influence organizational change (Isett et al., 2012; Klarner et al., 2008; McNulty & Ferlie, 2004). However, little research has empirically addressed the question what is specific or distinct about change in public organizations (exceptions are Kickert, 2013; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995). While many recent studies have studied change in public organizations, the distinctive characteristics of public organizations are generally not accounted for in the design or variables of these studies (e.g. Chustz & Larson, 2006; Isett et al., 2012; Klarner et al., 2008; Sminia & Van Nistelrooij, 2006; Tummers, Steijn, & Beckers, 2012). As such, there is little empirical evidence about what makes change management specific in public organizations.

In order to formulate hypotheses about the effectiveness of organizational change in public organizations, change management and leadership theory is reviewed subsequently. Then, the relations between change and a bureaucratic organizational structure are discussed in order to formulate hypotheses concerning the specificity of organizational change in public organizations.

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