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# A Case-Study into Change Influences within a Large British Multinational

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper evaluates how obvious the concepts of internal, external, planned and emergent change were within a UK based manufacturing company. It tracks multiple change programmes over several years across two company sites. The implementation of change programmes based upon common constructs as defined by management writers and consultants formed the foundation for the research. It is argued that an interpretation of the change process has to take into account multiple and varied forces and that specific influences do come into play. How these forces interact over time has a direct impact on perceived success. The intent of this paper is to reveal the underlying rationales that drove the change programmes, through an analysis of whether initiatives were internal, external, planned or emergent. Moreover, it identifies the principal influences upon organizational change for the case sites.*

**KEY WORDS:** Change, planned, emergent

## **Introduction**

As a research topic, organizational change offers fascinating insights into the way businesses actually function. The study of this topic can inform and educate both the practitioner and the active researcher. There does appear, however, to be considerable disagreement among both management authors and practitioners regarding the most appropriate method. This apparent conflict would account for many managers having doubts when considering which approach to use. The doubts are substantiated by clear examples of change projects regularly going wrong, such as those given by Cummings and Huse (1989) and Kanter *et al.* (1992). This research describes the perceived extent of internal, external, planned and emergent aspects of change within a large British multinational, applied to several different change

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initiatives. The objective being to identify the main influences upon change and the effect these interacting processes have over time. This research was carried out in conjunction with a large British multinational company. The company is a multi-site, blue chip, injection-moulding firm with an annual turnover of £50 million.

### **The literature**

In the change management literature, there is considerable disagreement regarding the most appropriate approach to changing organisations. Where commentators do agree, e.g. McCartney and Holbeche (2003); Hayes (2002); Iles & Sutherland (2001); Glynn and Holbeche (2001), is that the frequency of change is has increased to become a constant feature of organizational life. The disagreement accounts for managers having doubts about the validity and relevance of academic literature, and their confusion when considering formal approaches to adopt. The doubts are corroborated by management literature containing many accounts of change projects that fail, such as those given by Burnes (2004). From the literature, there appear to be two core modes of change management: planned and emergent. Planned change dominates the theory and practice of change management and it is based upon the work of Lewin (1951). This approach sees organizational change moving from one 'fixed state' to another through pre-planned steps. Another planned approach to organizational change is Lewin's (1958) 'Three-step model' which describes three learning stages of *freezing* – clinging to what one knows, *unfreezing* – exploring ideas, issues and approaches, and *refreezing* – identifying, utilizing and integrating values, attitudes and skills with those previously held and currently desired. This approach recognizes that, before any new behaviour can be adopted successfully, the old one has to be discarded. Only then can the new behaviour be fully accepted. Many writers have adopted similar approaches, for instance, Cummings and Huse (1989) developed an eight-phase model, and Bullock and Batten (1985) developed a four-phase model of planned change based on a review of over 30 models of change.

While planned change has many followers, it also has critics. Garvin (1994) argues that change cannot occur from one state to another in the disorderly business environment that is a reality. Hayes (2002) highlights situations where an organisation may need to change initially for so-called 'environmental' reasons but that it may not be obvious what to do. In such circumstances it may actually not be possible or desirable to define an end state for the change process. Bamford and Forrester (2003) suggest the planned approach is based upon an assumption that everyone within an organization agrees to work in one direction with no disagreement, this not always being the case. Within any group of individuals, differences of opinion on important matters will always exist.

A concept lacking the formal history of planned change is the 'emergent' approach. Its supporters appear more united in their stance against planned change than their agreement upon a specific alternative (Burnes, 2004). Dawson (1994) and Wilson (1992) both challenge the appropriateness of planned change within uncertain business environments. Wilson (1992) believes the planned approach, in laying down timetables, objectives and methods in advance, is too

heavily reliant upon the role of the manager. Dawson adopts a processual approach to change; this is less prescriptive and more analytical in nature. The approach is, in theory, better able to achieve an understanding of the key issues of managing change within complex environments. Organizational change is viewed as less dependent on detailed plans and projections than on reaching an actual understanding of the complexity of the issues involved and identifying the range of possible options. Dawson asserts that change must be linked to developments in markets, work organization, systems of management control and the shifting nature of organizational boundaries and relationships. He emphasizes that, in the present day business environment, one-dimensional change interventions are likely to generate short-term results and heighten instability rather than reduce it. A point also emphasized by others (Genus, 1998; Hartley *et al.*, 1997; Senior, 2002).

The emergent change argument assumes if organizations operate in stable and predictable environments, the need for change would be less and it might be possible to move from one stable state to another. Consequently, for the proponents of emergent change, the uncertainty of environmental factors makes planned change inappropriate and emergent change more pertinent. This point is emphasized by Strickland (1998), drawing on system theory to emphasize that organizations are separate from but connected to their environment. Strickland (1998, p. 76) raises a question which many who study organisational change do not acknowledge: 'to what extent does the environment drive changes within a system [i.e. organization] and to what extent is the system in control of its own change processes?' The environment, in organization terms, includes both internal and external influences.

An emphasis on 'bottom-up' *action* rather than 'top-down' *control* in starting organizational change is a major development of emergent change. The pace of change is so rapid and complex that once it occurs it is impossible for management to identify, plan and implement every action required. The responsibility for change is more devolved and it requires great changes in the roles played by management, who must change from being a controller to a facilitator. Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) believe there are no universal rules with regard to leading change; it involves linking action by people at all levels of the business.

The advocates of emergent change each offer a distinct view on how organizations should and should not manage change; others present more complete models of understanding change. Hinings and Greenwood's (1988) model of change dynamics, Kanter *et al.*'s (1992) 'Big Three' model of organizational change, Pettigrew's (1985) process/content/context model, and Burnes (2004) change management framework are all in this category

### **Research design**

Two broad questions were initially developed to guide the research: (i) what are the main influences in the implementation of change programmes?; (ii) what effect do these interacting processes exert over time? The first question served to identify key factors (internal and external) that influenced change within the organization. The second question was concerned with identifying and assessing

the effect the interacting processes had upon an organization, the managers and the change programmes themselves, over time. The questions sought to address issues related to organizational change and specifically to add to the knowledge base surrounding the concept of change and the issues pertaining to it.

The research was conducted across two sites within a high volume manufacturing organization. The parent Company of the case firm has an annual turnover in excess of £116 million, having manufacturing facilities in Asia, the USA and the UK. It acquired the UK subsidiary in the late 1950s. This subsidiary employs approximately 1000 people and its annual turnover is around £50 million. The UK subsidiary (hereafter called the company) manufactures hygienic plastic products for a variety of customer industries. Since the late 1950s, the company developed its injection moulded plastic packaging, producing in excess of two billion individual mouldings per year. The company made substantial investment at its two manufacturing centres in North Wales and South-East England. Each centre incorporates automatic moulding lines, robotic handling, and in-line testing and visual inspection. The Company has a wide customer base of prestigious blue-chip companies.

At each site, observations were made and interviews conducted with a range of operational and support management. Nine months was spent carrying out participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews and analysing Company documents. Approximately 200 meetings were observed, 54 managers workshopped, and 30 structured interviews were conducted within the organization. The documents analysed ranged from annual reports to individual memos and emails. The purpose of the case studies at each site was to evaluate and enhance the knowledge base of organizational change, specifically within an operations management environment. The case study methodology has a number of proponents in the management research community (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989).

### Research findings

The company ran a large number of change programmes over several years. See Table 1 for a brief overview.

**Table 1.** Company change initiative timeframes

Initiatives	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Ongoing
Continuous improvement (CI)	█						
Health & safety (H&S)		█					
Actioned ideas mean success (AIMS)			█				
Progress through quality (PtQ)						█	
Good manufacturing practice (GMP)		█					
Quality systems (QS)	█						

The CI initiative was instigated on the insistence of a number of customers. The programme developed over a period of six months, due primarily to customer insistence. It ran for approximately 1.5 years and, following a number of redundancy rounds triggered by harsh trading conditions, CI was stopped when key personnel were made redundant, promoted or resigned. The H&S programme was initiated by the Board of Directors (BoD) as part of a company-wide H&S drive. Its implementation was carefully planned and it was deemed to have emerged in direct response to a number of external and internal influences (increasing external legislation and internal accidents). The H&S programme was set-up to exist as part of the company legislation, so it continued to run throughout the research period. The AIMS initiative was developed to allow formal measurement of internal improvement projects. As with the H&S programme, AIMS had its implementation planned. However, in reality, it emerged from previous information collection initiatives and it was promoted as a formal means of improvement measurement and control. It ended three years after its inception: no formal announcements were made and it effectively faded away. The PtQ programme was started in response to a falling share price and harsh economic trading conditions. The BoD needed to be seen to be acting in response to these conditions, so reducing costs of manufacture through making productivity improvements and reducing waste were considered key. The PtQ initiative therefore emerged as a reaction to trading conditions. Unfortunately, 18 months later, the company announced it was for sale to the highest bidder – this immediately stopped all improvement activities and PtQ disappeared. GMP was a specific customer supply requirement in the industry. If the company did not have an active GMP initiative, customers would cease purchasing their pharmaceutical products. GMP training and awareness within the company emerged over a number of years in response to requests, suggestions then ultimately the demands of pharmaceutical customers. As such, GMP was made part of the company's own legislation and continued to be high profile throughout the research period. QSSs, such as BS EN ISO 9001 and the clean room codes of practice were also a direct response to customer requirements. They emerged over a number of years, driven by customer requirements and demands. In a similar manner to GMP, they became part of the company legislation and continued throughout the research period.

The above are the major change initiatives that existed within the company over several years. An important footnote to this introduction of the company is that in year 6 the parent company announced it and all of its subsidiaries were for sale to the highest bidder, an apparent result of falling returns and a rapidly declining share price. This nullified the inertia that had built up around current initiatives. Once the sale to new owners was formally announced all improvement activities within the company stopped.

#### *Internally or Externally Driven Change?*

Internal forces, especially frustrations about demarcation, both vertical and horizontal, did influence the initiation of various change programmes. The demarcation was apparent at managerial level in strong departmentalisation and

hierarchical demarcation. There were also strong demarcations at shop floor level (i.e. different trades). Some of the initial impetus for change came from the dissatisfaction of managers, at all levels, with the current *status quo*. Change programmes were explicitly conceived as a way of replacing the old rules (for example, managers building empires, and a culture of keeping your head down and doing what you are told) by new ones (challenge things and get involved, we are all in this together). However, as change initiatives unfolded, many of the old rules tended to corrupt the new rules. For example, 'playing the change game' became a new way of empire building; managers who wanted promotion had to be seen to support whatever change was currently active. Expectations of operational managers were that vertical demarcations would become less pronounced but many were disappointed by the perceived commitment shown by colleagues and senior managers. To many people within the organization change had become part of the political games that were played; change initiatives were no longer seen as a way to make the company a better place (cf. Watson, 1994). Table 2 outlines the internal influences and their organizational influence.

External forces included economic ones. During the research the price for various grades of raw material (virgin plastic injection moulding granules) increased a number of times, at one point it was five-times greater than just two years before. This situation affected the buying patterns of customers through the prices charged for product and was critical as the market was driven by high volume, low added value, and low selling price. Competitors were quick to adopt strategies that allowed a foothold with new customers, resulting in loss-leaders being used to gain further business (taking a loss to gain potential future trade). The Company was forced to absorb rising costs without passing them onto customers. This affected the manner in which they were able to run

**Table 2.** Internal influences on the company

Internal influences	Initial influence	Eventual influence
Financial reporting system	+ve: focused short-term resources on tangible results	-ve: did not allow for long-term planning/allocation of resources
Operational management	+ve: followed company line	+ve/-ve: seen to adopt their own strategies
Other senior management	+ve: follow the company line	+ve/-ve: seen to adopt their own strategies
Internal legislation (ISO)	+ve: created a control mechanism	+ve/-ve: largely ignored
Management structure	+ve: existing frustrations promoted change	-ve: frustrations at the <i>status-quo</i> did not allow time for consolidation of initiatives
Prevailing culture	+ve: existing frustrations promoted change	-ve: frustrations at the <i>status quo</i> did not allow time for consolidation of initiatives
History	+ve: building on what already achieved	-ve: history of failed initiatives created failure
New employees	+ve: catalysts for change	+ve/-ve: once incorporated into company develop own agenda

Note: +ve – positive; -ve – negative.

their operations. Table 3 provides a brief overview of the core external influences and their organizational influence upon the Company.

A less explicit driver was the need to look good to customers/potential customers, to be perceived as a modern manufacturing organization. This actively drove particular change initiatives such as CI, AIMS and PtQ, with the effect that many middle managers felt Company senior directors were not making the strategic change decisions – they were perceived as reacting to the external environment. External change consultants also had a major input in the initial stages of most of the change programmes. Observation demonstrated that this approach generated, perhaps understandably, feelings of despondency amongst a self-proclaimed ‘more aware’ middle management group.

The change influences exerted upon the Company over the course of this longitudinal research would appear, therefore, to be a combination of both internal and external forces. The next section will assess specific change initiatives and discuss whether they are perceived as being planned or emergent.

*Planned or Emergent Change?*

To what extent were the company initiatives planned or emergent? The CI initiative was instigated at the insistence of a number of major customers. They put considerable pressure on the company to adopt formalised approaches to improvement initiatives. Certain customers, mainly blue-chip pharmaceutical and toiletry goods manufacturers, were themselves introducing variations of CI. This did enable the company to perform a benchmarking amongst the some of best companies in the UK before launching their own initiative. Another key influence in this was the company’s competitors. They had begun to adopt CI style initiatives for the same reasons and a perceived view among company managers was that they could not be seen to be falling behind. The CI programme within the company therefore emerged over a period of approximately six months,

**Table 3.** External influences on the company

External influences	Initial influence	Eventual influence
Economic (raw material, component price, etc.)	+ve: forced improvements	-ve: company sold
External legislation (ISO)	+ve: acted as an improvement catalyst	Negligible: once set-up has no discernible effect
Popular literature	+ve: enabled up to date thinking	Negligible: change tended to be driven by the market
Change consultants	+ve: change catalyst	-ve: caused resentment
Social setting	Site 1: Negligible Site 2: +ve:	Site 1: Negligible Site 2: +ve
Shareholders	-ve: cash constraints	-ve: forced business sale
Customers (existing)	+ve: forced to keep up to date	+ve: tangible improvements made
Customers (potential)	+ve: forced to keep up to date, to look good	+ve: tangible improvements made and plans set for future

Note: +ve = positive; -ve = negative.



principally due to a great deal of customer insistence. Table 4 reviews the change initiatives recorded within the company, identifies them as planned or emergent, and provides brief background details.

It was acknowledged among senior managers that the Company H&S programme had been initiated in response to a number of serious accidents within the parent organizations chemical production sites. Indeed, the potential for fatalities or environmental disasters at some of the Company sites, highlighted by a growing number of recorded near misses, was such that the BoD instigated a formal H&S programme. A cynical view amongst a large number of company managers was that the BoD had started the H&S initiative in order to save money – principally the medical, insurance and replacement cover costs for injured personnel. Once again, this initiative was benchmarked, although this time more formally. DuPont Limited was paid to come in and advise Company sites and to instigate formal training programmes. The H&S programme within the Company, while its implementation was carefully planned, was deemed, therefore, to have emerged in direct response to both external (including the National Health and Safety Executive) and internal influences (cf. Dawson, 1994).

The AIMS initiative was developed in order to allow formal measurement of improvement projects within company sites and departments. The initiative had developed after feedback from middle managers within the company highlighted the tremendous amount of effort and enthusiasm sites were putting into improvement projects. In order to be seen to support these disparate sites the company sought advice from an external consultancy and implemented their suggestions. The high profile given to the launch of the AIMS initiative within the company newspaper, the posters and briefing documents that followed were designed to demonstrate company support of successful improvements projects. As with the H&S programme, the AIMS initiative had its implementation planned, however, it was believed to have emerged on the back of previous initiatives and to have been promoted as a formal means of improvement measurement and control.

**Table 4.** Emergent or planned change?

Initiative	Planned or emergent?	Background
Continuous improvement (CI)	Emergent	Pharmaceutical customer influence forced the company to develop a programme
Health & safety (H&S)	Planned/emergent	Following some near-fatalities at chemical production sites, company BoD implemented H&S training
Actioned ideas mean success (AIMS)	Planned/emergent	Came after CI and the H&S initiatives as a simple way of measuring improvement initiatives
Progress through quality (PtQ)	Emergent	Response to falling share price. The initiative focused on cost benefits and operational effectiveness
Good manufacturing practice (GMP)	Emergent	Pharmaceutical customer influence forced formal training to take place
Quality systems (ISO 9001, Clean room codes of practice)	Emergent	Customer influence forced the implementation (would not be able to supply if no ISO certificate or full compliance to Clean room codes of practice)
Employee training	Emergent	Any specific training was usually in direct response to some 'failing' within the organization

Company managers believed the PtQ programme was generated as a direct response to a falling share price and harsh economic trading conditions. The BoD needed to be seen to be doing something to control costs. Controlling expenditure through making productivity improvements and greatly reducing waste were the obvious key drivers and the PtQ initiative focused upon cost benefits and operational effectiveness. An external consultancy was again brought in to pilot improvement projects at key Company sites and the refined PtQ programme was rolled-out Company wide. The initiative was viewed as emerging in direct reaction to harsh economic trading conditions and increasing competitiveness within company main markets (cf. Pettigrew, 1985).

GMP was a specific requirement of company pharmaceutical customers; a core requirement of supply became the development and implementation of formal GMP principles. The GMP training and awareness developed over a number of years principally driven by current and potential pharmaceutical customers. GMP was viewed as emerging over time.

The Qs developed and implemented within Company sites were a direct response to actual and potential customer requirements (e.g. BS EN ISO 9001). This quality standard was adopted by individual sites to conform to specific customer demands (e.g. 'you must get the quality certificate or you do not supply us after a certain date'). This also applied to the adherence to the clean room (C/R) codes of practice, which were assessed during the BS EN ISO 9001 six-monthly audits. The Qs within the company, therefore, emerged over a period of years to suit the customer grouping the individual sites served.

Employee training with the Company, in common with the above Qs, was mainly customer driven. Training would be instigated in direct response to a new project, changing customer requirements, customer complaints, internal failure. Training was seen to emerge to fulfil specific needs.

With all of the above initiatives, an element of planned change did exist, but the primary driver in the majority of cases was emergent change (cf. Dawson, 1994; Wilson, 1992).

## **Discussion**

From the analysis of the empirical data the majority of change within the company was emergent. Certainly, the reality of implementation would suggest that none of the traditional planned change models are recognisable within the company (cf. Lewin, 1958; Cummings and Huse, 1989; Bullock and Batten, 1985). Garvin (1994) supports this observation, stating that change cannot simply occur from one stable state to another. Wilson (1992) suggests that the planned approach, whilst laying down timetables, objectives and methods in advance is reliant upon managers acting together as one united body. This does not appear to apply within the company.

Upon reflection, there is considerable disagreement, amongst both analysts and practitioners, regarding the most appropriate method(s) to embrace for effecting organizational change. Practising managers have many doubts when considering which approach to adopt, especially as there are many publicised examples of change projects that go wrong (Cummings and Huse, 1989; Kanter

*et al.*, 1992; Burnes, 2004). Within this research, the managers generally ignored the popular change literature – some were not even aware that formal change theories existed. Those that knew some of the theories stated they offered a rather simplistic manner of theorizing what actually occurs during change. More specifically, the literature could not and did not account for the uncertain rate and direction of organizational change. Events, processes and experiences in organizations are rarely transparent, self-evident, or completely fixed (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993; Burnes, 2004). They are, however, open-ended in the interpretations that can be attached to them. According to Schein (1985), change programmes tend to generate unprecedented outcomes that are not always consistent with the original strategy of change. Managers find it very difficult to relate to this.

The change literature is clear on how organizations might address some of the issues identified within this paper. Rather than following a set of rules or models, what is needed in managing organizational change is a more reflective and less reactive operational style (Burnes, 2004). Consultants and senior management alike give credit to, and blame, change programmes for organizational/departamental success and failure. Having made this error, they then look to other change programmes for the next quick fix or longer-term improvement (Watson, 1994). Senior management is constantly surprised when the new change programme invokes very little improvement. Of course, in an ideal world, managers would not be under such intense pressure to deliver the quick fix and produce the quick win. What senior managers should do is instil confidence into their people and, as far as practically possible, proactively plan for the future, rather than reacting to the past or present.

Some general areas of agreement for emergent aspects of change that link to the findings presented within this paper are: (i) change is a continuous process of experimentation and adaptation aimed at matching organizational capabilities with the needs of an uncertain environment; (ii) this is often achieved through small-scale changes which, over time, lead to major reconfiguration and transformation of the organization; (iii) managers do not plan or implement change but create a climate to encourage experimentation and risk-taking, and develop people to take responsibility and initiative in identifying the need for and implementing it; (iv) managers should be facilitators rather than implementers but must develop common organizational purpose to give direction within the organization.

## **Conclusions**

From the research it emerged that an interpretation of the change process had to take into account multiple and diverse forces which interacted over time and which exerted varying influences. An appreciation of these forces, both internal and external, and the manner in which they affected the change process was almost totally absent within the company. The analysis of empirical data suggested the majority of change within the company was emergent rather than planned. Certainly, the reality of implementation suggested none of the planned change models were recognizable within the company. The planned approach to change is based upon the assumption everyone within the organization agrees to work in the same direction, this was not the case within the company. The

emergent view of change dictates that a process unfolds through interplay of multiple variables, of context, political processes, external and internal influences, and of professional consultations.

Future research work is proposed within different organizational sectors (the NHS) with the objective of longer observations. This should provide focused results targeted upon investigating influences upon organizational change.

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