

What happens when the game changes? Presenting a model for Transformative Change.

It is critical that organisations effectively manage and implement transformational change strategies in order to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by environmental ‘game-changers’ such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Transformational change, as distinguished from developmental and transitional change (Marshak 1993), represents a fundamental reframing and shift in organisational assumptions and values as well as its systems and structures (Chapman 2002). However, given that "the success of change initiatives in contemporary organisations remains poor" (O'Connor et al 2017: 629) with evidence suggesting a gap between theory and practice (Balogun and Hailey 2014: 4), there is a call for more evidence-based practice to help bridge this divide (Barends et al 2017; Tatli and Özbilgin 2012: 196).

My research makes a timely and key contribution in this regard by presenting a model for Transformative Change that both describes the enablers of transformation and also prescribes the process required to meet its intended goals. Change processes at three universities were analysed through an ethnographic case study incorporating 44 multi-level participant interviews within five schools across three institutions, supported by participant observation and documentary analysis. The analysis evolved to offer timely and informative new insights into change management processes.

Theoretically a novel framework was adopted utilising Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital and habitus (1977; 1990) and Mouzelis notion of figurational structures (1992; 2000), incorporating a fully ‘three-dimensional’ relational analysis. This approach addresses the call to action to extend Bourdieu’s analysis (Hallett and Gougherty 2018: 289) and adds to the relative dearth of management and organisational studies that fully utilises his theory of practice (Tatli et al 2015; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Townley 2014; Nicolini 2016: 113). Furthermore, studies in organisational change processes have yet to consider the relevance of Mouzelis concepts for categorising strategies of practice; hence incorporating Mouzelis into Bourdieu’s theory of practice enabled a fieldwork analysis of transformational change processes across the three case study organisations.

My fieldwork analysis explored university change processes to consider the impact of situational developments in regard to policy changes at school level, and to consider how change processes resulted in micro and macro level outcomes that serve to either reproduce or transform the ‘status quo’. This includes analysis of a strategy for gender mainstreaming within one school at the first institution; a formal restructuring across schools at a second institution; and the appointment of a new Head of School within one school at a third institution.

Through mapping this fieldwork analysis against my theoretical framework I identify a typology of six responses to policy and change initiatives. This typology of responses categorises strategies of practice around acceptance, compliance, collaboration and detachment, incorporating both collective and individual responses and having micro or macro level effects within each respective case study university. This analysis provides new insights into the extent to which change processes can result in either reproductive or transformational outcomes. From the six responses categorised, only one held the potential for transformative change which points to the determinist nature of systemic, structural and cultural organisational practices and the difficulties of engendering real change. However, one response I identify as ‘querying-transformation’ holds the potential for transformation as well as reproduction of current systems, cultures and practices, resulting in my model for Transformative Change.

Following on from this and as arising from the fieldwork analysis, I present a model of Transformative Change which identifies six key enablers or 'drivers' for, and five objectives of, transformational change. My model has both descriptive and prescriptive utility. As a descriptive model it can facilitate understanding through describing both the enablers and intended goals of change, and prescriptively it presents guidelines to managers and organisations as to the process of transformation through inclusion of all six enablers and the associated actions required.

The model of Transformative Change represents an original contribution to the literature on change management processes. I argue the model can be applied to policy-making in general, in that the model promotes actions and processes that can help meet the organisational objectives and engender the beneficial outcomes of change. Insights gleaned on the enablers of transformational change can guide policy development and organisational change management processes to explore social relations in a variety of organisations and sectors.

The model can be adopted by practitioners and policy-makers holistically as a 'toolkit' for facilitating change. Viewing all six enablers as necessary, complementary and coinciding is crucial in order to fully enact transformative change, in that practitioners should adopt all actions and processes rather than approach the model in a piecemeal fashion. Furthermore it should not be viewed as a step by step process but is cyclical in nature, with all enablers mutually self-reinforcing. Hence it does not prescribe a highly mechanistic or linear approach to engendering transformational change but instead allows for practitioners to adapt the model to their particular context.

The model offers the potential for policy-makers to design robust and sustainable policy initiatives and interventions “based on empirically – and theoretically – grounded understanding” of the field (Tatli and Özbilgin 2012: 1230). Consequently the model facilitates implementation of practical measures, helping practitioners overcome difficulties in engendering more beneficial outcomes of policy by enabling them to move beyond the rhetorical and abstract nature of change management initiatives and focus on actions, practices and behaviours that take place within the actual day-to-day operational and interactional realities of organisations.

Consequently the model for Transformative Change holds the potential to 'close the gap' between the theory and practice of change management processes. If key decision-makers reflexively question both the ‘rules of the game’ and the ‘actual game play’ itself, rather than merely relying on a taken for granted ‘feel for the game’ then the potential exists for transformational change which is revolutionary in its ability to challenge, alter and ultimately transform the game completely. This reflective practice is critical if organisations are to effectively respond and adapt to the complexities and uncertainties of a post-Covid environment and any future paradigm shifts that may engender a ‘new normal’.

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