

Organisational Development —Process of Change

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Organisational Development has been differently defined and practised by various people. It has been called a process of planned change, a method of organisational renewal, a technique of human development. This paper presents an alternative perspective. It argues that the process of change affects all organisations and organisational development is an approach towards developing the capabilities of the organisation to effectively manage those pressures for change in a long-term perspective.

Evolution of life has been characterised by *continuous* change. Different human groups have built their own nests and are continuously reorienting and reorganising themselves, in an attempt to keep up with their own *conditions* and *expectations*. However, this process goes on within the collective consciousness of the groups or cultures. The self-propelled nature of this process creates, to a certain extent, its own web. Vickers (1972) clearly brings out this in focus :

"The conditions of our day are threatening, first, because the multiple interlocking systems of which we form part have become too complex to be understood; and, secondly, because our fears and aspirations have generated standards so exacting and so conflicting as to pose insoluble problems of multi-valued choice. But in my view, a greater threat than either of these is latent in self-generated rate of change both in the course of events and in the categories and standards of our appreciation."

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Change, its rate and direction, has become the chronic theme of this decade. Toffler (1970) gave the 'future shock'. His analysis and description is so overwhelming, that 'future shock' seems to be right on top of us. The difficulty in coping is compounded due to the simultaneous and contradictory demands of novelty and transience—that is to say, new 'solutions' are needed in a situation which is transient i.e., a state which has no solution. One tends to agree with Bennis (1969): "No exaggeration, no hyperbole, no outrage can realistically describe the extent and pace of change. In fact, only exaggerations appear to be true."

Moreover, the very nature of human systems creates its own predicaments. While being a part of the system, human beings are also assigned the role of observing or intervening in the system. That is to say, a screw from a mechanical system becomes operative as an observer and as an interventionist. The confusion which results is only natural. Morris (1969) highlights it :

"The story of modern man is the story of his struggle to deal with the consequences of this difficult advance. The picture is confused and confusing, partly because of its very complexity and partly because we are involved in it in a dual role, being, at the same time, both spectators and participants."

Recent literature on planned change has outlined, somewhat adequately, the characteristics of this overwhelming change (Roebler, 1973). Without going into the delicacies of this inventory, we will try to outline some emerging elements of our present natural course of events :

(1) Technology appears to be the single most important element shaping modern life. The technology is not only confined to machines or techniques, but also the way of doing things. And it is this machine effect which is having an *autonomous* impact on human destiny—exhibited in man's quest for 'one best way'.

(2) Consequently, the opportunities of work and leisure have increased enormously. The individual is now continuously confronting the problem of overchoice. However, the situation is not

so markedly explosive in the countries of the Third World. But the concomitant dilemma is reflected in the diversity of groupings and roles. The multiplicity of roles is leading to overlapping membership and each individual is occupying multiple roles simultaneously. Golembewsky (1972) provides the basic tenet of this theme :

"What is this age's monument? Its character is more or less clear, on balance. A huge kaleidoscope seems appropriate: colourful, ever-changing, with recognisable bits and pieces reorganised in a bewildering number of arrays. . . . Epigrammatically, this is an age of relationships more than of relatives, of now rather than of past or future, whose basic constant is that all relationships and values and institutions will be stressed, at work or play or in life."

(3) Individual style and motives have also undergone changes to adapt to the demands of technology and consequent increase in temporary interactions. The revolution of rising expectations—a recent phenomenon in the underdeveloped countries of the world—has brought about a change in assumptions about the nature of man, organisation and man-in-organisation. Egalitarianism and humanism seem to have become the dominant values of the Third World at the same time when they are being increasingly accepted in the more affluent countries of the West.

(4) The opportunities of new experiences, which can be gained over a very short time, have led to an increasing degree of behavioural experimentation. The high rate of obsolescence—technology, skills, experiences—has led to new concepts of action and organisations. With a greater portion of individual's life being spent in organised situations, the purpose and structure of these organisations assume significance. The societal perspective is gradually gaining acceptance and the social role of all organisations is being openly explored. To the extent that this trend is healthy, it is creating a potential gap between the ideal and the real—that is to say, the degree and rate of adjustment are lagging behind.

PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

Within the context of an organisation, these trends generate two sets of pressures for change—external and internal.

A. *External Pressures*

Organisations experience a set of pressures for change which emanate from their environment. The sources of these pressures for change are external to an organisation. External pressures for change can be broadly classified into two categories :

(i) One type of external pressures for change are independent of the organisations. The change pressures are generated by an autonomous process occurring in the environment. For example, the change in government at the centre leads to a policy of reservation for backward castes. This in turn expands the tasks of the ministry of home affairs. Many such examples are visible every day and they are increasing in magnitude.

It is useful to understand why such autonomous changes in the environment are taking place that put pressures on the organisation for change. The major reason is the characteristic of the environment. As Emery and Trist (1965) point out, the environment is becoming increasingly turbulent. The main characteristic of a turbulent environment is that autonomous changes occur in the environment, independent of the organisation, yet creating pressure for change.

(ii) The second type of external pressures for change result from the nature of the organisation-environment relationship. Other organisations, regulatory bodies, government, business, etc., may put pressure on an organisation in response to some previous acts of the organisation towards them. For example, the confederation of organised unions may demand the withdrawal of a certain legislation as it might have been introduced without prior consultation with them.

The source for such pressures is embedded in the quality of organisation-environment relationship.

B. Internal Pressures

Another set of pressures for change emanates from within the organisation. The internal dynamics of an organisation generates continuous pressures for change. Two types of internal pressures are more frequent:

(i) One type of internal pressures are those which emanate from the existing social system of the organisation. The social system of an organisation consists of its people, their skills, emotions and values, and their collective experience as members of the organisation. For example, new entrants to the postal system may be comparatively more educated. When graduates begin to join as postmen, their expectations, values and skills generate internal pressures for change.

(ii) The interactions between the social and technical systems of an organisation generate second type of internal pressures for change. The technical system of an organisation consists of machines, equipment, tools, techniques and their physical and operational characteristics. When social and technical systems in an organisation become incompatible (generally the technical system makes demands on the social system), internal pressures for change are generated. For example, the typewriter, because of its weight, noise and punching operations, generates pressures, both physical and psychological, on the typists. This, in turn, may lead to visible forms of expression of discontent by them.

The pressures for change, though presented above in separate categories for a clearer understanding, in reality, are a combination of these. This is because organisations are open systems. As systems, they are a set of interdependent parts. As open systems, they are continuously in interaction with various segments of the environment. These characteristics of an organisation are simple to state, but difficult to appreciate. Pressure for change in an open system have a tendency to escalate. If earlier pressures are not effectively responded to by the organisation, newer pressures "trap" the organisation in its own previous position. As Hrebiniak (1978) points out:

"The challenge of the open system is two-fold. On the one hand, it must change, cope with others' changes, and handle the problems and uncertainty generated by the process. On the other, it must respond to uncertainty and change while at the same time maintaining certainty and avoiding negative effects of change. . . ."

Dynamics of Change

Organisations exhibit a number of characteristics when they have failed to effectively manage the pressures for change. An analysis of these salient characteristics can clarify the dynamics of change and point towards directions for effectively managing it. Some of the salient characteristics of lack of effective management of change are the following:

(a) An autonomous educational institution was concerned with the indiscipline of its administrative and support staff. Peons, clerks and assistants were not coming to the office in time and were frequently away from their seats. In his wisdom, the director of the institute decided to strictly enforce discipline by appointing a set of five assistant administrators who were expected to provide close supervision. After two months, the situation had worsened. The assistant administrators complained of overload, stress and lack of cooperation from the administrator.

In this case, the organisation was experiencing difficulty in exercising effective control. The solution was aimed at enhancing control from above though it has led to no visible improvements. The problem of loss of control is endemic to present-day organisations, but their responses invariably are to further tighten the control machinery. This strategy or "more of the same"—if only we increase the supervision and tighten the machinery, indiscipline will be reduced—has invariably proved ineffective. Organisations tend to try an increased magnitude of their previous strategy in managing change, only to find that they have again committed their valuable resources for minor repairs which reappear after a short time.

(b) The social welfare department in one of the state governments was recently attacked by the legislators for its negligence in providing services to the rural women. Senior officials of the department, in consultation with the concerned minister, decided that some quick steps need to be taken in this direction. They formed a departmental committee to develop a plan-of-action. After a period of six months, the committee recommended that a special cell be created to work as a coordinating/information-processing unit for services to rural women. Three months later, this recommendation was implemented and a ten-person (total staff) cell started functioning under a new assistant director. The minister informed the assembly accordingly.

This is a simple example of self-production. Organisations tend to reproduce themselves in response to any pressures for change. The new unit suffers from the same constraints as the total organisation. As Beer (1974) concludes, "...our institutions will go on producing the social benefits of their activities simply as by-products of their major bureaucratic undertaking which is to produce themselves." This type of response to pressures for change is a superficial solution to a complex problem. It is the recreation of existing patterns under the same principles of organising that makes organisation's management of change ineffective, in the long run.

(c) Another characteristic way of managing pressures for change is by living in and justifying the past. "If it has worked for the last fifty years, it can work today," seems to be the underlying thinking. Organisations continue to live in the past, because it is convenient, less threatening and stable to be so. Despite all the pressures for change as mentioned earlier and visible frequently, it is sometimes surprising to note how little our organisations have changed in their basic design. A number of examples are available, but only one is mentioned here. The supply of medicines to primary health centres (PHC) in the districts of Madhya Pradesh is made from the Medicine Supply Depot located at Bombay. Each PHC can order medicines only once a year and it takes 6 to 8 months for the supplies to come after the

placing of orders. This practice has been in place since the British days and is still very much intact. In terms of effective rural health care, perhaps a decentralised supply system (say located in Bhopal) may have greater impact than either doubling the number of PHCs or posting more qualified medical professionals. This illustrates the principle of organisational inertia, where existing practices, designs and structures are generally retained.

(d) When a departmental undertaking started attracting young men and women in its services cadre, who had technical background (statistics, engineering, etc.), they began to question some of its practices and procedures. Middle level managers who were mostly promotees, clearly discouraged these youngsters from making suggestions before they have learnt their jobs well. This generated a lot of conflicts, and the higher management felt that the discipline and authority structure of the organisation was threatened. A decision was made that all opinions and suggestions must be made in writing. Very soon, there were no complaints from the younger officers.

As in the above illustration, most organisations dislike conflict inside. Changes within the organisation's membership invariably generate conflicts. In present day organisations, conflicts exist. How an organisation deals with those conflicts determines its ability to manage change effectively. In most organisations, deviance of opinion, ideas and behaviours are construed as threats; and, therefore, conflicts are either not recognised as legitimate differences of approaches/expectations/values, or they are suppressed in a direct or subtle manner. In either case, organisations adopt a strategy that neutralises their internal reservoir of ideas and suggestions. To that extent, it ignores or suppresses the pressures for change, which makes it ineffective in managing change in the long run.

The above characteristics are some salient illustrations. The basic underlying issue for this ineffective dynamics is variety. Change entails coping with variety. Pressures for change emerge

when the existing variety within the organisation is less than the variety generated by the processes of change taking place internally and externally. All organisations possess a certain amount of variety in terms of their responses. Here, variety is equivalent to an organisation's repertoire of possible responses. It is clear that organisations need to reduce variety to a level that they remain stable; unlimited variety is equivalent to instability. However, where organisations lack requisite variety, that can match the variety being generated by the process of change, it is unable to manage it effectively. Since an organisation lacks requisite variety, it attempts "more of the same" strategy in the face of loss of control. Similarly, organisations tend to reproduce themselves in response to pressures for change because they lack variety to seek alternatives. Limited variety also forces the organisations to live in the past. And, deviance and conflict, by definition, emerge when the variety of the parties involved does not match. Any deviance from the organisation's present norms is a reflection of limited variety of the organisation.

Organisational Development

Organisations, therefore, need internal capacity in terms of requisite variety to effectively manage the pressures for change. Organisational Development is the systematic process of building this capability in the organisation. Organisations, on their own, should be able to continuously build such capabilities and utilise them in managing change. It is not a one-time effort because much pressures for change cannot be properly anticipated in advance. OD cannot, then, be just a one-time planned change effort to cope effectively with existing pressures for change. OD should be an attempt to enhance the capability of the organisation to learn on its own. The process of OD, therefore, should focus on learning how to learn, rather than learning how to operate a new system.

To that extent, organisations need to go through a process of change in building their internal organisational capabilities. Various models and approaches are available in the literature

prescribing how organisations can engage in a process of change on their own. In this section, some practical ideas are presented to suggest what factors and steps are essential in the process of building organisational capability.

1. Any change effort can generate resistance, because change can be seen as threatening by some people. It is, therefore, useful to spend considerable time in developing a somewhat shared understanding of need for change.
2. In building the capability of the organisation, the change effort cannot be initiated and implemented by one man, say, the head of the organisation. People at different levels in the organisation have to feel some ownership of the change process. There is no substitute for people's participation in effectively bringing about change in the organisation.
3. Building organisational capability is a long term process. Organisations easily commit themselves to a ten-year effort of building technological capabilities. Not many think in terms of such a time perspective in building organisational capability.
4. A major focus in such an effort must be on developing capability for varied functioning among the members of the organisation. Individuals, if capable of multiple, varied responses (high variety), can significantly contribute to organisation's capability.
5. Building organisational capability also entails strengthening and augmenting the design of the organisation. This means that organisation's structure, procedures and systems, norms and rules also need to be examined in terms of variety.
6. The process of building an organisation's capability needs to be an action-research process. There are no universal solutions that can be applied instantly. The perspective of action-research provides opportunity to combine the knowing and changing components.

7. Initial starting point in such efforts needs to be carefully selected. In a large organisation, it is not possible to begin the change programme all over. Initial attempt can be made in a limited area/part of the organisation.
8. Finally, the thrust in these change processes must be on building capability to learn and not on providing one-shot, immediate solutions to visible problems. One needs to continuously ask if the individuals and groups in the organisation are developing capacity to learn on their own and if the organisation design facilitates that. That is the acid-test for effective change process.

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