

“ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION”: WAVERING ON THE EDGE OF AMBIGUITY

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ABSTRACT

Organisational transformation has become one of the most used change concepts of our time, but researchers and practitioners seldom pause to consider the meaning of this concept more explicitly. The meaning parameters of organisational transformation are explored from within the prevailing literature and considered in terms of the results of a qualitative study of limited scope conducted among managers of a local government institution. Both the literature and the findings of the study reveal substantial variation in the meaning of transformation, which is considered undesirable for change management practices. The implications of the study are briefly indicated.

OPSOMMING

Organisasie transformasie het een van die mees gebruikte veranderingskonsepte van ons tyd geword, maar navorsers en praktisyns verpoos selde om die betekenis van die konsep meer eksplisiet te oorweeg. Die betekenisparameters van organisasie transformasie word vanuit die bestaande literatuur ondersoek en vergelyk met die resultate van 'n kwalitatiewe studie van beperkte omvang wat met bestuurders van 'n plaaslike regeringsinstansie onderneem is. Beide die literatuur en die bevindinge van die studie toon omvangryke variasie in die betekenis van transformasie, wat as ongewens vir veranderingsbestuurspraktyke beskou word. Die implikasies van die studie word kortliks aangedui.

A constant stream of publications on change and organisational change has been a notable feature of the literature base in the fields of organisational behaviour, -theory and -psychology over the past decades and as can be expected a multitude of concepts and perspectives have surfaced to date. Moreover, this bewildering array is expected to expand further in view of the generally accepted view that the rate of change is increasing exponentially (e.g. Schabracq & Cooper, 2000). The change literature, in addition, is heavily biased towards “change management” (Van Tonder, 2004a) but at the same time does not seem to be particularly useful to organisational change practices. The validity and relevance of the literature is often doubted by managers (Bamford & Forrester, 2003) and change practices still appear to be veering more to the “unsuccessful” than the “successful” (cf. Applebaum & Wohl, 2000; Mariotti, 1998). Judging by the comments of Collins (1998) and Pettigrew (1988, 1990), the problem is probably still to be found in the need for greater refinement around theory and the contextualisation of change phenomena. As regards the latter, Doyle (2002, p. 480) has argued more recently that existing change theory and practice (with one or two exceptions) are aligned behind a set of unchallenged assumptions about the nature of organisational change and the way it should be managed. We are consequently left with a spiralling number of rather generic change concepts that are used in a universal manner, and of which the theoretical foundations are likely to be found wanting. The situation is obviously not assisted by the tendency of managers and practitioners to cling to established/ existing views and practices in respect of change management (cf. Collins, 1996; Nortier, 1995). The latter not only contributes to a view that some change concepts are untouchable, but also furthermore complicates the introduction of corrective or more valid perspectives with regard to these change concepts.

One such concept that is very common and that has acquired faddish status during the late 1990s is “transformation” (King, 1997). While this is true in an international setting, it is certainly more so in South Africa where it has become a “catch phrase” for most forms of institutional change since the transition from one political dispensation to another in 1994. In the latter instance it more often appears to be associated

with behaviours that aim to redress historically informed inequalities in several spheres of human activity, and it is generally assumed and indeed employed as a concept that is commonly known and understood. In view of the widespread use of the phrase (cf. Tosey & Robinson, 2002) not only in a socio-political context, but more pertinently so in public as well as private sector organisations, several questions about the nature and meaning of “transformation” or “organisational transformation”, were raised:

1. In the first instance, what meaning is ascribed to “organisation transformation” and is it indeed a universally understood, generic change concept?
2. Elaborating on the previous problematic and recognising that the concept is currently used in the business context in a general sense simply as *transformation* (or *organisation transformation*), is the concept's use sensible and appropriate, or should the approach to dealing with transformation in organisational change practices be reconsidered and augmented?

The purpose of this paper is consequently to explore the meaning parameters of the type of organisational change referred to as “transformation”, “transformational change”, “corporate transformation” or “organisational transformation”² and to consider its utility value. More specifically and in view of its widespread use, the paper aims to explore the universality and consistency of the concept's meaning structure and to consider the implications for organisational change practices. By way of introduction, the paper leads with a brief conceptualisation of the organisational change concept, followed by a literature-based consideration of the “organisation transformation” concept. These observations are then contrasted with the results of a qualitative study of limited scope, which explored (tested) the meaning parameters ascribed to the *organisational transformation* construct in a local government setting. Implications for organisational change practices are briefly highlighted.

Current conceptualisations of *change* and *organisational change*

Our point of departure is, by necessity, the generic concept of change. Apart from Lewin's (1951) earlier and classic view of change as a *sequence of activities* that emanate from disturbances in the stable force field that surrounds the

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² These and related variants such as structural transformation are broadly considered synonyms for the purpose of this paper.

organisation (or object, situation, or person), most contemporary definitions appear to view change in a rather simplistic and universal manner. Change has been described for example as making or becoming different (Eales-White, 1994) or as a phenomenon of time ... where something over time turns into something else (Ford & Ford, 1994). We could also consider it, as Skilling (1996) does, as something (old) that stops and/or something (new) that starts at a specific point in time or, from Van Tonder's (2004a) perspective, as a dynamic, time-bound, and non-discrete process evident in an empirical difference over time in the state and/or condition of the entity with or within which it occurs.

Differences between definitions of change such as those cited above, tend to be a function of *selective* emphasis i.e. elevating the *motion* element or the *outcome* or end result of change, the role of *context*, and so forth. Most of the more common conceptualisations of change however appear to echo the process nature of change, the central role of *time*, and the notion of manifest *differences* in pre- and post change conditions or states (Van Tonder, 2004b).

If we then turn to *organisational change*, we find that *organisational change*, in character, is of course no different from change except that the latter is now contextualised by the term "organisation". Earlier definitions tended to differentiate between different *types* of organisational change for example Ackerman (1986) who proposed that organisational change could take the form of *developmental change*, *transitional change*, and *transformational change*, or Nadler and Tushman's (1989) conceptualisation of organisational change in terms of *tuning*, *adaptation*, *reorientation* (also referred to as frame-bending change) and recreation³ (also referred to as *frame-breaking* change). Although the fixation on *type* change has been criticised, a great many change typologies emerged from the mid 1970s to 1990s⁴, but very few of these could be regarded as *organisational change* proper as they did not clearly identify the organisation as primary and distinctive context for the change phenomenon. Moreover, while elements of the true character of organisational change could be extracted from the very few that validly claimed to deal with organisational change per sé, these typologies did not adequately articulate the essential character of organisational change – as distinct from generic change. Furthermore, while the vast majority of these conceptualisations (or rather typologies) lacked empirical support, "*type*" change for example continuous and discontinuous change, radical change, evolutionary and revolutionary change, transformational change, and many more, persisted into current perspectives on change (Van Tonder, 2004a). It is noteworthy, however, that where a distinction between change types is the focus of the definitional effort, this would tend to occur at the cost of a clear articulation of organisational change proper.

More recent perspectives on *organisational change* describe it, for example, as an initiative that alters critical organisational processes which, in turn, influence individual behaviours, which subsequently impact on organisational outcomes (Porras & Silvers, 1991) or as a dynamic process concerned with the modification of patterned behaviour (Kanter, Stein & Jick, 1992) and again as an empirical observation of difference in the form, quality, or state over time, in an organisational entity (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). While many more definitions can be surfaced, contemporary definitions of organisational change largely echo the core elements of generic change definitions introduced earlier. The example provided by Van de Ven and Poole (1995) more closely matches these generic change definitions but differentiates *organisational change* through the addition of the term *organisation*, which immediately contextualises the change. Though these definitions reflect slightly more variation in the manner in which they are articulated,

fundamentally, they do not deviate from the core content of generic change definitions referred to earlier.

It is not surprising that *change* and *organisational change* are frequently presented in general rather than specific terms, as change (however conceptualised) remains essentially an intangible and "invisible" phenomenon. The presence and/or evidence of change, without exception, can only be inferred from the altered state or condition of some object or phenomenon over time. By logical extension any type (of) change need to articulate pre- and post change differences in the object or entity (incorporating the role of time) for it to be observable – in this instance these differences need to be articulated from within the framework of the organisation. From the definitions provided we would also expect different types of change (for example transformation) to articulate pre- and post change differences in the behaviour of the organisation, though this would not necessarily be the only indication of such forms of organisational change.

The phrase "organisational change" inextricably ties the understanding of change into the pre-existing meaning that the concept "organisation" holds for the reader. While this is certainly not novel (Pettigrew, 1985, has for example argued that organisational change is best understood from a historical, contextual and process perspective) it unfortunately remains a seldom-acknowledged but glaring reality that organisational change cannot be adequately conceptualised without first considering the specific meaning that the term "organisation" holds for the reader or employee. Bolton and Heap (2002, p. 309) for example are quite adamant that *all* change need to be set within a regional, national and/or organisational context and culture. Indeed, change with and within the organisation is substantially defined by what an organisation is (Van Tonder, 2004a). By virtue of the differences observed between structurally different types of organisations (e.g. public versus private, small versus large, local versus national, multinational and international; profit versus not-for-profit; virtual and networked versus monolithic and bureaucratic, etc.), located in different industries (e.g. retail versus banking, or mining or manufacturing, etc.) and operating in different contexts (developing versus developed, western versus eastern, stable versus turbulent, etc.) we have to acknowledge that the organisation as context for conceptualising change is more than merely a theoretical consideration. From this premise it follows that any and all forms of organisational change will be informed by the nature of the organisation – a principle that should hold true also for *organisational transformation*.

The nature of *organisational transformation*

By far the most common practice observed in the literature, is the tendency of authors to use the term *transformation* or *transformational change* freely yet without explicitly defining it. Although an implicit definition is sometimes apparent in these instances it is exceedingly difficult to extract clear meaning parameters about the nature of this type of change.

Transformation as second-order change

By way of introduction consider the acontextual definition of transformation as a marked change in the nature, *form* or *appearance* of, say, the organisation (The Oxford dictionary). Regrettably most of the definitions of transformation extracted from the literature and discussed in the ensuing sections lack this clear and relatively simplistic account of what "transformation" is. At the same time however this eloquently lean articulation is too nondescript to aid the organisational scientist in his/her work. For the purpose of gaining a better understanding of *organisational transformation as change type* we turn to its early use as a synonym for *second order change* (Levy & Merry, 1986; Lichtenstein, 1997; Torbert, 1989). This (very influential) perspective probably originated from the definition by Levy and Merry (1986, p. 5) wherein

³ *Tuning*: system-compatible, incremental change; *Adaptation*: incremental change in response to environmental/external events; *Reorientation*: major, anticipated and continuous change (not discontinuous with the organisation's past); *Re-creation*: change of significant scope in the core of the organisation, in response to environmental circumstances that threaten the existence of the organisation.

⁴ See Van Tonder (2004a) for a more detailed consideration of different change concepts and typologies.

organisational transformation is effectively considered synonymous with second-order change: “*second-order change (organisation transformation) is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, qualitative, discontinuous, radical organisational change involving a paradigmatic shift.*” The descriptive parameters included in this definition capture the features ascribed to most of the change types that have surfaced over the past three decades, for example, deep change, discontinuous change, gamma change, radical change, revolutionary change, and so forth (cf. Van Tonder, 2004a). This definition addresses the scope and inherent nature of transformational change, (discontinuous, qualitative) and indicates that its effect (impact) is at the organisational *paradigm* level i.e. a change in the tacit worldview or meaning structures held by the organisation and is therefore essentially a cognitive change. Transformation as depicted however does not consciously account for the notion of “time” (e.g. the pace and duration of the onset and dissipation of the transformational change), nor does it consider the potentially influential role of context. Many contemporary researchers nonetheless subscribe to concepts of transformation that are closely related to the content of Levy and Merry’s (1986) definition. Chapman (2002) for example equates transformation consciously to *second order* change (cf. Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974) and *gamma* change (cf. Golembiewski, Billingsley, & Yaeger, 1976) while Thorne (2000) draws on the same change concepts (by these authors) to define transformation.

Transformation as fundamental or “state” change

Despite the expansive and all-encompassing view offered by Levy and Merry’s (1986) earlier definition, scholars continued to attach their own specific meanings to the concept of transformation. A sense of this diversity in perspective is evident from the many definitions that have been proposed. Contrast, for example, King’s (1997, p. 63) view that organisational transformation is a planned change designed to significantly improve overall organisational performance by changing the majority of people in the organisation, with that of Levy and Merry (1986) or that of Marshak (1993) and Hill and Collins (2000). Both Marshak (1993) and Hill et al. (2000) refer to transformational change as a transfiguration from one state to another. The latter further suggests that transformation comprises a series of transitions from one state to another (that entail evolutionary and revolutionary zones), while Marshak (1993) emphasises the fundamentally different nature of the successive states of being. These definitions very closely approximate the working definition of change presented earlier, but key to their meaning is the incorporation of the principle of a change in “state”. It can also be deduced that the organisation’s state of being reflects its manner of existence and therefore functioning, and consequently transformative change signifies a change in the organisation’s modes of existence and functioning. The substantive nature of this change is suggested when the author details the change as one that is fundamental, indicating change in the organisational core and hence its modes of existence and functioning. Nutt and Backoff (1997) concluded from an analysis of different transformation definitions that transformation is fundamental change, but also the development of higher levels of complexity, chaotic change, cultural metamorphosis, and so forth.

Transformation as unidimensional change in behaviour

From an altogether different perspective, Blumenthal and Haspeslagh (1994) emphasise the *sustainability* of the change. They argue that transformational change will result in behavioural change, for which the measure of “success” is the long-term financial success of the organisation. From their perspective the change has to be enduring to be transformative and this simply means that the majority of employees have to change their behaviour. As with most definitions of organisational transformation this view also displays deficiencies – in particular that it is too wide in definitional

scope and provides no indication of the actual nature of the change. As an illustration consider the organisation-wide adoption of a relatively insignificant procedure designed to bring about cost savings for example through recycling wastepaper. If adopted by the majority of the work force, it will most certainly contribute to the long-term financial success of the organisation (albeit in a relatively insignificant way) but will nonetheless qualify as a transformational change in accordance with this definition. Granted, this is an extreme illustration and clearly the authors’ intention was *major* change (although not stated), but it does suggest a sense of the difficulty in adequately and precisely articulating the nature of transformational change. Most descriptions of change as transformational emphasise the *result* or *outcome* of the change i.e. that the organisation is different in its appearance and/or character once it *had* experienced transformational change. This *outcome* of transformational change has been described at various times as the behavioural change of the majority of employees, long-term financial survival, and the improvement of operational and strategic performance (e.g. King, 1997). This central focus on the “behaviour change” aspect of transformation has been further elaborated by some authors, who emphasised the perceptions, thinking and behaviour of the organisation’s employees (e.g. Kilmann, 1995) or more specifically the attitudes, beliefs and cultural values (e.g. Chapman, 2002). The latter resonates well with Mezirow’s (1978, 1994, 1995) transformation theory in which changes in cognition or perspective are central. When we deal with values, beliefs, and perspectives as these authors suggest, we once again find ourselves on the doorstep of a predominantly cognitive type of change implying significant scope and which is reminiscent of Gamma change (Golembiewski et al., 1976) and second order change (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

Transformation as a time-bound, uncontrollable and unpredictable change

More recently the concept has been considered also from within a complexity and non-linear dynamic systems perspective. Transformational change is for example described as the emergence of a totally new state of being out of the remains of the old state – a new state that is unknown until it begins to take shape (Ackerman, 1997). It has similarly been argued that the dissipated structures approach is better suited to explain radical transformation in organisations (Macintosh & Maclean, 1999). A dissipative structures approach will suggest that change will be a sudden, often unexpected, and dramatic restoration of an imbalance in energy (resources) – referred to as the dissipation of energy. This dramatic flow of energy (from high to low concentration) follows when the discrepancy between two concentrations of energy within the field (referred to as the field potential) has reached critical proportions. At a critical threshold a minuscule trigger will set the automatic and dramatic dissipation of energy in motion. Drawing on this perspective we expect not only a dramatic difference in pre- and post-transformational states of the organisation, but also that the process of change i.e. transformation is likely to be sudden, and dramatic in several ways.

The implicit reference in the preceding argument to *time* as a defining parameter of organisational transformation is also indicated when Macintosh and Maclean (1999) describe transformation as a relatively *rapid* transition from one archetype to another – a dimension not featured in the earlier definition by Levy and Merry (1986). Though seldom explicitly indicated, time is more often than not an implicit dimension of transformation definitions. King’s (1997) earlier depiction of transformation as a planned change, for example, suggests a notion of time that is controllable and for this reason unlikely to be the “rapid” transition proposed by Macintosh and Maclean (1999). Compare this view also to the distinction between Type I and Type II change (Van Tonder, 1999; 2004a) wherein time emerges as a central defining parameter of change type. In the former (Type I) change is incremental and unfolds over extended

periods of time – hence the perception of control. Type II change on the other hand, and apart from its major impact, has a very sudden onset and rapidly escalates to a point where it is perceived as being beyond control. Notwithstanding these perspectives, time is generally an understated parameter of transformation and appears to be a secondary consideration among scholars, if at all.

Transformation as change in select organisational variables

A large number of the definitions of transformational change proceed to specify those *organisational variables* that are likely to bring about this form of change in the organisation. This is a common but somewhat problematic practice as it implicitly suggests that transformation is causally related to the manipulation of specific organisational variables. So for example we observe that Burke and Litwin (1989) by implication argued that the organisation will be transformed when we manipulate variables such as leadership, structure, strategy, and culture. Porras and Silvers (1991) argued that changes in the organisation's purpose, its beliefs, mission, and elements of the organisation's vision will lead to a transformed organisation. Against this Dunphy and Stace (1993) indicated that corporate transformation involves substantial change in many of the following features: the organisation's mission and core values, power and status, structures, systems, procedures and workflows, communication networks, and the appointment of new executives. In recent years the number of transformation models has increased exponentially and with it the persistence of the argument that a transformed organisation can be achieved by manipulating one or more key variables of the organisation. The overwhelming majority of these are not underpinned by substantive empirical research or even an adequate theoretical foundation. In the absence of these, we are confronted with the question: on what basis do we identify and work with select organisational variables to either contain or facilitate transformational change? In fact, if viewed from the more contemporary chaos and complexity paradigm, transformation may not stem from variation in these existing variables, but could be triggered by a *minute* perturbation that could push the system into chaos with its accompanying massive dissipation of resources – i.e. chaotic change. The usefulness of this line of enquiry into the nature of organisational transformation, at this point in time consequently appears somewhat limited.

Transformation as extreme or ultimate change in change typologies

Transformational change is generally not introduced as part of a larger and coherent typology or system of change concepts. A few exceptions are however observed. Commencing with Ackerman (1986), it is noted that "transformation" is characterised as the emergence of a new state that is unknown until it takes shape out of the remains of the chaotic death of the old state. It is presented as the ultimate of three organisational change types with *transformation* preceded by developmental and *transitional* change. Whereas developmental change is essentially improvement of what is in existence (and suggests an incremental character), transitional change is concerned with the controlled implementation (and management) of a new and known state over a period of time (thus a qualitative but controllable change). From this view transformational change is distinguished on the basis of its "unpredictable" nature - both in terms of content and timeframe, as well as the implied inability of office bearers to exercise control over it (i.e. an uncontrollable qualitative change). A somewhat more simplified distinction between *change* and *transformation* (but couched in a more elaborate terminology) is offered by Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl (1996) who argue that change is continuous, while transformation, by implication, is sporadic as it only occurs when there is a realignment in logics⁵ across organisational subgroups. Accordingly, transformation (realignment) is the result of dissonance emerging from differing logics in different sectors of the organisation, who

maintain different perspectives with regard to the organisation's need to adjust to environmental change (some actively pursue adaptation while others do not recognise the need for it or resist it). If this conceptualisation of transformation is projected to its logical conclusion (either succeeding or failing) we observe that it aligns with the view that the behaviour of the majority of people needs to change for transformation to have occurred.

Burke and Litwin (1989) proposed a more elaborate causal model of organisational performance that distinguishes between transformational and transactional factors. *Transformational factors* are likely to be influenced by environmental forces (both within and outside the organisation) and are concerned with organisational elements such as its mission and strategy, leadership, and culture. *Transactional change* on the other hand tends to be more contained in focus and content, and is likely to be of a short-term nature and duration. Transactional factors are concerned with management practices, structure, systems (including policies and procedures), task requirements, work unit climate, motivation, and individual needs and values. Dramatic and pervasive change is likely to occur when "*transformational factors*" are altered. This articulation suggests that "organisational content" (constructs or variables) is central to defining transformation, but finer distinctions between types of transformation have been made. King (1997) for example identified different types of transformation on the basis of their foci, e.g. organisational performance (the most common form), strategic performance, and renewal, which unavoidably imply distinction on the basis of specific organisational variables. In a similar vein Dunphy and Stace (1993) differentiated between *modular* and *corporate transformation*, where the main distinction centres on the scope of the change: modular refers to specific "modules" i.e. one or more departments or divisions (e.g. transformation of the HR function), while corporate transformation refers to organisation-wide change. So too, do we observe distinctions between personal and *organisational transformations* (e.g. Rooke & Torbert, 1998) and *individual, organisational and societal transformation* (Neal, Bergmann Lichtenstein & Banner, 1999). The latter examples indicate how the unit of analysis (context) selected by the researcher, serves to inform differences between types of transformation. Ultimately the number and nature of types of transformation will vary in accordance with the multiple ways in which researchers conceive and frame reality. This manner of conceptualizing transformational change is problematic and suggests the potential for virtually limitless diversity in perspective with its obvious difficulties for selection of constructs, measurement and replication.

Consolidation

At the practice level the diverse foci of transformation definitions confront both the researcher and the practitioner with a choice between different transformation concepts, yet these concepts provide limited information and guidance on the nature of this type of change. Paradoxically, it may be precisely this ambiguity that has contributed to the transformation term's enduring presence in the vernacular. It seems, on reflection, that the literature only succeeds in facilitating greater clarity on the diffuseness of transformation as change type. We can however conclude that despite the initial turn away from the earlier multidimensional, multilevel concept of transformation (Levy & Merry, 1986) in favour of more unidimensional views of the concept, that it is in fact a far more comprehensive and complex concept of change. It is a type of change that is not only comprehensive in its scope and severity but likely to unfold quite rapidly to a point where its impact on the organisation will be irreversible and evident in a total state change i.e. the organisation's character, form and appearance will display this discontinuity with the pre-transformation state of the organisation. As can be expected, change of this nature and magnitude will materially alter individual and

⁵ A logic is defined as a cognitive framework that guides behaviour.

organisational cognitions, which will ultimately be revealed by (sustainable) changes in the behaviour of the various systems and subsystems of the organisation.

Against this context of multiple perspectives and approaches to the transformation concept, this study set out to explore ("test") the meaning parameters of this form of change at an empirical level.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Approach to the research

As the study sought to explore how organisation transformation is understood i.e. is concerned with the meaning of transformation as construed by employees at the level where they experience the organisation and organisational transformation, it clearly resides within the interpretive sociological research paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Reality, viewed from within this paradigmatic framework, is socially constructed and more a result of members' / employees' actions (enacted perceptions) than they may recognise (Morgan, 1997). Subjectivity in the traditional sense is not a concern as it is precisely the idiosyncratic meanings that each employee constructs that ultimately define the shared or collective meaning structures from which an organisation is defined. For the fact that the study is concerned with description and understanding rather than explanation, it is consequently (and more appropriately) pursued through qualitative methodologies (cf. Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Mouton, 1996).

Respondents

Respondents in the study were managerial and supervisory employees of a local government (municipality / city council) in the North West Province where a formal, institution-wide process of "transformation" has been ongoing. This transformation was a Council initiative that was managed on the Council's behalf by a transformation facilitation committee. An attempt was made to include all managers at the different levels in the hierarchy (levels P1 to P11) in anticipation of difficulties with their availability and as a result sampling in the strict sense of the word was not undertaken. Of the 372 managers and supervisors that constituted the research population, eighty (80) questionnaires were returned of which 77 provided valid responses to the qualitative question on transformation, and these were subsequently utilised for purposes of this paper.

Although the impact of sample characteristics cannot be accounted for statistically in a qualitative study of this nature, it is worthwhile noting that the distribution of the sample revealed a dominance of female respondents (61%), middle (59%) and senior (39%) managers, and predominantly Afrikaans speaking (74%) with English and other language groupings representing 8% and 18% respectively. The majority of the respondents were between 36 and 45 years of age (47%) while 23% and 19% were between 26 and 35, and 46 and 55 years respectively. In terms of job tenure the majority had between 6 and 10 years service (39%), followed by 11 to 15 years (24%) and 20% with between 2 and 5 years service. The largest proportion of the sample (44%) did not progress beyond high school level education, while 21%, 14%, 11% and 3% had a three-year diploma, a B-degree, a Honours degree and a Masters degree respectively.

Method of data collection

A single open-ended question that prompted respondents to provide a description of organisation transformation, was presented as part of a more elaborate multi-purpose questionnaire, designed to measure various facets of the transformation process in the metropolitan council. This

question required respondents to "Please describe exactly what you understand (what is meant) when reference is made to TRANSFORMATION in [the institution's name]". Wary of the potential influence of context and the possibility of an order-effect this qualitative question preceded all other content-based questions in the questionnaire (and followed immediately after the biographical data section).

Procedure

Respondents of the participating organisation were prepared in advance for the survey and briefed on its purpose and likely contribution. Questionnaires were administered by the in-house industrial psychologist, who verbally briefed respondents on the structure and nature of the questionnaire and the requirements for completion, after which they were instructed to individually complete the questionnaire. An open invitation was extended to participants to contact the administrator should questions crop up when they complete the questionnaire. Upon receipt of the completed questionnaires all data was captured for further computer-assisted analysis. Qualitative comments (descriptions) of transformation were captured verbatim and the consolidated list of descriptive statements was subjected to content analysis. A few randomly selected statements nominated by respondents are provided in Table 1 as examples of the meaning parameters that they ascribe to organisation transformation.

TABLE 1
ILLUSTRATIVE STATEMENTS ON "TRANSFORMATION"

Respondent No.	Statement provided in response to question on what is meant by "Transformation"
5	Changes which have to be made
13	Bringing improvement in the workplace
17	Equal opportunities for all people
25	Process of restructuring departments to new directorates which form a unit for better service provision
30	A gradual positive change
40	Is a process whereby the structure of the council is structured from top management to the last level of any employee involved to the advantage and interest of council
50	I don't understand what is meant by transformation in the city council
66	The whole process of restructuring council
77	Changing the way we do things and improve service - trying to achieve a change of mind-set

Data Analysis

Basic content analysis, which is described by Crabtree and Miller (1992, p. 94) as a quasi-statistical approach that looks for regularities in terms of words, themes or concepts using some form of classification procedure, was selected as vehicle for analysing descriptive statements of transformation. "Regularities" in this sense relate to the frequencies with which certain terminology, ideas, feelings, personal references, and the like occur (cf. Gouws, Louw, Meyer & Plug, 1979, p. 132). A template in the form of a "code book" was utilised as a means of organising the text and quantifying observations (using frequencies of occurrence) for subsequent interpretation. Several alternative approaches for developing codebooks are of course possible, which differ in terms of the degree of structure employed in the method. The *a priori* construction of a list of codes ("code book") to which data are later matched and fitted, and subsequently scored, represents the most structured approach, whereas the so-called "editing style" entails the researcher making interpretations or observations of segments of text as he/she reads through the material (commonly through

noting comments in the margins of the text), from which further abstractions are later made (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, pp. 93 – 95). In both these instances, the list of codes (or code book) is frequently altered or updated as new data categories emerge from the text under review. In order for categories to emerge, an open-ended approach to analysis was followed, which in this study utilised a single phrase (“short sentence”) as unit of meaning and analysis. The code list was augmented with every new phrase that emerged and the final consolidated “code book” was employed to review all phrases and statements and to assist with the calculation of frequencies per category.

RESULTS

The results of the content analysis are conveyed in Tables 2 to 4. Table 2 conveys the rank ordered themes arising from a frequency count of words (nouns) and/or statements that addressed the “what” of transformation. This analysis purposefully excluded and avoided statements that attempted to further qualify the transformation in terms of its purpose or intention. Content analysis in this latter instance (Table 3) focused on words (nouns) or expressions/statements that immediately followed words such as “to”, “in order to”, “for the purpose of” and in the Afrikaans “om”, “om te”. In order to infer the most probable type of change underlying respondent perceptions of transformation, an analysis and frequency count of action verbs only, were undertaken. The rank ordered themes emerging from this analysis is conveyed in Table 4.

Perhaps the most notable observation with regard to the “what” (Table 2) and “intention” (Table 3) of organisational transformation is the substantial *variation* in *meaning* ascribed to the phenomenon. Though the variation in itself is unsurprising (in view of the dominant perspectives from the literature and the reality of notoriously poor change management practices), it is remarkable for the fact that it reflects the *perceptions of employees working in close physical proximity to one another. If we pause to reflect on the nature of transformation (Table 2), it is clear that perceptions polarise around transformation as change in the human and social fibre of the organisation on the one hand, and change in the organisational architecture (structure, workplace, etc) on the other* – representing 25,5% and 21,8% of the descriptive comments respectively. This trend is echoed by the perceived “intentions” of the transformation (Table 3) which highlight the prominence of social (27,9%) and business objectives (23,3%) as distinctly different motivations for the transformation. See for example in this regard the different constituency-specific notions of “transformation” in a South African context (Table 5) identified by McNamara (1998), which provides some context for viewing and interpreting the observed variation in the perceived nature and intent of transformation. As soon as McNamara’s (1998) categorisation framework is projected onto the results reported in Tables 2 and 3 it becomes clear how pervasive and significant the influence of extra-organisational contextual influences is. The confusing array of social, political and economic considerations articulated by respondents not only reveals the salience of context but also the permeability of organisational boundaries and in particular the translucent character of the organisation transformation concept.

The third primary category of meaning associated with transformation is that which equates it to *adaptation or alignment* with environmental change (indicated as core content in Table 2, and as an intention in Table 3). Transformation as adaptation represents a fusion of social and business objectives (18,6%). Adaptation during the normal course of business occurs naturally in response to environmental change, but in this instance largely as a reaction to socio-political (mostly legislative) change and to a lesser extent to globalisation (e.g. competitiveness).

TABLE 2
THE MEANING OF “TRANSFORMATION”:
VARIATION IN CONTENT PARAMETERS

No ^a	Themes of meaning: Transformation is...	f	%
1	Change in the staff/human resource profile <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving relationships between management and workforce, improving salaries and benefits, skills/capabilities and attitudes, and addressing the needs of the workforce ($f = 8$) Implementing employment equity i.e. ensuring representation of all groups, affirmative action, altering the staff profile through new appointments, affirmative promotions, staff replacement ($f = 20$) 	28	25,5
2	Structural change/restructuring (of the council, departments, functions, posts/jobs, budgets)	24	21,8
3	A general and non-descript form of change i.e. transformation is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change (e.g. change from an old to a new situation) or change in the organisation (“Council”) A change process (whether slow or radical, positive, unavoidable) Change management. 	15	13,6
4	Workplace change e.g. conditions, the way things are done, improving efficiency, service delivery	12	10,9
5	Change in institutional management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change in management style, approach and functioning (towards greater transparency) Change in the system of management/administrative management 	11	10,0
6	Adaptation/alignment to environmental change such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turbulence and environmental uncertainty Political change Legislative changes context (e.g. equity & skills Acts) 	11	10,0
7	No meaning or description offered or indicated as “don’t understand”	9	8,2
Total responses		110	100

^a Rank order based on frequency

TABLE 3
VARIATION IN THE PERCEIVED INTENTION OF TRANSFORMATION

No ^b	Themes of meaning: The intention of transformation is ^c ...f	%
1	To address people issues i.e. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accommodate and secure support from all staff, disadvantaged communities Ensure a representative staff profile, redress imbalances, and ensure optimal utilisation of potential 	27,9
2	Improved performance and functioning i.e. more effective, efficient and sustainable service delivery	23,3
3	Adaptation/alignment to environmental change, notably new legislation in respect of equity, skills development, and so forth	18,6
4	Development i.e. enacting a development role, creating jobs, alleviating poverty	11,6
5	General improvement i.e. change for the better	4,7
6	Diverse (reasons) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparent management Attending to the interests of the organisation Creating “things” Bringing about a change in mindset Disrupting order 	13,9
Total responses		100

^b Rank order based on frequency

^c Analysis of phrases following words “to”, “in order to”, and (in the Afrikaans) “om”, which have not been considered in the analysis reflected in Table 2

TABLE 4
TRANSFORMATION AS TYPE CHANGE:
MEANING PARAMETERS EXTRACTED FROM ACTION VERBS

No ^d	Perceived nature of transformation as type change: Transformation is ^e	f	%
Generic and “pure” types of change			
Probable Type I Change:^f			
1	Generic, non-descript change: Verbs: “change”, “changing”	23	25,5
4	Incremental change: Verbs: “improve”, “enhance”, “streamline”	8	8,9
4	Adaptive change: Verbs: “adapt”, “align”, “balance”	8	8,9
7	Continuous change: Verbs: “manage”, “run”, “running”	3	3,3
Probably approaching Type II Change:^g			
5	A qualitatively different type of change: Verbs: “transform”, “total change”, “radical change”, “rapid change”	7	7,7
Context bound change types^h			
2	Social change (Social context): Verbs: “empower”, “appoint”, “promote”, “replace”, “place”, “transfer”, and more generally: “correct”, “uplift”, “alleviate”	14	15,5
3	Behavioural change: Verbs: “tolerate”, “communicate”, “perform”, “do”, “implement”, “disrupt”	9	10
6	Structural change (organisational context): Verbs: “restructure”, “structure”	6	6,7
6	Cognitive change: Verbs: “review”, “see”, “learn”, “deny”	6	6,7
	Other diverse verbs (cited singularly): “introduce”, “establish”, “use”, “lose”, “demotivate”, “prescribe”	6	6,7
	Total responses	90	100

^d Rank order based on frequency.

^e Analysis of “verbs” that were directly stated in statements on the meaning of transformation.

^f Defined as a steady-state, incremental or step-by-step, sequential change, which evolves over extended periods of time, does not have a disruptive influence on the system and is generally perceived to be within the control of the system (Van Tonder, 2004a, p. 110)

^g Defined as Major, disruptive, unpredictable, paradigm-altering and system-wide change, which has a very sudden onset and escalates rapidly to a point where it is perceived as being beyond the control of the system (Van Tonder, 2004a, p. 111)

^h These types of change are more specific and could include Type I, Type II and hybrid (in-between) types of change.

A fourth but significant indicator of the meaning parameters of transformation, is conveyed by the relatively large number of responses that either *did not attempt to offer a meaning for transformation* or equated it simply to a non-descript, general type of change (a combined 21.8% of responses – Table 2). This uncertainty or lack of clarity is also reflected by those who indicated that transformation has a very general i.e. non-descript intention (Table 3) e.g. change for the better, or those who nominated a number of somewhat “removed” views/motives for transformation (e.g. “creating things”).

If we integrate the categories and frequencies of Tables 2 and 3 we observe that transformation is mostly interpreted to mean change in the human resource profile, followed by *structural, workplace, and adaptive change* (in response to environmental dynamics). When we turn to the action verbs (Table 4) which suggest the dynamics of this change type (“transformation”), we note less variation when compared with the nature and intention of transformation (Tables 2, 3). Although the different categories of change indicate that transformation can assume any of a number of change forms (*types*), the underlying character of the change reported in this study and how it unfolds, are strongly leaning towards *Type I* change (gradual, incremental in nature) regardless of the more specific context-bound renditions of the change. Contextualised change “types” can unfold in accordance with a gradual (Type I) or a dramatic and revolutionary (Type II) dynamic (cf. the punctuated equilibrium model – Gersick, 1991). Whereas transformation is most commonly associated with a change in state and therefore more likely to be radical, revolutionary and of substantial magnitude, the analysis of respondent commentary reflected in Tables 2 to 4 indicates, without exception, that respondents effectively considered transformation to be a more rather than less controllable form of change. This becomes clearer when the majority sentiment evidenced in the main themes of meaning (Tables 2 to 4) are compared with views expressed in the literature (Table 6). Equally evident is the degree of non-alignment between the generic meaning parameters extracted for change and *organisational change* (items 1 and 2, Table 6), and the content of *organisation transformation* definitions and descriptions (items 3, 4 and 5). If we momentarily disregard the divergent foci and emphases of scholars it would appear that espoused transformation theory and transformation theory-in-use (certainly in the target organisation) are technically strangers – at least in the South African context.

TABLE 5
CONSTITUENCY-SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Dimension	Constituency		
	Public Sector	Business	Organised labour
Definition of transformation	The dynamic, focused, short term process to fundamentally reshape the public service and achieve a unified, representative, transparent, effective and accountable public service.	A fundamental shift in the way in which business delivers value to customers and stakeholders, resulting in dramatic changes in strategies, processes, technology and the utilisation and management of human resources, to meet the needs of the global economy	The achievement of full worker rights and social equity flowing from political democratisation, followed by further evolution to socialism
Foci and constituting elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service delivery: restructuring, decentralisation, community partners • Equity through affirmative action and equitable employment conditions • Institutional support in the form of human resources training and development, democratisation and accountability, service ethos and a culture of diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restructuring: delayering, downsizing, and outsourcing of non-core business • Business process re-engineering: process value change and information technology • Human Resources: skills development, empowerment and leadership • Customers: quality, service, boundaryless organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs: creation and preservation • Fair labour practices: worker rights, non-discrimination, health and safety, training and development • Social equity: representivity and affirmative action, redistribution of wealth, eradication of poverty, social welfare • Socialism: regulated markets, worker control

(Adapted from McNamara, 1998)

TABLE 6
CONSISTENCY AND VARIATION IN THE MEANING PARAMETERS OF TRANSFORMATION AS TYPE CHANGE ACROSS THEORY AND PRACTICE¹

Literature-based views of organisational transformation	Practice-perspective on organisational transformation ¹
<p>1. GENERIC CHANGE definitions Emphasise process nature, role of time, manifest differences in pre-and post change conditions or states:</p>	<p>Commentary by respondents did not convey a notion of change that incorporates the dimensions of generic change as indicated. Indeed, literature-based definitions of transformation in most instances did not define the construct adequately in terms of most of the dimensions of this generic concept of change ("<i>time</i>" and pre- and post change "<i>differences</i>" being the most notable omissions).</p>
<p>2. ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE definitions Porras & Silvers (1991): Initiative that alters critical organisational processes, influence behaviours and impact organisational outcomes Van de Ven & Poole (1995): Difference in form, quality, or state over time of organisational entity Contemporary: Contextualise change as organisational, note differences in organisational behaviour from pre- to post change, change informed by nature of organisation</p>	<p>Some comments (an insignificant number) were provided which suggest the process as described by Porras and Silvers (1991). Generally commentary did not present a definition of the change that would qualify it as "organisational change". This observation holds also for literature-based definitions of organisation transformation, which do not incorporate these minimum definitional parameters of a change that is organisational in nature. Except for a few references to "Council" (which is still inadequate), there are very few (if any) indications that the target organisation has contextualised "transformation" for itself. This is born out by the salience of societal and business context issues permeating employee interpretations of the transformation process.</p>
<p>3. Organisational TRANSFORMATION DEFINITIONS Levy & Merry (1986) Second order change, multidimensional, multilevel, qualitative, discontinuous, radical, a paradigm shift (Emphasise <i>multifaceted</i> nature, <i>scope</i>, <i>non-enduring</i>, <i>cognition</i> change as component)</p>	<p>Although a few comments indicated more than one (diverging) intention of transformation, these were not indicative of a multilevel and multifaceted transformation construct. Empirical observations instead suggested a generic (incremental) concept of change.</p>
<p>Marshak (1993): Succession of states that differ fundamentally from one another Nutt & Backoff (1997): <i>Fundamental change</i>, increasing complexity, chaos, cultural metamorphosis Hill & Collins (2000): Transfiguration from one state to another Series of transitions with evolutionary and revolutionary moments</p>	<p>Fundamental or state change was not indicated (two comments indicating a change from the old to the new however alluded to state change – Table 2).</p>
<p>Blumental & Haspeslagh (1994): <i>Sustainable/enduring change, change in behaviour of majority</i> King (1997): Planned change, changing <i>majority of people</i>, to improve overall organisational performance, measured in long term financial success Kilmann (1995): Change in perceptions, thinking and beliefs of employees (emphasis: <i>cognitive</i> behaviour change) Mezirow (1994, 1995): Change in perspective/<i>cognition</i> is central Chapman (2002): Change in attitudes, beliefs, cultural values</p>	<p>The notion of behaviour change is not substantially indicated with only 10% (Tables 2 and 3) suggesting changes in management practice. Skills development was mentioned once (a fraction of a percentage). One comment on "mindset" change (Table 3) and about 6 comments conveying a preconscious nature, suggest change in cognition (Table 4). "Transformation" in this sense do not align with theory.</p>
<p>Ackerman (1986, 1997): Emergence of a new and unknown state from the remains of the old (Emphasise <i>unpredictability</i>, <i>scope</i>) Macintosh & Maclean (1999) rapid transition from one archetype to another. Proposed a dissipated structures approach which implies sudden unexpected and dramatic change (Emphasise <i>time</i>, <i>unpredictability</i>, <i>significant scope</i>). Van Tonder (1999, 2004a) Type II change (as distinct from Type I change) Emphasise major, disruptive, unpredictable, paradigm altering and system wide, with rapid onset and rapid escalation to perception of being beyond control (Emphasise <i>time</i>, <i>unpredictability</i>, <i>significant scope</i>, <i>severity</i>, <i>uncontrollability</i>)</p>	<p>With the exception of an insignificantly small number of comments that articulate the transformation as "rapid", "radical" and "total" (Table 4) which are suggestive of change characterised by "<i>time</i>" and "<i>scope</i>", the empirical results do not convey transformation as a severe, unpredictable, time-sensitive and uncontrollable phenomenon. Evidence of the converse is in fact prolific (refer "<i>probable Type I change</i>", Table 4). Although Type II change (Van Tonder, 2004a) is not a definition of "transformation" per se it nonetheless represents a multidimensional concept of change in the same category as that provided by Levy and Merry (1986), Macintosh and Maclean (1999), and Van de Ven and Poole (1995) – with some differences – which convey increasingly sophisticated conceptualisations of change as objective phenomenon. The results however echo the tendency of respondents to view change mostly (and inappropriately) as one-dimensional.</p>
<p>4. Transformation as CHANGE IN VARIABLE SETS Burke & Litwin (1989): Environment, mission, strategy, leadership, culture Porras & Silvers (1991): Purpose, beliefs, mission, vision Dunphy & Stace (1993): mission, core values, power, status, structures, systems, procedures, workflows, communication networks, appointment of executives</p>	<p>Provided commentary have identified <i>structures</i>, <i>staff</i> movements and appointments (which may include the appointment of some executives), and changes in <i>management</i> (more a question of style and practice) as variables that are leveraged during the transformation. Management do not necessarily constitute "leadership" and again, in terms of the indicated terminology, the reported "transformation" do not substantially align with that indicated by the literature.</p>
<p>5. Transformation as CHANGE TYPE in CHANGE TYPOLOGIES Ackerman (1986, 1997): Developmental, Transitional & Transformational Nadler & Tushman (1989): Tuning, adaptation, reorientation, recreation Bacharach et al. (1996): Change (continuous), Transformation (sporadic, realignment)</p>	<p>"Transformation" in this study resembles a form of change that is transitional (implementation of a known and controllable new state), likely to oscillate between <i>adaptation</i> (mostly) and <i>reorientation</i>, and <i>continuous</i> as opposed to sporadic (see Table 4 in particular).</p>
<p>6. DIFFERENT TYPES of transformation King (1997): transformation as organisational performance improvement, strategic performance, strategic renewal Dunphy & Stace (1993): Modular & Corporate Rooke & Torbert (1998): personal and organisational Neal et al. (1999): individual, organisational, societal</p>	<p>In terms of contextualised transformation types, the findings again suggest that for this institution "transformation" was more of a <i>performance improvement</i> (Table 3) and <i>strategic</i> though not necessarily "renewal", as core organisational constructs such as mission, vision, etc have not necessarily changed. It is also both <i>modular</i> and <i>corporate</i> (the change was confined to divisions, but in other instances seen as affecting the entire Council), clearly <i>not personal</i>, but <i>organisational</i> and to an insignificant extent, <i>societal</i> (refer development/job creation – Table 3).</p>

¹ Note that this perspective is a consideration of the strongest trends/majority sentiment emerging from the provided descriptions/meaning parameters ascribed to "transformation" (refer Tables 2, 3 and 4). It is not an attempt to establish the nature of the change(s) that may underlie or follow from the provided descriptive parameters.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation

Transformation does indeed present in many different guises. Both theory and practice attest to the universal use of the concept but it is certainly not a universally understood concept. While it may be true that the meaning of the concept changes with time and from person to person, and consequently retains a “chameleon-like” character (Tosey & Robinson, 2002), it is our contention that this is indicative of the translucent character of the concept, which stems from its ill-conceived nature. Transformation in fact has neither a substantive nor a distinctive character. As definitions of transformation are essentially nondescript and open to interpretation (being an inadequately defined stimulus) researchers, practitioners and employees “colour” transparency from their perspective. The concept has the appearance of a fluid and changing character because researchers and practitioners thus far tended to project and inject meaning onto and into a *vague* transformation “stimulus” in an attempt to make sense of it. In so doing they will call on pre-existing schemata about major change and/or organisational transformation simply as the existing definitional frameworks for the transformation concept are too lean and general. People do not approach situations as neutral observers but bring their wishes and expectations with them (Smith, 1998) and will perceive organisational change events in a distinctly personal manner and create their own interpretations of what the change entails and could translate into (Van Tonder, 2004a, p. 186) – more so when inadequate information is provided prior to or during the change process (Coghlan, 1993). The likelihood of unrealistic expectations or fears, or both, each with its commensurate response patterns and behaviours, is therefore very high and could in and of itself fuel destabilisation and resistance to the transformation.

Changes in context signify changes in concept – in this instance the perceived nature and intention of transformation (cf. Bolton & Heap, 2002; Van Tonder, 2004b). Because of its ambiguous (inadequately specified) and pliable nature, contextual parameters have to be clarified if employees are to interpret correctly the term *organisational transformation*. The recorded results for example illustrate how broader socio-political dynamics and global business trends as features of the macro-context have been internalised by employees, and convey the relative ease with which these are brought to bear in the organisational setting. The results also represent a fusion of different contextual considerations within a single institution and convey a strong sense of the permeability of organisational boundaries and the difficulty of “managing meaning” (cf. Weick, 1995) within organisational settings. In essence, the recorded results of this brief empirical exploration of the transformation concept once again confirm how variation in response patterns is indicative of *stimulus ambiguity* and the *unmoderated role of contextual influences*. Both are de facto comments on the role of change agents and managers tasked with the responsibility of navigating the organisation through major change.

Conclusions

Despite its ambiguous nature, *transformation* has remained in the change vocabulary of scholars past and present for a number of plausible reasons. The first in this regard is the concept’s ambiguity, which enables its continuous “redefinition” or rather reinterpretation from within the framework of new or emerging theory – in a way that ensures its continuous compatibility with contemporary organisational thinking. Moreover, it appears to perform a useful function in that it at least provides an *additional* change concept for use by the general public and non-scientifically inclined audiences. In a very crude manner *transformation* (and

organisational transformation) enables them to draw a distinction at a very general level between (two) different types of change i.e. when the variation observed by these populations appear difficult to reconcile with a single descriptive term such as change (or *organisational change*). *Transformation* could now be used instead of change when a different form/type of change – say a change of substantial magnitude – is observed. Thirdly, and paradoxically, “transformation” may have more descriptive power than other types of change such as radical change or discontinuous change simply as the properties of these change concepts are far more narrowly conceived. “Transformation” as concept is more encompassing and most perspectives on transformation incorporate several of the lean descriptions with which different change types such as those indicated have been characterised. This, however, merely confirms that transformation as change type is *not* the worst of the number of ill-conceived change concepts in circulation.

The variation in meaning parameters observed among management respondents is cause for concern. Managerial employees, in particular those that are located higher up in the hierarchy, are generally better informed about the nature and intention of major change initiatives. This is not the case in the current study. This lack of information is precisely the reason why confusion tends to proliferate at lower levels and consequently it can only be surmised what the degree of variation in the meaning of transformation would be at these levels. In this regard the results sensitise the reader to the very high probability that not only transformation but any other major change initiative defined in general terms, is bound to be misconstrued and that substantial variation in the ascribed meaning to the change is likely to be the norm rather than the exception. In view of the substantial variation that was noted in the meaning parameters attributed to “transformation” in this study, we have to question the usefulness of “organisational transformation” as a descriptive label. In its current form the concept is too nondescript and lacks the specificity to inform meaningful organisational change practices. It must be concluded that even when it is employed as a symbol, a “rallying cry”, or as a manifestation of a particular philosophy or policy, “*transformation*” or “*organisational transformation*” appears to add little in terms of descriptive clarity. When it is employed in this format managerial change practices are effectively limited to general interventions that are incapable of accurately and completely addressing the recorded variance (see for example Tables 2 to 4). On the other hand the risk of not identifying and purposefully aligning variation in the meaning parameters that employees associate with “transformation” or any other large scale change initiative, substantially exposes the organisation to the typical consequences of such ill-defined change concepts. These include, for example, unrealistic or inappropriate expectations and/or demands that could materially retard or derail change processes, erode interaction and existing intra-organisational relationships and trust levels, and ultimately compromise operational effectiveness and ignite spiralling cost structures. We have to conclude that without explicit, organisation-specific clarification, transformation will serve no useful purpose to either the employee or the organisation and will only inject further confusion into the traditionally ambiguous domain of organisational change.

At a more general level the results revealed how constructs that are presented merely in a label-format (e.g. *transformation*, *re-engineering*, *restructuring*, *downsizing*, *quality improvement*) without explicitly probing the employee-ascribed meaning, or providing an explicit (indeed redundant) operational definition of the constructs that are being measured, are likely to mask substantial variance. It is submitted that such variance will be directly proportional to stimulus ambiguity and will be informed by the respondent’s idiosyncratic meaning

creation processes, which in turn are informed by personal schemata and other prominent contextual influences (e.g. organisational culture, organisational dynamics, societal issues, and the like). At the level of application many contemporary practices that may be premised on presumed commonly understood constructs but in reality may be anchored in substantial yet tacit variance come to mind (e.g. engaging foreign consultants to broker a South African transformation or reengineering process). Unless context is precisely discounted in the process, the investment in these initiatives may be at risk. Indeed, it is not the short term (initial) "successes" but the medium term sustainability of a major change initiative that conveys successful change.

Recommendations

It needs to be recognised that organisational strategies that claim to succeed in dealing effectively with multiple and diverse yet tacit viewpoints, are logically implausible not only because they are exceedingly difficult to conceptualise, but above all for the fact that "one-size-fits-all" change management strategies are unlikely to attend to a more complete and representative reality at the level of implementation. Moreover, most change processes and change management recommendations tend to be superficial (Kets de Vries, 1998) and are based on unchallenged assumptions (Doyle, 2002). The difficulty of organisational change (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Garofalo, 2003) appears to go unnoticed or is simply underestimated. Either way, "N-step programmes"⁶ (Collins, 1998) are still the preferred model for dealing with any and all forms of change. Unsurprisingly these approaches are not succeeding in their objectives as much as it is claimed and dismal results are still the overwhelming outcome, indeed, the literature conveys a consistent failure rate varying between 65% and 75% (cf. Van Tonder, 2004a; 2004b). The typical generic, planned change models and programmes consisting of for example 5, 7 or N different steps or stages assume precisely that all employees, groups, and ultimately organisations perceive, experience, and react to change in a consistently similar fashion. This practice is perpetuated despite the fact that people experience change in different ways (Carnall, 1986) – even at managerial levels (Taylor, 1999; Terry & Callan, 1997; Worrall & Cooper, 1999), and differ in terms of their willingness to adapt to change (Darling, 1993). The fallacious nature of this form of reasoning is of course further revealed by the results of this study, which is consistent with Pettigrew and Whipp's (1993) assertion that there are no universal rules for dealing with change.

Fortunately some realisation is dawning (albeit slowly) that traditional organisational change models do not provide adequate guidelines for specific contexts and that "successful" change will require translation and application of relevant information to specific contexts (Buchanan & Badham, 1999). This is precisely the point concerning the need for *contextualising change* or aligning change initiatives with the context of implementation (Berger, 1992; Bolton & Heap, 2002; Hailey & Balogun, 2002; Oxtoby, McGuinness & Morgan, 2002; Pettigrew, 1988, 1990), and the more recently indicated *need for greater specificity in the conceptualisation* of organisational change (R.T. Golembiewski, personal communication, 03 February 2004; Van Tonder, 2004b).

The most obvious implication for researchers, managers and practitioners is that *change and transformation initiatives need to become substantially more organisation-specific, focused, and above all, precise in their conceptualisation*, prior to launching into any form of action. Such an approach would control substantially for context (macro and organisational) and reduce stimulus-ambiguity – leaving less room for variation in employee interpretations of the change (specifics are more amenable to "management" than are generalities). Though an

emotional response to any and all change initiatives is unavoidable, emotional "noise" in this instance will be minimised, less "free floating", and certainly justified as they will be informed by appropriate expectations and fears. It is submitted that this principle, if applied consistently, will help to minimise the inevitable downside of change to which Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) make reference, and would certainly contribute to a substantial reduction in the unintended consequences of organisational change (Applebaum, Henson & Knee, 1999), which have become a costly trademark of change initiatives regardless of whether they are considered successful or otherwise.

The second major implication that emerges from the need for specificity and precision is that the *breadth and depth of change analysis* prior to engaging in any form of organisational action, should intensify and deepen significantly. This is in fact a prerequisite for complying with the parameter of greater specificity and precision. In itself this is a daunting task that should not be underestimated – particularly in view of the increasingly unreflective manner in which most change initiatives are dealt with (Barker, 1994). The latter may in fact account for the observed organisational ignorance of the stress that employees endure during organisational change as well as the inefficiency, costs, and risks that accompany such change (Doyle, 2002). More recently a similar point has been argued when it was stated that studies of change have tended to focus on the organisational dimensions of change processes at the expense of variations in individual perceptions of, and responses to change (Bamford & Forrester, 2003, p. 546; French & Delahye, 1996). Again the findings reported in this brief study underscore this observation.

This however also presents a challenge to those tasked with the responsibility to oversee the organisation's response to imposed change and/or its approach to self-initiated change. Perhaps the most consistent observation in the literature about change management practices, other than the poor success rate, is that management is ill-equipped for dealing with change (Buch & Aldridge, 1990) and is often cited as the main cause of the poor change management results (Jewell & Linnard, 1992; Stuart, 1996). In their attempts to transform the organisation they are likely to undermine change efforts (Kotter, 1995) and could in fact destroy the very capabilities that sustain the organisation (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Worrall, Cooper & Campbell-Jamison, 2000). Managerial deficiencies in the organisational change domain are documented only too well and range from lacking adequate change related knowledge and skills or displaying skewed knowledge levels (Applebaum et al., 1999; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Cameron, 1994; Church, Siegal, Javitch, Waclawski & Burke, 1996; Laabs, 1996) to not being able to comprehend and attend to the more psychological aspects of the change (Dehler & Welsh, 1994). The problem does not end with the line manager of course and applies equally to human resource professionals who are regularly demonstrated to be inessential during major change initiatives and in fact often performed a harmful role during these initiatives (Applebaum, et al., 1999). An obvious recommendation then is the intense and effective re-education and training of managers in the science and practice of organisational change – a need that has been stated repeatedly in the past (Belasen, Benke, Di Padova & Fortunato, 1996; Francis, Bessant & Hobday, 2003; Worrall et al., 2000).

Limitations of the study

The study did not utilise key informants and instead elected to draw on a sample of respondents. The composition of the sample in turn slanted towards middle and senior management and was under represented in the area of language (with Afrikaans being dominant at approximately 74%). The latter,

⁶ Referred to as overly programmatic, structured, and linear (sequential) yet generic change management models and programmes.

which serves as a conduit for culture (and value systems), suggests the possibility that different vantage points on transformation may not have been sampled during the study. Future research obviously needs to compensate for the somewhat skewed distribution of respondents and if a similar methodology is pursued, attempt to expand the sample size. The typical ailments of questionnaire methodologies of course also apply – in particular where participants complete the questionnaires independently. This obviously implies exercising greater caution when interpreting results and a continuous search for improved methodologies. Moreover, the study was limited to a single local government institution and it is likely that the relative emphasis on different intentions of transformation may shift or be less pronounced in for-profit institutions. It would similarly be illuminating to establish the nature and degree of variation in the meaning parameters that may be ascribed to transformation within public sector and non-governmental institutions.

Suggestions for further research

Future research efforts would be more usefully directed at establishing the relationship between the clarity and specificity of conceptualising and articulating transformation initiatives and the variation and intensity of employee perceptions and responses to the change. Secondly, variation in the scope and nature of the unintended (and undesirable) consequences of transformation (and other forms of major change) in relation to the degree of specificity and contextualisation of the change initiatives, should similarly be established and predictor variables isolated. Thirdly, to simply argue for and institute a participatory approach to change management is unlikely to suffice if the nature of the transformation and change has not been adequately dealt with at a conceptual level. Finding ways and means of modifying change practices so that the meaning parameters and mindsets pertaining to the transformation or change can be aligned and internalised, would contribute substantially to more effective change practices.

In closing, it would appear that “organisational transformation” or transformational change as change *type* appears to be reasonably well embedded at the academic discourse and organisational practice levels, but its use is fraught with complexities. At the academic discourse level it appears to have been used largely as a more expanded version of second-order change which, for this reason, makes it a preferred choice above lean and singular descriptions of radical, discontinuous, or revolutionary change. Its theoretical and conceptual underpinnings however, are at best limited and as such do not provide a meaningful platform from which to pursue systematic and rigorous research. The pliable nature of the concept demonstrated the very important principle of extracting and confirming meaning structures at a greater level of detail rather than dealing with change at a general and abstract level. While this is true for most conceptualisations of change both in research and practice, it is certainly more so for the very transparent and chameleon-like notion of organisation transformation. At the practice level it appears to be useful in differentiating at a very general level between two qualitatively different types of change in organisations, but this in itself is insufficient cause. This study demonstrated that the meaning parameters ascribed to the concept within the organisation may vary substantially and suggests that the widespread use of the concept as a commonly understood phenomenon is invalid. Transformation is in fact shrouded in ambiguity and likely to be more problematic than beneficial to organisations in its current form of usage. For it to be usefully employed in organisational settings and change practices, it will have to be substantially contextualised and explicitly delineated for every event and every institution.

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