Creating Sustainable Change:  
A new paradigm in Project Management

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Abstract  
Projects can be seen as a system to realize change in organizations. This change can involve new work processes, new policies, new resources, new products or services, etc. Sustainable change in these policies, processes, products, etc, requires different behavior of the workers or employees of the organization. It is, however, this aspect of change that most projects seem to oversee.  
In this paper, we will argue that changing or influencing the behavior of an organization’s employees is a crucial element in realizing change. The contemporary insights in human behavior and behavioral change, however, seem to contradict the more mechanical approach to projects that most project management methodologies prescribe. Controlling behavioral change, if possible, may require a different paradigm to projects and organizational change. Our paper will shed some light on this contradictory topic and will provide practical suggestions for the integration of behavioral change aspects in project management.

Keywords  
Project management, Sustainable Change, Management of Change

Introduction  
Projects can be considered as temporary organizations (Turner and Müller, 2003) that deliver (any kind of) change to organizations, products, services, policies or assets (Gareis, 2010). Successful change most often requires a change of human behavior and therefore is influenced by the motivation to overcome resistance to change (Kotter, 1996). Gareis (2010), however, concludes that this kind of change is not adequately recognized in project management and that “specific change methods are to be applied according to the specific change requirements”. This paper provides an overview and practical suggestions for the integration of behavioral change aspects in both portfolio and project management. The question asked is how to realize sustainable behavioral change (when that is intended with the project)?

Many publications (e.g. Boonstra, 2004; Cummings and Worley, 1996) show a managerial perspective on change: behavioral change is something that can be planned and managed top-down. However, this perspective is increasingly being questioned. People are free individuals who decide for themselves to show certain behavior. All attempts made in the past to force members of the organization to behave differently and the rewarding or punishing act on it has never led to sustainable behavioral change. It led to short-term changes with fall-back (Anderson, 2002; Beer 1990; Homan, 2005). This perspective creates this paper’s main question: which circumstances need to be created by project in order to make sustainable behavioral change occur?

In this paper we focus on how the ‘forgotten group’ in organizations, the employees, experience change in projects. In the next paragraph will elaborate on what is meant with this ‘forgotten group’. We will then look at change from the perspective of this group. How do employees experience changes? How do they handle changes? When are they effected by change? When do they change their behavior permanently? By practicing this perspective we will gained interesting insights, for example that managing for shorter lead times for projects actually hinders sustainable behavioral change. The paper will be concluded with some recommendations on how to connect with employees and integrate behavioral change into projects and project portfolios.

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The ‘forgotten group’

Employee’s are all different. Not only different in personality, skills and knowledge, but also in how they handle changes. We believe the an important group of stakeholders are often forgotten and get little or no attention in organizational changes, although this is the most important group concerning sustainable behavioral change. Employee’s can be distinguished in different groups when looking at change and adoption of innovation (Rogers, 1983).

Figure 1: adoption of change (based on Rogers, 1983).

The innovators are the ones that are eager to try new ideas and adapt quickly to the change process. They are often already involved in the initiation and preparation phase of the change. The next group are the early adopters whom are positive towards change. They will follow the innovators soon in the change process and give candid feedback to help to refine the change. Another group are the laggards, whom don’t want to adopt change and always will be skeptics. The majority of the population (almost 66%) are early majority and late majority. This majority is often reserved, need proof and is withholding from publicly expressing their opinion on change. They choose they strategy to be quite , because they think they will harm their relationship with their manager if they express their opinion (Milliken et al., 2003). We believe them to be the ‘forgotten group’ in organizational change, and lack getting attention. First of all for they don’t claim attention on their own and secondly for many change managers lack to focus on this group during changes.

Looking into more detail to this group, they can be found to be characterized, contrary to the other groups, by aspects such as loyalty to the organization. They tend to stay working for the organization for a long period of time and don’t search for another employer quickly. They presume to be a stable factor in the organization, for they are continuous, reliable, live up to the rules (unlike innovators) and perform their work as should. They don’t draw attention and don’t complain like other groups (such as innovators and laggards), for which the organization should be grateful. They’re not easy to let to believe and have seen many change come and go. Serenity is the key word when a new change has set in. As in organizations many changes occur simultaneously, they have become immune for all those changes. This group has close contacts, for the social environment is very important for them and an important measures for their working environment are enjoyable and pleasant. Due to the intensive interaction within the group, they have strong common believes: this is how our organization works. This group has less contact with executives, whom have a place outside their confidential network. These are the two mean reasons why they feel and experience less necessity for all changes. It is evident that this group is hard to reach for and get in contact with; they also react on change differently than innovators. Looking into sustainable behavioral change from the perspective of this group is putting on some more spectacles. One of them is how they handle the psychological contract that was closed when they were employed. The second one is how this group proceeds a change. What is the individual change cycle of members of this group? The third one is what happens in this group when a change is (top down) commenced.

Psychological contract

A psychological contract is a psychological relation between the employee and the employer, a concept used for a long time and is first named by Chris Argyris (1960). Although a psychological contract, unlike an employment contract, isn’t legal, it is an essential part of the work relation. It always concerns reciprocity and is specific to a specific situation. The psychological contract takes effect during the commencement of the employee, whom believes to supply the organization with the following rewards: devotion, skills, loyalty, etc. and expects in return from the employer different things, such as career prospects, a pleasant working environment, stability in the organization, etc. The relationship between fulfilling the psychological contract and mutual trust between employee and employer is very strong (Robinson, 1996). The following definition applies on psychological contract: the psychological contract consists of a perception of commitment between employer and employee, declared or implicit, on their relationship of exchange.
Due to all sorts of changes (personal and organizational) the psychological contract is dynamic and changes over time. Younger employees are looking for different factors than employees mid 40. Employers can break, often without even knowing, the psychological contract, as they are unable to keep track of what employees want and are sometimes unable to live up the employee’s expectations. Often from executive’s perspective it is unclear that the psychological contract is broken as a consequence of organizational changes. In case it isn’t addressed effectively, it can lead to obstruction, negligent omission, late arrival, departing of ‘mental absence’. The employee’s expectations haven’t been met and will therefore lose motivation to perform. How does our forgotten group react on the breaking of the psychological contract by the organization? It shows that employee can react in four different ways when they are unhappy (e.g., for instance when the psychological contract is broken) and it’s called: exit, voice, neglect and loyalty (Rusbult, 1988; Withey, 1989). Exit consists of searching for another job outside the organization, voice the attempt to improve the situation by expressing themselves, neglect is ignoring the feelings of unhappiness and loyalty is keeping devotion for the organization and continue to support. We believe the forgotten group firmly keep to the psychological contract that has been entered in the beginning. In case the organization breaks the contract, the reaction is generally loyalty or neglect. Voice and exit are seldom chosen. The forgotten group goes on, stays loyal, but notice a strong reaction in feelings and believes. When the psychological contract is broken by the organization multiple times, this group will become more suspicious, will try to ignore the changes more often and will continue working as it is. The current behavior is even more secured

The individual change cycle in the ‘forgotten group’

Generally a personal change process occurs according to a regular pattern, e.g., for instance the Kübler-Ross (1969) model on grieve, John Fisher’s (1999) personal transition curve and De Caluwé’s ‘individual change cycle’ (2001). A personal change is characterized by the factor of time and a period of relapse. De Caluwé describes the process as follows:

![Figure 2: The individual change cycle.](image)

People experience and process a change the same as an development process with several milestones. At the beginning (1) the group listens to the proposed changes without many emotions; for them life goes on. Subsequently originates resistance (2), this may happen passively or not, against the idea that the former way of working no longer holds up. Slowly the consciousness grows on what is happening and lead to anger (4): they become insecure and react unreasonably. After growing over the anger, they will doubt (5) the ideas they once had on the former situation and realize the positive site of it. Now change managers often believe to have reached the goal. People involved often relapse in a passive attitude and depression (6) due to the fact that the old habits now definitely have to be said farewell and the ‘inevitable’ start to sink in. Little by little (by trial and error) the new behavior will be experimented on (7) until they accept the new situation (8). The new knowledge and skills become more integrated and experienced.

According to De Caluwé, behavioral changes can be interpreted as learning processes which, under the right circumstances, can be developed in approximately two years time according to the described learning curve, in which each phase has its own characteristics. The first phase is the one of fast learning and the corresponding relapse. The second phase is that of recovery and learning gradually new skills. The first phase of the learning process characterizes by:
- Decide whether it is pleasant and useful
- Imitate and copy behavior
- From the outside in: the change is being handed to them

In the second phase learning is of the following kind:
- How important do I believe it is?
- How can I do it my way?
- Does it suit me and my work style?
- How does the change integrate in my work style?
- How much energy am I willing to put in?

This shows that sustainability (in terms of continuous behavioral change) isn’t realizable on short term. It requires time and playground in which in the second phase employees can experiment. Also psychotherapists confirm the long term character of sustainable behavioral change; there is consensus within this profession that it takes at least one year to be able to report on the long term effect in individual change processes.

Considering that the forgotten group are different from innovators who immediately embrace a change, we can state that for the total change process members of the forgotten group need at least one year time, if not two. The chance of relapse into primary behaviour and old habits is large when only little time has been given to the group for this process.

We also like to state that the forgotten group reacts less expressive to changes. The different stages are more difficult to perceive within this group. Anger will be less visible and resistance will be of a silent one. It is therefore more difficult to perceive in which point of the change cycle this group is and when this group has finished the entire change cycle.

What really happens up to now (from an employee’s perspective)

Many changes are still commenced top-down and are often announced with conceptual words as: customer focused, more commercial, professional, different gamma of products, new markets, improved positioning, etc. Words for which all of those involved have to define a ‘colour locale’. In organizations consisting of different management levels, changes often start with meeting between highest and middle management, even long before employees are informed.

Considering the time aspect the middle manager, who is in stage 3 of the individual change cycle, is (explicitly) asked by the higher management to implement the change within the rest of the organization. As this manager hasn’t endured the change himself completely, will experience difficulty supporting the change authentically. The forgotten group, the majority of the population involved with the change, reacts with silent resistance. They won’t explicitly express their disagreement (voice) or even leave (exit). They will keep distance, interact with each other during coffee breaks, when they will create meaning to the changes within the organization. This happens without contact with their executives, whom have a place outside their confidential network. The forgotten group experiences the proposed change as an attack on their expertise! After all, they believe that without their loyal dedication and continuity the organization won’t have survived all previous urges of change from colleagues and top management. Due to their personality they will express this message silently. Their personal change cycle simply doesn’t start yet. This means also that the middle manager, positioned outside their confidential network, will receive little reaction from the group when attempting to connect with the group and to create learning or experimental space. The visible reactions are less fierce then those of other groups. It takes time for the forgotten group to be able to assess their functioning in a changing environment and to, eventually, change their behavior. Examining the relationship between the change cycles of the innovators and cynics on the one site and the forgotten group on the other site, we presume Figure 2 based on the above mentioned rhythm.

How to connect with the forgotten group?

A sustainable organizational change can only be achieved when the forgotten group as endured the sustainable change. Actually connecting with this group is therefore a highest priority. How can you connect with the forgotten group? The
most important (and most difficult) thing to do is of course to accept their characteristics and believes! Still there are ways to really connect and stay connected with this group and use this time as effectively as possible. It is important to create a productive organization climate (Schneider, 1996). First of all by creating stable circumstances. It is important that the forgotten group’s executive is a reliable leader and this manager for a longer period of time has shown to really support the group and communicate an honest, integer and consistent statement. The forgotten group has no sympathy for an ambitious manager, who is only interested in “talking along” and a fast moving career. De proposed change has to be a necessity and logical for the group, and in the meantime no big leaps forward, but small clear steps. The group is best addressed with clarifying, realistic and to their work identifiable or relating change proposals. Instead of announcing the company has to become more ‘customer dedicated’, it is better to announce “for the call centers we like for every complaint to be resolved within two days with satisfaction of the client, whom we contact within 2 days. In order to be able to achieve this, extra employees will be hired”. The change has to suit their ideas of reality. A perfect example of this concept was when an indigenous tribe was touring in Jakarta, Indonesia, to experience the latest developments. Afterwards they were asked what the remembered most. They hadn’t noticed the cars, sky scrapers, elevators, new roads, shopping malls, computers or hospitals, but the carrier cycle/delivery tricycle that carried 100 clustered bananas simultaneously. In their tribe it was usual for the men to carry the bananas their selves. For them it was the most important development. Create space for the forgotten group, with their ideas of reality, their skills, and based on clear outlines, to translate the change to their daily practice. Let them develop their own skills instead of enforcing commercial rhetoric of bigger, better, profitable and shareholders’ equity.

Connecting to the forgotten group can also be seen from coherent change rhythms in organizations. Brown and Schneider (1997) use the term ‘time-paced evolution’. After all, we’ve established that the forgotten group require relatively more time to endure a change. This means, however, that the other groups are already adapting to the next change, while the forgotten group is still finishing the first change. To connect with the forgotten group and ensuring them enough time for really endure the entire change, it is best to develop coherent change rhythms: high impact (behavioral) change will be followed by more instrumental changes.

Conclusions and reflection

In order to create sustainable change by members of the organization (change in behavior en therefore also change in personal and collective believes), the following can be concluded.

1. Changes commenced top-down lack synchronization between the timescales of managers and employees. Managers already have, not knowing, a year lead and therefore impatient to finish the change. Therefore they understand employee’s less, for they are currently in a different stage.
2. Due to the fact that projects often stop at point 5, changes don’t become sustainable. Accept that sustainable (behavioral) change take time; 1 to 2 years for every individual to endure the entire process. Don’t stop a project in case point 7 of the individual change curve has been achieved. We believe that the current paradigm in project management (close projects as soon as possible) is a mismatch to sustainable behavioral change. Projects can function as a social emergency and experiment space for the development of new behavior. Therefore projects might end up taking more time.
3. Choose a approach/perspective on change that relates to behavioral changes. There are two main advantages: there will be less difference in synchronization between managers and employees, behavior will be more sustainable and the executive can support someone in their individual change cycle (mentoring).
4. Choose a coherent change rhythm in the project portfolio to which radical changes can be varied with instrumental changes. These changes, however, have to be parallel to the large strategy changes assuming the company’s strategy is consistent for several years.
5. Accept that sustainable change can’t be a top-down initiative; employees decided whether the behavioral change will become sustainable or a farce.

From the conclusions above, some new question arise. First of all we wonder whether long term change project stand a chance within the current social and economical developments. The competition game requires, unlike in the past, to react faster and the market has been expanded to the entire world. In a certain way we are all forced to adapt faster, even the forgotten group. After all, survival of the fittest doesn’t concern the strongest one, but the one adapting the quickest and the best. We all stand that chance. The second question is if management focuses too much on the doable. Doable products and processes, but also doable employees, even giving extra time for this. Wouldn’t it be better for employers and managers to accept more and learn to capacitate the characters and skills of the current staffing/workforce/resourcing to realize the company’s strategy. We believe there is a place within the organization for every skilled professional with his/her unique character, however, sometimes not within the organization they are currently working for.

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