Chapter 11
Towards a Multidimensional Explanatory Approach to Voluntary Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT

At the theoretical level, several authors have modeled the progression of change, which has given rise to several explanatory processes of change (planned, political, interpretative, incremental, complex processes, etc.). Each process has particular change characteristics. The empirical results showed the coexistence and complementarity of several explanatory processes of change to explain the change observed in the projects planned by the senior management. In this descriptive chapter, we present a synthesis of the different characteristics of the explanatory processes of change as well as the empirical results of their confrontation in the field. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the importance of the different characteristics of change that shift up over time. A consideration of this aspect will allow managers to better target the managerial actions to be implemented throughout the change process in order to succeed it.

INTRODUCTION

Starting in the 1960s, many researchers have tried to explain organizational change. Their work gave rise to two explanatory approaches for change: the deterministic approach and the voluntarist approach.

According to the deterministic approach, change is imposed (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Woodward, 1965; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Mintzberg, 1982). It represents an organization response to internal pressures or changes in the environment. This approach is criticized by cognitive school theorists because it attributes a passive and reductive role to business leaders (Reitter et al., 1991; Laroche, 1997).

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Criticism addressed to the determinist approach reveals a second research approach namely “the voluntarist approach”. The latter postulates that the choice to initiate or not a change depends on the will of the actors and their strategic choices (Bennis, 1969; Beckhard, 1975; Beer, 1976; French and Bell, 1978).

The theorists of deterministic and voluntarist approaches deal with the question: why does the company change? They explain the reasons of the organizational change. However, recent work addresses the question: how does the company change? They are interested in explaining the progression of change over time (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). Several authors have modeled the progression of change, which has given rise to several explanatory processes of change (planned, political, interpretative, incremental, complex processes, etc.) (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; Vas, 2005; Lengendre et al., 2006; Pichault, 2009). Each of these processes has particular characteristics of change.

In this context, several authors (Vas and Ingham, 2002; Beldi, 2004; Vas, 2005; Pichault, 2013; Sghari, 2013; Sghari et al., 2016) have raised a question: at the empirical level, is there a dominant explanatory process to understand and explain the observed change or can explanatory processes of change coexist to explain it? The reply to this question showed the coexistence and complementarity of several explanatory processes of change to explain the change observed in the projects planned by the senior management (Vas and Ingham, 2002; Beldi, 2004; Vas, 2005; Cicconi and Soparnot, 2010; Pichault, 2013; Sghari, 2013; 2016; Sghari et al., 2015; Sghari et al., 2016).

Given the high number of the cited researches, it is difficult for the reader to have a global and synthetic vision of the research work dealing with the management of organizational change. Thus, it would be very interesting to propose a researches summary dealing with organizational change in order to facilitate the comprehension of the theoretical basis of organizational change and consequently the management of organizational projects introducing changes. In this descriptive chapter, the authors present a synthesis of the different characteristics of the explanatory processes of change as well as the empirical results of their confrontation in the field.

THE PROCESS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Organizational change can be approached from three perspectives: content perspective, contextual perspective, and process perspective. The first one explores and explains change in terms of its impact on different components of the organization (Shirley, 1975). The second one focuses on forces or conditions existing in an organization’s external and internal environments (Pettigrew, 1985a; 1985b; Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999). According Pettigrew (1985a; 1985b), studies dealing with organizational change must take into consideration the context in which change is evolving. The third one, to which this study adheres, deals with temporal dynamics relating to the progression of change. In the latter perspective, change is considered as the passage from an initial, primary state to a secondary state which is empirically observed via differences in form, quality, or the state of the entity (individual work, group work, organizational strategies, programs, products, or entire organizations) through time (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Several authors have modeled the progression of change according to the different explanatory processes of change presented in Table 1.

At the empirical level, is there a dominant explanatory process to understand and explain the observed change or can explanatory processes of change coexist to explain it? The answer to this question is discussed in the next section.