

**AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE:
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS**

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ABSTRACT

The way in which workers and managers interpret change at work has been an important focus of interest for researchers. This interpretation may find them assimilating change as they listen to accounts from other workers experienced in the outcomes of such events. On the other hand, there may be a divergence among workers concerning the value and meaning to be ascribed to the change events. If this is the case, a culture of ambiguity may be said to exist, where the nature, degree and value of the cultural change are highly contested and remarkably unclear (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2005). Following Piderit (2000), this paper suggests this may explain the disparity between an individual's expectancy of change and their response to it, and also that, individuals' ambivalence may influence whether they accept change, adapt to it, or reject it out-of-hand, . We show how different dimensions of ambivalence in different individuals can lead not only to different responses to imposed change at work, but can also account for individuals coming to terms with the demands of change.

INTRODUCTION: AMIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE

How individuals respond to change can be complex. Whilst an individual may welcome the imposed changes in theory, in practice they may find its implementation uncongenial. Such variance of response is sometimes referred to as ambivalence.

Ambivalence, it is suggested here, involves differences across the cognitive,

emotional and intentional dimensions of response to change (Piderit, 2000: 784).

Identifying these different dimensions can allow a rethinking of the concept of resistance and attitudes towards organizational change. For example, Piderit suggests that an individual may be cognitively in favour of a change, whilst being uncertain about the ethical dilemma involved. In this sense, the individual may not be resistant so much as reluctant to accept the change imposed (Watson, 1982). A change may be good for the business, but is it right? If there is ambivalence between these dimensions, the question arises whether it can be reconciled by the individual.

The implication of this distinction is that evaluation of change may find individuals intellectually convinced but emotionally or ethically challenged, and this allows the researcher to view the effects of change as an emergent process as individuals come to terms (or not) with perceived contradiction (Casey, 1995; Gabriel, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). According to Piderit (2000: 791), 'both scholars and managers need to pay more attention to the dynamic processes that help to acknowledge and sustain ambivalence without letting it impede the momentum of change'. In this view, ambivalence may even be an opportunity for individuals to reassess how they view their working life as they make sense of change. For researchers there can be a benefit in monitoring these dimensions of response to change over time, paying more attention to the events that are perceived as ambiguous and seeking to understand how ambivalent dimensions of response may mean that assimilation is either quite possible or very unlikely. For change agents this may generate new possibilities for understanding how intervention in change events influences different levels of individual response.

There are some who welcome the opportunity of examining emergent change in detail, so that divergence between individual views is to be welcomed (Buchanan & Badham, 1999; Collins, 1998; Dawson, 1994; Erikson & Hunt, 1997; Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997; Preece *et al.*, 1999). What becomes significant to the research that focuses on such difference is the actors' ability to refashion, reshape and redefine the cultural values, prescriptions and mechanisms about which they are ambivalent (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2005: 71). In the context of organizational culture, for example, ambiguity has been described as a disparity between the conceptual content theme of the organization and its practices at the departmental level (Martin & Meyerson, 1988: 106). Differences between departmental practice and the organization's espoused values may diverge so significantly from each other that the content theme intended to unite people within the organization is no longer sustainable.

McLoughlin *et al.*, (2005: 74) refer to this as the 'devil in the detail' of change, which can become an issue of contention and dispute among workers who identified that the care espoused in managers' rhetoric was not always demonstrated in some of the outcomes of the change programme as it unfolded. This is seen, however, as an opportunity for a 'learning dynamic' to unfold; in that 'embedded uncertainty' about the change and its implications will stimulate challenge and debate among all those involved as 'managers and workers appear to be faced with substantial and on-going ambiguities about the nature and depth of the initiatives that are undertaken' (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2005: 84).

But ambiguity does not always suggest confusion, uncertainty and contradiction among workers. In the world of management consultants, for example, some

practitioners are used to the tensions between conflicting goals. In one researched case, the need to achieve the company objectives by fulfilling sales targets is experienced as ambiguous by management consultants who expect autonomy as they deal day-to-day with their clients (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Robertson and Swan (2003: 852) go so far as to say that the culture could be described as ‘strong’, in that individuals can accept, come to terms with and be successful by ‘developing strong norms based on ambiguity that secured both their own freedom and their own slavery to the organization’. What both this and the McLoughlin *et al.* study highlight is the different responses to ambiguity that can arise from conflicting demands on managers during imposed change at work.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

The subjects of the research presented here were twenty senior Civil Servants in HM Customs & Excise, each responsible for a discrete area of Large Business activity extending geographically throughout the UK. The structuring around business sectors meant a change from traditional regular inspection visits to companies to occasional visits to interview CEOs and Financial Directors to discuss how systems of tax revenue accounting can facilitate company cash flow. This meant that instead of leading and managing large teams from a central office, the research subjects were responsible for smaller dispersed teams whom they see infrequently.

In order to facilitate and encourage this change, the Large Business Management Group encouraged for the first time the recruitment of managers from outside the civil service. The subjects of this research therefore included a range of ages and experience. Seven had been in the service for more than 30 years; eight were

accelerated promotion path candidates in their thirties; and five had joined recently, recruited for their financial and accountancy expertise and experience in outside business.

An interpretive case study research design was adopted, which accepts the researcher's own subjectivity in the analysis, countering claims that biased views necessarily lead to invalid research findings (Robertson & Swan, 2003: 841).

Interpretive research also accepts that there are some organizational phenomena that cannot be empirically validated but may still be understood in an interesting and meaningful way (Alvesson, 1995). Here, culture is treated not as a variable which can be measured in objective terms but as one which is subjectively perceived by the subjects in the organization themselves. Thus the emergence of a culture is seen through the accounts provided and can be found in 'the devil in the details' of change, the ongoing 'learning dynamics' and the consequences of 'embedded uncertainty' surrounding the changes imposed (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2005: 72).

These accounts were given during one-and-a-half hour semi-structured interviews with each manager. The questions ranged from expectancy on joining the service; induction training received; the way the organization has handled change; surprise and sense making in the face of reorganization and change; the qualities required of a manager at their grade (Band 11); the role of the Board (their immediate managers) in day-to-day management; and future priorities for the Service. The researchers were constantly aware of the need to allow subjects to express their own views in a way that enabled the basic assumptions about job, work, career and organization to surface during the interviews.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The accounts offered during the interviews highlighted a number of concerns about the effects of restructuring. In the course of the interviews differences emerged between the three groups of managers: those taking the ‘long view’--mostly older managers who had spent more than 30 years in the service, most of it in the traditional regime of policed inspections; those taking the ‘short view’-- who had been fast-tracked into senior positions but had between 10 and 15 years service; and those taking the ‘new view’, the incomers who had been recruited for their outside knowledge and experience. Using the dimensions suggested in Piderit’s treatment of ambivalence, the responses of the three groups to different ambiguities raised by the imposed restructuring are summarised in Table 1.

	Long view	Short view	New view
Cognitive	Visits to clients Not totally accepted	Appraisals/perception of monthly meeting Not accepted by younger managers	Senior management assessment centres Ignoring experience and insisting on centre does not make sense
Emotional	Preference for visits to own staff	Strong feelings expressed about perceived contradiction between rhetoric and reality	Strong feelings against the practice
Intentional	Rationalised as a secret ploy for finding out what clients are really doing/restoring the policing role to the job	Strong belief that this disparity is wrong and should be resisted	Resolved by appointment to post in spite of failure to pass assessment centre

Table 1 The Dimensions of Ambivalence of the Three Views of Change

The Long View

The older and longer serving managers see their role as grounded in the experience of predictive inspection carried out by teams of Executive Officers in the field. Such subjects represented on average 30 years' experience in the Department and, at the time they were promoted to this senior rank, businesses were visited on a regular basis and inspections of company books conducted, with under-declarations being collected on the spot. The new way of conducting the work was immediately commented on:

I used to have seven managers [surveyors] and 108 staff. Now I have 12 immediate support units and 44 staff. Less clerical staff, vastly less. They have been hived off into other work streams entirely.

For these senior managers, their team no longer works in an adjacent office where they can be accessed immediately day-to-day. The close community network that once supported the work is now geographically more dispersed and contact with the senior manager therefore more occasional.

The new approach is based on education and support of the client in the field. The purpose of these visits is to encourage businesses to learn about the systems they could be using to make it easier for them to monitor and manage their cash flow, of which tax collection is a significant part. For these longer serving managers the traditional people management priorities continued to be given priority. If there was a conflict of interests between visits to clients and looking after staff, there was no real contest for one older manager:

It's very hard to get involved in the business if you're driven by requests for information, if you're driven by personnel issues. I think so far this year I've probably been able to get into four businesses and that was all in the first quarter.

However, this priority of putting their staff first does not blind longer serving managers to the intention behind the visits to client businesses. In fact, the new way of doing client visits is interpreted as a scheme to penetrate businesses and find out what they are doing. In the words of one manager near to retirement:

You are expected to know the minds of the people at your sort of level in industry and anticipate their scams and wheezes business by business and help our policy makers counter them, because otherwise they would be operating blind in the field.

The new management mantra of 'Get tax on the boardroom agenda' is interpreted as a crafty strategy to give senior managers eyes and ears that will uncover practices that could lead to the discovery of under-declaration of tax. The conflict between their traditional role and the new role of visiting clients is alleviated by interpreting the new procedure as a different means of achieving the same end – that of policing clients.

As far as evaluation of their own job experience is concerned, there was a frequently expressed feeling on the part of respondents that their own managers do not appreciate the traditional view of business priorities. However, they can rationalise and come to terms with that:

I just think it's almost as if they [their managers] think they have a group of junior staff. They want to pin it down: you go there; you do that; that's what we want you to do.

Overall comments about the organization suggest that longer serving managers have taken the long view of changes occurring in the Department. Change may present

some ambiguities but they can be adapted to or adopted. Although the ambiguity between older practices and the new regime of customer visiting is commented on, the ambivalence experienced is resolved for older managers as they impute or imply that their managers, the Board, are just pursuing the same policing policy using a more subtle ploy of friendly visits (which could be equally revealing of irregularities perpetrated by clients).

The cognitive ambivalence surrounding current management directives is rationalised at the intentional dimension as being part of the risk-averse culture which applied in the past and still applies today. There is still at the emotional dimension a preference for visiting staff rather than clients, but the autonomy they have allows them to make their own choice about where to focus their visits. Visits to staff would be given preference.

The Short View

For some young managers the road to the top has been faster than was once possible. London, for example, has traditionally suffered higher staff-turnover than the rest of the UK, giving career-seeking staff there more opportunities for promotion which might not have been possible in other parts of the UK. For one young, female senior manager, her career path has included the Solicitor's office, debt collection, computer accounts and then team leader at 27-years-old. For this group there is no narrative about previous work practices and the regular inspections of client books. Their reflections suggest that the present arrangements were good at preparing people for the challenge that the work now involves. For these younger Civil Servants, role models were the key to success. In the words of one female manager:

I had two senior officers who were absolute pillars of integrity and respectability and who knew the codes inside out and I guess that instils in you from an early age really.

For this group of respondents, the challenge of change has been a vehicle for their own career success. They are motivated by new work opportunities and the chance to respond to it in their own way. Their experience has been similar to what a Graduate Management Trainee would experience in any outside company – a variety of experiences in different work activities. The rise through the organization in London can be fast, and the perception of the work includes the future and strategic involvement with the Board who are just one level above them. They do not express the same doubt or concern that the older managers voiced about the nature of these new company visits to CEOs.

Where universal concern was expressed by this group of respondents was over the veiled criticisms coming from the Board about their performance. In the words of one young manager:

They criticise the Band 11s constantly and sometimes I think they are justified but other times they are not. Individually, they are not having those conversations with their own people because, as I pointed out to them, how many of the Band 11s are marked as less effective last year on their performance appraisal?

The narrative here relates to the Civil Service appraisal system. All the senior managers had been given the highest rating – Box 1 - equivalent in the Service to ‘fitted for promotion.’ The ambiguity is perceived in gaining the highest mark and then suffering covert criticism, and this is expressed in an ambivalence that the actions of the Board are regarded as contrary to the best practice of honesty and straightforwardness which these younger managers feel the Service represents. This

ambivalence is felt keenly at an emotional dimension and at the intentional dimension of what they perceive as being ethically correct. A similar ambivalence is expressed about senior managers' covert criticism of their monthly meetings. The feeling is expressed that the Board members feel this is a waste of time and could be better spent visiting clients:

The way I work is I'm one of those people that if you tell me I should be doing something differently I will either do it or say I don't think it's a good idea. But at the moment I don't think I've got the opportunity to say why I'm not delivering what's required because I don't know what they want of me.

Overall, the younger senior managers experience the day-to-day frustration of conflicting demands which they can live with, as do their longer service colleagues. But the conduct of their appraisals, combined with covert criticism of the Band 11 monthly meetings, is perceived as being unjust. In Piderit's terms this would mean an unresolved ambivalence at the ethical/intentional dimension. Other managers may have failed to find this significant, but for the younger managers it remained a matter of unresolved ambivalence leading to dissatisfaction.

The New View

The managers recruited from outside the Civil Service had come in with a good deal of varied experience. One had been a Financial Director in different companies with full training as an accountant – an ideal candidate, it might be thought, for interviewing CEOs and Managing Directors and 'getting tax on the board room agenda.' Another had been an employee of a sweet manufacturer, worked for a national newspaper and then another Civil Service Department, before having a family and then moving to work in the present Department. The accounts of their different approaches to the challenges of working in the Department make contrasting

reading to the traditional accounts heard from those who have spent all their working lives in the Civil Service.

But the reception inside the Service did not always impress the new comers for its clear-sighted evaluation of their skills and talents:

You are seen as a specialist and therefore you are not a generalist and therefore you don't meet the criteria for promotion in the Service. I found it a bit galling because I had come from managing 80 – 100 staff to be told that maybe I hadn't got the management skills, because I was working as a specialist. I thought, hang on, has anybody really tested this or looked at my background and what I've got?

The problem was thus seen as the approach to evaluating the experience of those who came from a management background of which the Service has neither knowledge nor experience. Another newly recruited manager from outside industry commented:

One of the things with the Civil Service is that it is very closed. It only looks at what you do within it; it never looks at what you've done outside it. It never looks at what you are bringing to it.

Ambiguity is expressed here about the interpretation of their past experience by the Service compared with how they evaluate their own worth. Experience not gained within the Service is seen by insiders to merit lesser consideration when it comes to assessing them as suitable for promotion. This meant that these newcomers are expected to undergo the same developmental path as all other insiders, including the assessment centre for senior civil servant positions. This three-day event involves many tests of candidates' aptitudes and abilities. All of the newcomers expressed their ambivalence towards this experience. As one of their number put it:

I think it is very artificial to be perfectly honest. And I think the way it is managed as well is to me proven to be flawed. What I find really strange is

that those who did well in their later career were often those who failed the assessment centre.

One of the incomers, who had been on a senior management course at Harvard and had been Financial Director of a company in the IT sector, found the undervaluing of his past experience somewhat puzzling. For him the future of the Service lay in changing this blinkered view of outside expertise coming into the organization. His ambivalence here focuses on the disparity between the narrow range of his experience for which he was employed and the failure to use the full managerial skills he had acquired. Ironically, the resolution of this ambivalence took place when he was appointed to the Senior Civil Service position in spite of his failure in the selection centre tests. The irony of the situation is not lost on the in-comers, but the Service is unaware of the ambivalence that its selection system raises for them. So, here the intentional dimension of ambivalence is resolved, but the cognitive dimension remains unresolved as long as the assessment centre is still in place for new comers with previous management experience.

None of the newcomers had the same attitude as the 'short view' respondents to the appraisal system. Nor are the newcomers fazed by the covert criticism of the management group above them about their monthly meetings. Like the longer serving managers, perhaps, it is a part of organizational life that senior managers say one thing and are perceived to believe something different.

What they do share with both other groups is the belief that at their level, autonomy and freedom to respond is what matters in allowing them to be effective as managers:

There is a lack of clarity about what they want us to do that we are not doing or what it is we are doing that they want us to stop doing. We need to be trusted to get on and do what we think is right and, yes, if we get it wrong, then we'll be accountable.

They are hard-headed about the historical strength that the Department once had but see it as a risk in a world which is used to fast change and flexibility of response to outside challenges:

If we are facing crisis the systems carry us – in the old days they always did. But the trouble is now that you need a lot more flexibility in both people and systems to cope with the challenge that exists outside.

Both long- and short-service senior managers see the benefits of this group of newcomers to the Department. They are perceived to be more effective in the new regime of 'getting tax on the board room agenda' and more challenging in espousing radical practices to recover tax from reluctant businesses:

More change. Embrace it. Be enthusiastic about it. Challenge it. If change is for change's sake, that's not change, that's disaster. But let's keep it moving and let's not be afraid to change. Be positive about it. What more can I say?

DISCUSSION

In our introduction we identified personal perceptions as a way of examining ambiguity triggered by top-down change at work. We noted that traditional literatures often assume that individuals would come to terms with imposed change, either in a staged way (Nicholson & West, 1988) or as a result of stories of other members of staff who had experienced such change in previous working experience (Isabella, 1990). In contrast, the emergent voices recorded in the present research would seem to suggest that the impact of imposed change has pointed up the ambiguities within and between different situations individuals have perceived as

occurring at work. As we have seen, whether that leads to ambivalence depends on whether the ambiguity is perceived as reconcilable with their own expected practice or can be ignored or circumvented in day-to-day encounters at work.

The role of the managers investigated here has become more a business-led and less a people-led one, but such a comparison depends on the longer-term memory of those whose working life included more stratified and bureaucratic ways of working.

Older managers do not express a desire to return to the old way of organizing work, but they do question the wisdom to mixing the traditional policing role of their job with the more informal and friendly adviser approach encouraged by the business priority of CEO visits and getting tax on the Board Room agenda. However, if that is reinterpreted as a cover for covert monitoring of clients, then the policing role to which they were accustomed appears to have been restored to them and any ambivalence they might have felt at the intentional dimension is then resolved.

In contrast, the younger managers of the 'short view' are accepting of the new demands imposed by the need to close the tax gap. However, they are ambivalent about the practice of awarding high markings at appraisal time and then being criticised for their performance behind their backs. This they see as being ethically irreconcilable with what they consider good management practice. They therefore remain ambivalent about this perceived contradiction at the intentional dimension, and the emotional dimension the strong feelings are reinforced by their perception of covert critical comments by their immediate managers.

The 'new view' offers a different perception of the role of managers above them. Here, the concern is over the very narrow view thought to be held of what counts as relevant managerial experience in the Civil Service, coupled with a belief that their own previous management experience has been disregarded. Their ambivalence is focused at the intentional dimension on the traditional management path within the Civil Service, especially the assessment centres used to choose senior civil servant position. The exercise of these procedures was a matter of ambivalence for them, but this was then relieved by their confirmation in post regardless of their performance at the assessment centre. At the cognitive dimension, the need for change to this practice is accepted by all managers in the Band 11 group. Indeed, the outside expertise of the new comers is acknowledged by long and shorter term managers in the contribution they make to the new initiatives required for the whole group. The emergence of the outsider's view of what the Service needs in order to achieve its goals is openly accepted and the initiative and innovation that the new-comers bring is universally welcomed.

As can be seen, each group is ambivalent about different issues. Sometimes they can resolve their ambivalence by rationalise the reasons for it at the cognitional level by redefining the underlying reason for their managers' demands. Sometimes the ambivalence is resolved by an acceptable outcome, as in the case of the new comers and their appointment in post in spite of performance at the assessment centre. Though, at the cognitive dimension the uncertainty about the relevance of such centres remains. Only where neither rationalization nor reconciliation takes place, as in the case of Grade 1 marking of appraisals and covert criticism, is ambivalence likely to persist in all three dimensions of ambivalence as described by Piderit.

CONCLUSIONS

The surprise expressed by individuals focuses on the contradictions between what may have been expected during change and what actually happened. We can agree that such contradiction surfaces ambivalence that may persist if it cannot be either rationalised or ignored (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003: 978). We can also agree that managers and workers appear to be faced with on-going ambiguities about the nature and depth of the change initiatives and the claims made for them by senior managers (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2005: 84). However, a closer examination of their different dimensions of ambivalence, as suggested by Piderit, may offer the opportunity of discovering the basis for the basis of specific concerns and objections existing among individuals and between groups, uncovering more subtle distinctions between cognitive, emotional and intentional dimensions as experienced in the face of ambiguous practices at work.

These different dimensions among individuals can alert both researcher and managers to the distinction that it is possible to be in favour of change in theory but maintain reservations about its emotional or moral implications. In this case it is suggested that individuals may be not so much resistant as reluctant to change (Watson, 1982).

Managers might also pay attention to the distinctions between dimensions so that they can approach change initiatives more sensitively. For example, younger managers in this case consider that the sacrosanct nature of appraisal needs to be correctly conducted by their managers as a matter of priority. Similarly, a more realistic approach to assessment centre to discover individuals suitable for appointment to the position of Senior Civil Servant also needs to be addressed by senior managers.

The distinction between dimensions of ambivalence is a useful addition, we believe, to the continuing debate on how individuals interpret change at work and whether they are likely to adapt to it or resist its imposition. The examination of senior manager scripts using these three dimensions of ambivalence can be a fruitful source for theorizing how different groups within a band of managers rationalise change at work and deserves further research to identify how resistance may be more readily responded to by managers and change agents alike.

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