"TYPE CHANGE": THE PERCEIVED STRUCTURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development and global prosperity hinge substantially on healthy, progressive organizations. The liability of change, which manifests in the dismal success rates of large scale organizational change initiatives, however threatens the advancement of this agenda. While the reasons for this are complex, a starting point for reversing this trend is a greater understanding of the phenomenon of organizational change, which is reified and enacted at the level of the individual employee. The current study empirically explored the under researched area of 'types of change', which influences employee perceptions and responses and which ultimately holds the key to organizational adaptation. Several structural dimensions were extracted from the 663 respondents' perceptions of change events, which suggest a more considered but also a potentially more effective approach to dealing with organizational change.

THE LIABILITY OF CHANGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Jones' (1995) view that societal wellbeing is substantially dependent on the health and wellbeing of the organisations and corporations that operate within societal boundaries, is beyond doubt. The argument, however, is perhaps best demonstrated (and tangibly so) in the current global wave of bankruptcies and corporate failures that are following in the wake of the credit crisis. To an extent this situation is tenable as it is entirely consistent with the natural growth and decline of organizations (and a rapidly declining institutional life expectancy of around 40 years – cf. De Geus, 1997). Corporate failures, however, have a huge impact in general, and in struggling economies in particular (Puplampu, 2005), which merely fuel unemployment, poverty, crime and disease. The pronounced rate at which organisations are liquidated, profit margins reduced, rationalisations occur and unemployment continues, pose a formidable challenge to organizational sustainability and societal well-being (Van Tonder, 2006) - a situation that is unlikely to improve soon (cf. Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). The causes of institutional demise however are multifaceted and complex and as Levinson (1994) has argued, far more psychological than the ostensible reasons advanced by management scholars. At its most fundamental corporate failures and bankruptcies entail an inability to adapt in a timely and effective manner to changing operating environments and conditions. Organizational change initiatives consequently become a critical instrument and strategy for sustaining organizations and hence the societal contexts in which they are embedded. *The effective 'management' of change processes is crucial to organizational survival* (cf. Luecke, 2003; By, 2005) *and unavoidably undergirds every attempt to advance the institutional, societal and global growth and sustainability agenda.*

Organizational change of necessity is an adaptive response, which, if not embraced (e.g. because of inertia), becomes a liability (George & Jones, 2001). These adaptive responses have assumed multiple forms ranging from gradual organic growth, reorganizations, restructurings, new technology adoption, to strategic repositionings, mergers and acquisitions, and related large-scale change initiatives. Essentially these responses have to secure the

organization's alignment with environmental conditions (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999) and consequently facilitate organizational longevity or sustainability.

However, the *liability of change* and hence the threat to growth and sustainability manifest also in the implicit organizational capability for dealing with or 'managing' change. One of the most consistently reported statistics in the change literature is the exceedingly high failure rate of organizational change initiatives with 65% to 75% of change endeavours failing to achieve their purpose (cf. Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Applebaum & Wohl, 2000; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Devos, Beulens, & Bouckenooghe, 2007; Grint, 1998; Hattingh, 2004; Mourier & Smith, 2001; Smith, 2002, 2003). This occurs with crippling consequences for the organisations and in particular their employees and their dependents. Voluntary turnover during a downsizing or reorganization, for example, incurs significant direct and indirect financial costs, but also social capital costs (Dess & Shaw, 2001; Morrell, Loan-Clark, & Wilkinson, 2004). The financial consequences of stress associated with organizational change, similarly, are extensive and the effects of change–related stress severely compromise morale, quality, relations, public standing, customer satisfaction, retention of staff, and absenteeism (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik & Welbourne, 1999; Kickul, Lester & Finkl, 2002; Schabracq & Cooper, 2000; Taylor-Bianco & Schermerhorn Jr, 2006). The uncertainty, anxiety and depression, and health problems arising from, or intensified by organizational change are substantial and well documented (cf. Kohler, Munz & Grawitch, 2006; Svensen, Neset & Eriksen, 2007) but the broader ramifications of large scale organizational change initiatives are seldom accounted for. This becomes an important consideration if it is acknowledged that in a developmental context approximately 4.7 people are materially affected for every person retrenched (cf. Drake Beam Morin, 1995). From this perspective it would seem that attempts at managing organizational change are eroding rather than contributing to organizational and societal health.

"TYPE CHANGE"

Although the underlying reasons for change management emerging as a liability rather than an "asset" are complex and multifaceted, a starting point for reversing this trend is a greater understanding of the phenomenon of organizational change (cf. By, 2005; Smollan, 2006). In this regard it is noteworthy that the available knowledge on change, generally, has been criticised for its atheoretical nature, contradictory and confusing approaches, unchallenged hypotheses, ignorance of the dynamics and contextual nature of change phenomena, the absence of an adequate process orientation, and generally a lack of empirical evidence (By, 2005; Collins, 1998; Doyle, 2002; Pettigrew, 1988, 1990; Van Tonder, 2004a). Indeed, the extant literature base is perceived to be of limited value to science and managerial practice (Bamford & Forrester, 2003), as the majority of change publications tend to be superficial analyses and personal opinions (Guimaraes & Armstrong, 1998). Calls for expanding the knowledge base on change phenomena, understandably, will continue (Longenecker &Fink, 2001; Plowman, Beck, Kulkarni, Solansky, & Travis, 2007).

Specific and particularly prominent (and interrelated) content areas in which knowledge is substantively lacking are that of measurement e.g. of change and its impact (By, 2005; Burnes, 2003; Hacker & Washington, 2004; Kohler et al, 2006) and knowledge of how change is experienced and responded to at the individual level and how this informs organization-level change (George & Jones, 2001; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik & Welbourne, 1999). While understanding in terms of the latter is deficient, scholars nonetheless concur that any organizational change is reified and enacted at the level of the *individual* employee (cf. Devos et al., 2007; George & Jones, 2001; Van Tonder, 2004a). It is at this micro-level that individual responses to change are formed and where it translates into collective action. The failure of many change efforts can be attributed to the underestimation of the cognitive and affective nature of change at the level of the individual employee (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). This relates in particular to the neglected area of change *content* (Devos et al., 2007; Van Tonder, 2008) - one of three critical dimensions of change with change *context* and *process* being the other (Huy, 2001). Rafferty and Griffin (2006) argue that a critical limitation in this area is the inability of research to identify the properties (salient dimensions) of organizational change that lead to negative employee outcomes. Although more focus is now being directed at cognition and affect in response to organizational change, and scholars are beginning to recognize causal links between variation in employee perceptions and responses to different change events (Caldwell et al, 2004; Judge et al, 1999; Kiefer, 2002), the importance of these studies is not yet fully appreciated (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). Arguments that focus on and associate type of change e.g. radical change with strong emotional responses such as substantive uncertainty are nonetheless appearing with greater frequency (Huy, 1999; Judge et al., 1999). In such studies the employee's perception of the change is generally postulated as the commencement point in models

attempting to describe the employee's response to change (Kohler et al, 2006; Smollen, 2006; Van Tonder, 2004a). The centrality of perception is implied by Devos' (2007) reference to the "threatening character" of organizational change but it is also acknowledged in more explicit descriptive parameters of change such as the "perceived favourability" and "perceived speed" of the change (Smollan, 2006). While these studies are beginning to address the structural dimensions of organizational change, the authors' conceptualisation of change hinges on known or popular change typologies that attempted to differentiate between qualitatively different forms or types of change. From the mid 1970s to the late 1990s organizational change typologies received a fair amount of scholarly attention. Scholars typically differentiated between two, three and occasionally four qualitatively different types of organizational change, for example evolutionary and revolutionary change (Gersick, 1991; Greiner, 1972; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985); Alpha, Beta and Gamma change (Golembiewski, Billingsley & Yeager, 1976); normal and paradigmatic change (Sheldon, 1980), first- and second order change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974); incremental and transformational change (Dunphy & Stace, 1988); incremental and deep change (Quinn, 1996); and (the non-discrete) Type I and Type II change (Van Tonder, 1999; 2004a). Apart from the narrow and atheoretical conceptualisation of different types of change the majority of these typologies are criticised for not being founded on empiricism. Where empiricism is claimed, this is based on scholar-specific interpretation frames and substantially less robust notions of empiricism. A direct consequence of this is that change is often portrayed as a vague and uni-dimensional phenomenon. A single or at best a few dimensions of organizational change are often identified when characterising organizational change events, for example, the *pace* of change (evolutionary versus revolutionary) or the manifestation of the change (incremental versus transformational). A more plausible account of the fundamental character of organizational change phenomena should attempt to characterise change on several dimensions simultaneously (Van Tonder, 2008). The Type I and Type II typology[2] (Van Tonder, 1999, 2004ab) is a case in point, for it argues that change and organizational change phenomena are notably multifaceted or multidimensional and that an organizational change event can be characterised simultaneously in terms of (for example) its scope and reach, impact, intensity, extent of intrusion into the employee's work life, pace and duration, perceived predictability and control.

As should be evident from the cited studies, knowledge of different types of change is becoming increasingly important (Golembiewski cited in Van Tonder, 2004a), in particular as a differentiated perception of change implies a differentiated experience and reaction, and would suggest a differentiated approach for dealing more effectively with different change events or processes in organizations. This is contrary to popular change management practices, which reflect the predominance of so-called "N-step programmes" as a preferred method for instituting and or responding to organizational change (cf. Collins, 1998). "N-step programmes" in essence refer to the exceedingly common practice of interpreting and implementing change initiatives as a number ("N") of preset sequential stages or steps. Untenable assumptions of such approaches are that organisations, employees, and employees' perceptions and experiences of change, indeed, also the essential character of the encountered change are *sufficiently similar* to justify the universal application of a generic stepwise formula (Van Tonder, 2004a). If it is acknowledged that 65% to 75% of change initiatives ultimately fail, it follows that a more context-bound and differentiated conceptualisation of change phenomena may offer greater prospects for change success[3].

EMPIRICAL STUDY AND FINDINGS

Against the preceding setting, the purpose of the current study is to explore the (perceived) underlying structural dimensions of organizational change events. It is postulated that employees' perceptions of change events will reveal underlying structural dimensions regardless of the form in which the change presents or is positioned ("labelled") by key officials. Secondly, and consistent with Van Tonder's (2004b; 2008) argument of multifaceted and multidimensional change constructs, it is further postulated that employee responses will reveal a differentiated change profile for each organizational change event on multiple structural dimensions.

Design and Methodology

A survey-driven field study was undertaken and a convenience sample comprising 664 respondents from 25 organisations straddling several industries, were engaged in the study. Respondents were identified and accessed with the assistance of the Human Resources practitioners in the different organisations. Two primary criteria defined

eligibility for participation namely that all respondents should have experienced the same change initiative or event, and secondly that employees should, generally, occupy positions within the same broad band i.e. variance is limited to two hierarchical levels. In practice this implied that the sample would comprise workgroups or sections that were reasonably intact, subjected to a specific change, and numbered between 20 and 35 respondents per organization. A developmental questionnaire, consisting of Osgood semantic differentials, was utilised to measure the perceived structural dimensions of change phenomena. Although respondents within each organization were identified on the basis of a commonly experienced change event, they were nonetheless requested to describe the change event in their own words, to enable verification of this criterion. Respondents then had to describe the specific change to which they were subjected in terms of a number of bipolar scales allowing six (6) response categories between the bipolar descriptions e.g. change X: "*Started slowly_ _ _ _ _ _ Started quickly (rapidly)*" or "*Changed nothing_ _ _ _ _ _ Changed everything*". Principal Components Analysis and reliability analysis were used to establish underlying structural dimensions and differences in mean scores for different organisations were tested through analysis of variance.

Findings

With regards to the structure of organizational change, the findings surfaced 10 reliable descriptive dimensions on which change events or processes can be characterised (accounting for 60% of cumulative variance). Apart from an "*effectiveness of change management*" factor, the study surfaced the factors of *orderliness, duration, impact, pace, substantiveness, predictability* of outcomes (linearity), *degree of anticipation, perceived control* over the change, and the perceived *source of energy* or *sustainability* (management or the change itself) of the organizational change. The results revealed both convergence and divergence of underlying descriptive profiles of different change "types". These profiles did not necessarily "fit" or correspond with the labels that employees or officials attached to the change initiatives. Two illustrative examples are provided with the first being a salary system change in both a bank and an engineering firm (i.e. "*same change - different industry*" - refer figure 1). The second example entails the merger of two divisions in two separate banks (i.e. "*same change - same industry*" – refer figure 2). The X-axis lists structural dimensions (factors) while the Y-axis indicates employees' mean ratings for the specific change events in terms of the rating scale employed in the study.

Figure 1: Change profiles: *Salary system change* in an engineering and a banking institution
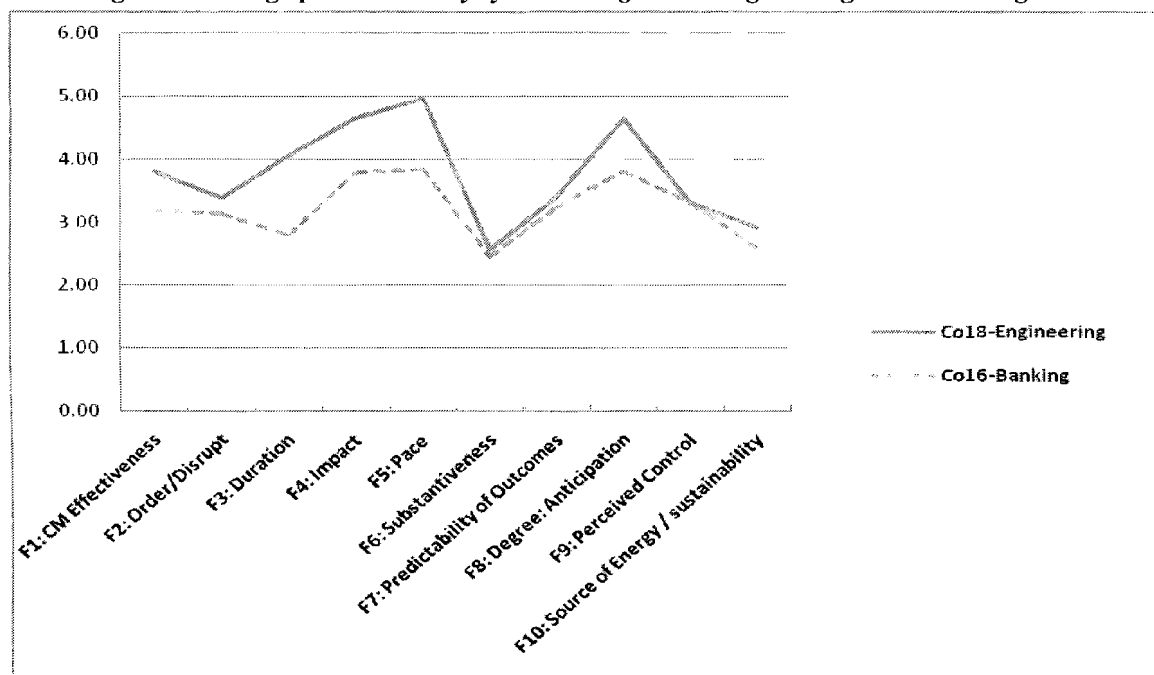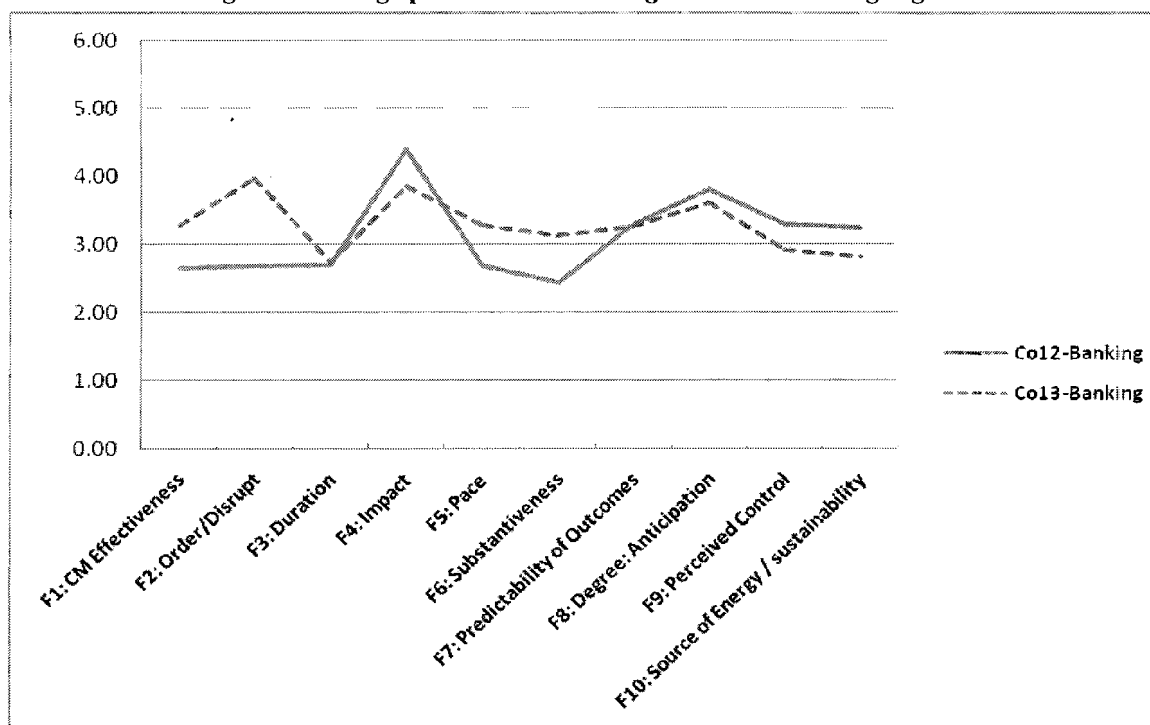
Figure 2: Change profiles: *Similar mergers* in two Banking organizations

For each of the two illustrative examples significant differences between change descriptions were recorded on five of the 10 descriptive parameters (those dimensions on which the greatest discrepancies between change profiles are observed). The *salary system changes* in both the engineering and banking organisations reveal a pattern that is intuitively plausible. The change is perceived in both cases as relatively orderly, non-substantive, and sustained through managerial effort (energy), but appear to differ in terms of its management, duration, impact, pace and degree to which it could be anticipated. For the engineering firm the change is more intense than is the case for the banking institution. In the former the change profile is closer to the more threatening Type II change[3]. The mergers undertaken by the two banking institutions reveal similar convergence and divergence in profiles (Col3 for example experienced the merger significantly more *disorderly* than Col2, while the *impact* of the change appears to be more pronounced for the latter). Apart from revealing different descriptive accounts for similar types of organizational changes (figures 1 and 2), the results also revealed that seemingly different changes, using different labels such as a "departmental restructuring" and "acquisition" at a fundamental level were effectively the same type of change.

Research Contribution

Although the obtained structural dimensions of change events should prove reasonably robust because of the number of organisations engaged (which spanned multiple industries), the study remains exploratory. The experimental instrument utilised should be refined and validated with larger and more focused research populations. Notwithstanding these caveats, the results are encouraging for several reasons. In this regard it constitutes much needed empirical progress in the domain of change measurement (cf. By, 2005; Kohler et al, 2006), which now enables further research into more sophisticated measurement approaches but also research in terms of correlates of perceived change, and causality, with the latter (e.g. change orderliness or the pace of change) as independent variable and organizational performance and workforce stress, morale and job satisfaction indices as dependent variables. Cost-benefit analyses of change initiatives, an improbability in this domain (cf. Svensen et al, 2007) become a material possibility. The results, however, also begin to address the void pertaining to knowledge of change content and more specifically, the characteristics of change (Devos et al., 2007; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Van Tonder, 2008), and do so from an empirical base. Several avenues for advancing knowledge in this area are now suggested. The current study, however, also specifically tested and found initial support for the theorised dimensions of the *non-discrete* Type I and Type II change typology (cf. Van Tonder, 1999; 2004ab) and confirms, at least from an employee cognition perspective, that organizational change events are indeed multifaceted, and to a

greater extent than has been suggested to date. It also suggests that the utility value of change typologies that reduce change phenomena to a limited number of (seemingly) discrete change types (the vast majority) is limited. Finally, the research posits an avenue for more specific and meaningful investigation of the relationship between the employee's perception and affective experience of the organizational change, as well as individual and collective (workforce) reactions to the change. Such research, premised on the perceived structural dimensions of change events, will illuminate the micro dynamics and intricacies of, among other, resistance to change and related attitudes to change in a manner quite distinct from the approaches pursued to date.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

Once again, and subject to confirmation of the scientific fundamentals surfaced in the current study, the results hold several potentially significant implications for institutional management. An important observation is that the common "labels" with which change initiatives are designated, in reality offer a poor guideline as to the underlying dynamics and hence the probable employee experience of a specific change initiative. The workforce's collective perception of an organizational change initiative is substantively tainted by their internalised understanding of the organization's culture and its identity, its leadership and management styles, technology and a gamut of other organizational attributes which serve to typify organisations as distinctive. The observed variation in change profiles consequently argues strongly against the "one-size-fits-all" N-step approaches that have become characteristic of organizational change practices and suggest a need for differentiated and organization-specific approaches to facilitating change initiatives. The "disorderly merger" of Co13, for example, requires careful consideration and greater involvement (and investment of resources) by decision makers if the change objective is to be achieved and adverse consequences are to be avoided. The implicit risk of change initiatives and the generally unsatisfactory results recorded for major change initiatives pursued through N-step programmes may be minimised if the presence of tacit change dimensions and non-discrete "types" are acknowledged and incorporated in managerial practices. A potentially worthwhile initiative and an intermediate step towards the establishment of a normative framework that would allow meaningful comparison of change initiatives across organizational and industry boundaries would be to establish organization-specific change perception baselines. This would entail repeated assessment of different intra-organizational change initiatives over a period of time and should enable comparative analysis of different change events on the basis of the fundamental or underlying change types rather than change labels. The diagnostic, anticipatory and predictive value of such initiatives for purposes of organizational management is obvious.

The findings in particular suggest that consideration be given to the manner in which organizational change is conceptualised on the one hand, and how it is bound to be perceived by employees on the other – drawing on knowledge of the perceived structural dimensions of the change. Much of the anguish and trauma of organizational change may be circumvented if the conceptualisation and execution of change initiatives (or responses to environmentally-induced change), take account of the structural dimensions of perceived change. To the extent that the unfolding change allows moderation by management (i.e. "change management"), the enactment of the change initiative or change response could be contained on dimensions likely to evoke more intense reactions (e.g. reducing the *pace*, imposing greater *order*, and facilitating clarity on expected *outcomes* i.e. *predictability*). The results consequently suggest specific foci (dimensions) where some influence and control over the perception of the change (and therefore the likely reaction to it), may be possible.

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

This paper commenced with a brief outline of the importance of effective change management as one of the most basic prerequisites and key managerial competences needed to sustain institutional health and well-being. Novel approaches proffered by the global business community will not achieve sustainable development and prosperity if the vehicles used in pursuit of these objectives, i.e. global institutions, are found to be incapable of enduring. This implies that organisations need to successfully transcend contemporary adaptive challenges imposed by a continuously changing operating context. Prevailing evidence however overwhelmingly suggests that institutional management is less than qualified to achieve this. The current recessionary climate and the demise of several longstanding corporate behemoths attest to the fragility of institutional strength and sustainability. Macro considerations of this nature invariably revolve around effective attendance to micro issues. In this regard the current study argued that an improved understanding of the *tacit structure of change events*, as perceived at the level of the

employee and the workforce at large is required for the effective engagement of any and all forms of change and hence organizational adaptation. This constitutes an important element of organizational change management – a highly required management skill (Senior, 2002) and considered in some scholarly quarters as the primary task of management (Graetz, 2000). The contribution of the current study resides in the initial measurement and empirical validation (albeit preliminary) of the theorised dimensional structure of perceived change events and episodes. Continued research in this domain should eventually reveal the micro-dynamics and causal spirals that give rise to collective action by the workforce and management and which contribute to change failure or success.

Any business strategy aimed at facilitating sustainable development and prosperity, in the first instance has to be premised on healthy and effective organisations that have the capability to deliver these strategies. This implies converting the liability of change into an implicit change capability, to which the recognition of change type and the individual employee's response is a key consideration.

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ENDNOTES

1   This research was made possible, in part, through South African National Research Foundation (NRF) grant FA2005041400002

2. A *Type I* change is defined as "A steady-state, incremental or step-by-step sequential change which generally evolves over an extended period of time, does not have a disruptive influence on the system and is generally perceived to be within the control of the system". A *Type II* change is "A 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:110-111).

3. Change is conceptualized as "*a non-discrete yet context bound process of energy movement that is reflected in an empirical difference in the state and or condition of the system over time*" (Van Tonder, 2008:2), whereas *change success* is viewed as the achievement of change objectives, in a sustainable manner and with minimized disruption of, and impact on organizational functioning and employee morale.