

Structuring collective change agency internally: Transformers, enforcers, specialists and independents

Wylie, N & Sturdy, A

Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

Wylie, N & Sturdy, A 2018, 'Structuring collective change agency internally: Transformers, enforcers, specialists and independents' *Employee Relations*, vol 40, no. 2.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/ER-10-2016-0194>

DOI 10.1108/ER-10-2016-0194

ISSN 0142-5455

Publisher: Emerald

© Emerald Publishing Limited 2018

Published by Emerald Publishing Limited

Licensed re-use rights only

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

STRUCTURING COLLECTIVE CHANGE AGENCY INTERNALLY - TRANSFORMERS, ENFORCERS, SPECIALISTS AND INDEPENDENTS

forthcoming in *Employee Relations*

(DOI 10.1108/ER-10-2016-0194 - accepted 22nd August, 2017)

Nick Wylie, University of Coventry, UK - ac3370@coventry.ac.uk

& Andrew Sturdy, University of Bristol, UK - andrew.sturdy@bristol.ac.uk

Purpose

This research paper aims to identify, describe and evaluate the different ways in which formal collective change agency is structured in specialist units inside 25 diverse organisations. As such it is oriented towards a range of practitioners operating in HR, project management or with responsibility for delivering change in public and private sectors.

Design/methodology/approach

Using a qualitative design, exploratory interview and case study research was conducted in organisations across the UK public and private sectors to explore how different change agency units operate within organisational structures.

Findings

Four dominant types of internal change agency unit are identified, varying in terms of their change impact scope and degree of structural embeddedness in the organisation. These units are described as *Transformers, Enforcers, Specialists and Independents* (TESI) and share key concerns with securing credibility from clients, added value, effective relationship management and with the use of consulting tools. The units' roles and the tensions they experience are outlined along with hybrid forms and dynamic shifts from one type to another.

Research limitations/implications

The study could be extended outside of the UK and conducted longitudinally to help identify outcomes more precisely in relation to context.

Practical implications

Each of the four types of change agency unit identified is shown to be suited to certain conditions and to present particular challenges for collective change agency and for specialist management occupations engaged in such work. The analysis could usefully inform organisation design decisions around internal change agency.

Originality/value

We extend debates around the nature of internal change agency which have typically focused on comparisons with *external* change agents at the level of the *individual*. Developing the work of Caldwell (2003), we reveal how emergent, team-based or collective approaches to change agency can be formalised, rather than informal, and that *structural* considerations of change need to be considered along with traditional concerns with change *management*.

Keywords – Change agency; change management; internal management consultancy; organisational structure.

Paper type - Research paper*.

* The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of research participants and the support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), grant number RES 000 22 1980A.

INTRODUCTION

As organisations in both the private and public sectors pursue rationalisation and reform, the need for effective change management to secure organisational benefits and retain positive employment relations is critical. Almost regardless of performance outcomes, change management can either establish support for new ways of working or erode trust (Vakola and Nikolaou, 2005). Given such importance, organisations typically look to “change agents” to deliver often complex and large-scale programmes. Change agency has its origins in the work of Kurt Lewin and the emergence of Organisational Development (OD) and consequently has traditionally been equated with an *individual* expert capable of supporting or facilitating processes of planned change. Such individuals can be based within or outside the

organisation (e.g. external consultants) and research has consistently outlined their relative advantages, around insider/outsider knowledge, cost and independence for example (Armbruster, 2006; Buono and Subbiah, 2014; Scott, 2000). However, as organisational change has become normalised or ‘business as usual’ in many contexts, change agency has itself changed.

In particular, Caldwell (2003, 2005) has argued that change agency as a form of expertise is no longer just the preserve of the OD specialist, but is being dispersed across management roles in general (also Sturdy et al, 2015). Furthermore, to fully profit from the potential of internal change agency, there is evidence that organisations are looking to go beyond seeing change skills as an *individual* management/leadership competency and adopt a more *organisational* approach through the establishment or further development of specialist internal change units (Christensen et al., 2013). Surprisingly, there have been few attempts to identify how these units might be organised and incorporated within existing structural and change contexts. Indeed, the notion of collective change agency more generally has received little attention with the exception of Caldwell’s (2003; 2005) analysis. In this article, we draw from and seek to develop this work in two ways. First, by presenting a model of different types of change agency units, we suggest that team-based or collective approaches are often more formalised than in Caldwell’s conceptualisation. Second, and relatedly, we argue that this formalisation coincides with the persistence of rationalist assumptions about the possibility of planned and structured approaches to change. In so doing, we question the extent to which the practice of change agency has shifted away from these assumptions towards an acceptance of change management processes as more fragmented and incoherent.

While based upon a large-scale academic research project (see Sturdy et al, 2015), this article is primarily focused on practitioner concerns. In particular, we set out different structural and functional options for collective internal change agency. This should be of general interest, but is of special relevance to those wishing to extend or change internal capabilities, including those looking at alternatives to using *external* management consultancy. Our model identifies four different types of internal change agency units: *Transformers*, *Enforcers*, *Specialists* and *Independents* (TESI). We describe how they are used within organisations, giving examples of where they have been successful. We also consider some of the shared characteristics and importantly, where they are likely to face tensions and challenges. In doing so, the article seeks to make an important contribution to extending debates around the nature of change agency as well as providing practitioners, especially in HR, project

management and strategic change roles as well as employee representatives, with some options over how to organise the management of change internally. We begin with a brief examination of the debates around the role of the change agent before setting out some of the core features of our research. We then focus in more detail on the model and conclude by considering some of the broader implications for collective change agency.

CHANGE AGENCY

Most mainstream change management texts discuss the role of the change agent in some form, often asserting its critical importance in the delivery of any change project (e.g. Cameron and Green, 2012). Despite this, there have been few attempts to examine explicitly underlying theories of change agency. Caldwell is an exception, arguing that change agency has experienced a ‘profound and increasingly disconcerting transformation’ (2005:85) from an activity underpinned by rationalist assumptions about the possibility of *planned* change, to one characterised by more constructivist perspectives that question the notion of a coherent and unified understanding of how change processes work (e.g. Stacey, 1995). For Caldwell, a rationalist discourse on change agency has a number of attributes. It tends to assume change is undertaken with groups or systems that are otherwise stable – meaning that change is unfamiliar, can be achieved within a designated timeframe and follows a set process which ends with stability being re-established (most famously captured in the three-stage process of unfreezing-moving-refreezing attributed to Lewin)(Cummings *et al*, 2016). Furthermore, Caldwell suggests that rationalist discourses place significant emphasis on the role of the expert as an autonomous individual, objectively detached from the change process which they are controlling and able to act as both subject-matter and/or process expert. In contrast, constructivist discourses reject these assumptions claiming instead that change agents operate in a context that is “characterized by new forms of flexibility, hypercomplexity and chaos in which the nature, sources and consequences of change interventions have become fundamentally problematic” (Caldwell, 2005 pg 83). In this fluid context, planned and systematic approaches to change make little sense and often fail to achieve the required improvements (Cameron and Green, 2012).

Although Caldwell argues that there has been a broad discursive shift, there remains some uncertainty about the extent to which this is represented in change agency practice. For example, there is evidence that more structured or formal approaches persist through, for

example, an increased use of project and programme management techniques within change agency (Sturdy et al, 2015). Indeed as Caldwell (2003) acknowledges, there is a more widespread use of change tools and techniques amongst change agents who are increasingly required to demonstrate added value. As such, an important concern we seek to address through our change agency model is the extent to which they point towards the on-going relevance of rationalist and planned approaches to change.

For Caldwell, a significant outcome of the shift from a rationalist to constructivist discourse has been the dispersal of change agency away from its original association with the external OD expert, skilled in facilitating processes of planned change, towards a much more fragmented and complex picture (see also Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan et al., 2007). The dispersal of change agency has two important implications that underpin the model of change agency units presented below. First, it means that change agency is now regarded more as a generic, rather than specialist, skill (c.f. Ottoway, 1983). In part, this is a consequence of the failure of the OD profession to claim jurisdiction over change management as a number of other occupational groups have attempted to assert their own change-credentials (Hornstein, 2001; Wylie et al, 2014). But change agency as a generic skill has also meant that the ability to manage change has become an accepted managerial competency, to the extent that organisations can now seek to utilise *internal* rather than *external* change capabilities (Sturdy et al., 2015). Second, and relatedly, the dispersal of change agency suggests that it is de-centred, meaning that it is no longer appropriate to only view the change agent at the level of the *individual*, but also in more collective forms such as change agency units. We will consider these two implications in turn.

Despite dispersal of change agency leading to growth in the use of internal change agents, the precise nature of how this works has been under researched. Perhaps the closest attempt has been to examine internal consultancy as a core organisational function (e.g. Scott, 2000) and there is evidence that the number of individuals and occupational groups that regard themselves as internal change specialists may be expanding and becoming more significant (Daudigeos, 2013). Indeed, as Law (2009:63) argues ‘internal consultancies have become major players; there are large numbers of managers who are, in fact, working as consultants.... without even realizing it’. In its simplest form internal consultancy is defined as change agency undertaken within a single organisation by salaried employees of that same organisation – i.e. unlike external consultancy (see Sturdy et al, 2015). As a result, studies of internal consultancy tend to focus on a comparison with external consultancy, emphasising

the advantages internals have in terms of understanding organisational systems and processes, longer-term relationships with key organisational players and, often, cost efficiencies (see Buono and Subbiah, 2014 for a detailed recent review). Such comparisons are important because they help to establish the viability of internal change agency more broadly. However, what is often neglected in these discussions is the issue of structure and organisation. For example, there is little consideration how the nature of reporting relationships, budgetary accountability and expectations for measuring performance or demonstrating value impact upon the type of change agency that is required and its effectiveness. As we shall see, our model sets out how change agency units negotiate these issues on their own terms, rather than just as a way of establishing a distinction from external change agents.

The lack of research focus on issues of organisation and structure is also important if we consider the implications of de-centred change agency. For example, rather than examine these issues directly, much of the mainstream change management literature continues to set out prescriptive stages-based models; suggest how problems (e.g. resistance to change) might be overcome or channelled; and describe the core competencies of the change agent (Burke, 2013). There is also a recurring emphasis on equating change agency with leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006). However, there is a noticeable absence of studies which consider issues of organisation and structure. Instead, much of the focus has been on the behaviour of individual leaders and how they might inspire and motivate others by setting out a vision of change (Battilana et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2012). This draws attention to the way change delivery is often intertwined with issues of hierarchy (something we explore further in our model). However, placing the individual leader at the centre of the analysis may deflect attention from how s/he has to work in a distributed way and how change agency is now apparent beyond simply the individual expert. There have been studies of change agency that have reflected on more dispersed or distributed approaches. For example, Buchanan (2003) details a process of change in healthcare in which change agents were drawn from a range of specialisms, but experienced fluid and unstable roles which were subject to contextual changes as the project progressed. Even here however, the core focus remains at the level of the individual and personal experiences of the role. This is also true of a number of other typologies of change agency in which the identification of role types is derived from individual competencies and ignore more structural issues (e.g. Beatty and Gordon, 1991; Hammer and Champy, 1993; Ottoway, 1983).

One notable exception here is work of Caldwell (2003) which rejects competency-based models of the 'heroic' or facilitative change agent and instead argues that there are four general approaches to organising change agency. In brief, he differentiates between *leadership*, *management*, *consultancy* and *team* models of change agency, arguing that internal change agents are incorporated within each one. For example, in the management model Caldwell shows how middle managers as well as functional specialists deliver change within business units. Overall, the model reflects Caldwell's argument about the dispersed nature of change agency and shift to constructivist assumptions in change management identified above. Also, and critically for our purposes, he explicitly acknowledges collective forms of change agency through the idea of team-based approaches. Here, Caldwell argues that change agency *teams* can be represented at both the strategic and operational level. A key example of a strategic change agency team is Kotter's (1996) notion of 'guiding coalitions' – a team created to deliver a specific change programme. Kotter argues that these teams are essential to translating change visions into sustained processes of change, although he offers little precise guidance on how these teams should be structured or how they should operate. At the operational level Caldwell argues that team-based change agency has been represented by such things as quality circles and T-groups (Highhouse, 2002). The focus here is on how dispersed change agency is achieved through processes of learning and empowerment within the organisation. Caldwell suggests that the learning organisation (Senge, 1990) is the most significant form of collective change agency given its emphasis on collective learning across all organisational activities. However, as recognised by some of the more substantive critiques of the concept of the learning organisation (Keep and Rainbird, 1999), the abstract nature of this and related concepts such as communities of practice mean that the precise implications for change agency are unclear – something Caldwell (2003, pg139) acknowledges, suggesting that the breadth of these concepts 'diffuses any sense of how change agency can be managed, controlled or developed'.

To summarise, the increasingly collective nature of change projects, involving multiple groups and extending across networks, means that empirically, research should extend beyond studies of change agency at the individual level. Conceptually, in order to develop Caldwell's framework of dispersed change agency, there is a need to examine (a) how collective forms operate outside of abstract notions of learning and empowerment and (b) how issues of organisation and structure shape change agency units even when they are operating at a more strategic level. A focus on these issues also allows us to assess the extent

to which dispersed change agency represents a shift away from rationalist assumptions about planned change or their persistence.

RESEARCHING CHANGE AGENCY UNITS

Our model of internal change agency is based on data collected in one of the largest ever qualitative studies of this activity (Sturdy *et al*, 2015). In this paper, we are only able to present some of the detail and so focus on how we developed our model. More information on the data collection and analytical processes that underpin the analysis are available at <http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/grants/RES-000-22-1980-A/read>. In brief, the research involved 95 interviews with change agents and some of their ‘clients’ across 24 UK organisations in both the public and private sectors (see Appendix 1). We defined change agents as individuals in permanent employment who (a) understood that a substantial part of their role involved the management of change (b) worked on defined projects or programmes of change and (c) were part of a formal team or unit which had a defined responsibility for delivering change. In the absence of any formal database of such units or collective forms, a ‘convenience sampling’ approach was adopted with information drawn from relevant professional publications and associations, including the UK Chartered Institute of Management.

Although the research initially had a broad aim of understanding the nature of internally-based change agency, the wider neglect of collective forms of change agency and their organisation soon emerged as a theme and is reflected in our specific research questions:

- What are the reasons claimed behind the adoption of collective internal change agency?
- What are the characteristics of organising internal change agency through formal units?
- What are the main organisational challenges facing unit managers?

Within each interview, these questions gave us a broad insight into the structural nature of internal change agency units. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, generating rich data for a detailed analytical process. We used a process of thematic analysis to interrogate our data - the outcome of which enabled us to derive the core dimensions of the TESI model

(see Table 1). Thematic analysis is a well-established approach across the social sciences that depends upon a detailed interrogation of qualitative data in order to identify patterns across that data, rejecting the more passive approach associated with grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This means that establishing themes or codes requires analysts to follow a sequential process, broadly defined by Boyatzis (1998) as (1) generation, (2) review and revision (3) test.

----- Insert Table 1 about here-----

We followed this approach in our analysis. The initial stage of generating themes was to code the data in line with the research questions. This meant distinguishing evidence related to each unit's (1) development or historical narrative, (2) its core working practices and positioning within the wider organisation, and (3) its main challenges. The process of review and revision involved further coding and analysis that enabled the identification of more specific issues within each of these areas. To guide this process, we established some specific categories related to each question. The analysis involved an iterative process whereby the relevance of these categories was continually assessed (see also Eisenhardt, 1989). This ensured that we rigorously examined each category and the findings within them, such that some were discarded for lack of evidence or data. For example, when analysing the data relating to the second research question we began to categorise in terms of descriptive characteristics of each unit (e.g. size, change specialism, internal hierarchies). However, as the analysis proceeded, we identified that the association with a specific change specialism or use of change methodology was more significant in terms of how each unit operated, and that these were not fixed characteristics that could be used as a straightforward means of comparison between units. As a result, we gave more weight to this issue and explored its wider implications in relation to how units had developed and how different specialisms related to the scope of change in which the unit was involved.

The final stage in the analysis was to establish the themes that recurred across the findings in relation to each research question. Again, this involved an iterative process where themes were defined and refined as we sought to highlight critical dimensions that would resonate across all units (see also Gioia et al., 2013). Inevitably this required a degree of abstraction in

order to engage with wider theoretical debates such as the nature of internal change agency. We also used this stage to highlight features of collective internal change agency that might be more directly relevant to a practitioner audience. The resulting model is therefore an attempt to draw on our key themes to identify significant points of contrast between different units in order to present a set of ideal types that can be used to inform decision making (Höpfl, 2006).

Before introducing the model, it is worth noting that our analysis did not reveal any systematic patterns in terms of unit type and sector or other organisational characteristics. In part, this reflects our sample which was not developed in a manner that allows us formally to claim representativeness, but it also stems from the fact that units were rarely engaged in work which was unique to any given sector. By this we mean that change delivery units would often play a facilitative role in which expert insight into sector-specific knowledge was of less significance than their ability to coordinate projects and manage relationships. As a consequence, each type of change agency unit to emerge from our analysis was found in organisations in a wide range of sectors and of different sizes (see Appendix 1 and below). Some organisations contained different types of unit and, as we shall see, units sometimes changed their form, including becoming hybrids. In setting out the key features of each unit type in more detail below, space requirements mean that we can only give a small number of qualitative illustrations. However, for each main type, we provide an exemplar to demonstrate its key features.

A MODEL OF ORGANISING COLLECTIVE CHANGE DELIVERY

Our model represents a particular form of collective change agency - change delivery units – and the four dominant types we found in our research. We labelled these units Transformers, Enforcers, Specialists and Independents (TESI - see Figure 1). Each one addresses particular strategic imperatives and, broadly speaking, can be distinguished along two organisational dimensions which emerged as significant from our data analysis; *structural integration* and *change impact scope*. Structural integration refers to the degree of embeddedness within host organisational structures. Relatively detached units are not incorporated within traditional reporting lines and so are likely to largely operate outside conventional hierarchies. Conversely, embedded units are typically situated within existing functional structures and so are subject to standard managerial hierarchies and relationships. Impact scope refers to

whether units deliver change designed to impact across the whole organisation or just within specific business units. In using these dimensions, we prioritise issues of structure and organisation rather than, for example, type of change delivered or any specific change methodology used. Importantly too, the model seeks to capture other shared characteristics and experiences which include threats to the long term stability of units.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here-----

1. Transformers

Transformers are units established with the purpose of delivering large-scale and transformational change. They were the least common type of change agency unit across our sample, arguably reflecting that change of this nature often requires a substantial commitment by the organisation and so is rarer. Often, such change is directly related to an organisation's strategic objectives, meaning that the impact scope of Transformer units is typically broad and pan-organisational. In terms of structural integration, these units tend to operate across the organisation and so are detached from particular business units or functions, and also temporary in terms of their intended existence. Transformers will most likely contain a combination of internal specialists seconded from operational areas and often, former external consultants with a strong project focus. As such, there was a significant emphasis within these units on working to a fixed timetable and for using a change methodology that could be applied consistently across a range of projects. This worked well in one public sector organisation for example, where the unit used individuals with consultancy expertise and those with extensive organisation-specific knowledge to achieve a wide-ranging programme of cost savings. In this case, the unit reported directly to the Chief Executive through a specially created performance efficiency group which had established a three year timeframe in which the unit had to achieve the transformational programme. As the manager of the unit explained, the scope of the change meant that there were few areas 'off limits' to the group because they were given the broad instruction to "go away and map and landscape and tell us which of the areas we need to be looking at as a priority". To achieve this, this Transformer unit and others were able to leverage existing organisational relationships

(thereby promoting collaboration and co-ordination in silo-based organisations) as well as draw on external knowledge and insights.

Establishing a Transformer unit does carry risks. For example, a unit with broad impact scope is likely to have a high profile in the host organisation and high expectations for the impact of the change delivery. This can mean that Transformer units face strong sectional interests from operational managers suspicious about the extent of the change and/or keen to retain control over initiatives in their area. This can create disputes over responsibility for impact and threaten the added value of the change across the organisation. Also, these tensions can be exacerbated by the tendency for Transformer units to adopt a more directive and non-participative approach to change given that they often have limited timescales in which to achieve impact. Alternatively, otherwise successful Transformers can experience a form of ‘mission creep’ which can also dilute their ability to add value to the organisation.

CommsCo

CommsCo is a large multi-divisional communications firm. A Transformer unit was established to deliver a large-scale change programme around work methods and reducing headcount. The unit directly employed over one-hundred people made up of ex-external consultants and traditional managers who demonstrated a commitment to consultancy-style working (e.g. delivering projects through the use of structured change methodologies such as Lean Six Sigma). The unit had a very high profile, with its Director reporting directly to a Divisional CEO and tasked to deliver projects across all functions within a fixed timescale. This pan-organisational scope meant that the unit had to employ a range of approaches including what were termed compliance methods where, according to one change agent, ‘*we basically forced people to [change], because if I’d have given them the choice it would never have happened and I would never have convinced them*’. Although other projects were more collaborative in nature, the unit did have to overcome resentment from functional or business unit managers and other employees who often sought to retain control over change projects in their domain and so use the Transformers as a resource or ‘bodyshop’. The response of one ‘client manager’ was to say to the Transformer unit:

‘You didn’t tell me what to do differently, you’re not driving me to do something different, we know where we want to go, we know how we want to do it, we’re just short of clever, experienced people with the ability to drive and do it.’

2. *Enforcers*

Enforcers also have a pan-organisational focus, but they are more likely to be embedded in the organisational hierarchy, most notably in the form of a *permanent* CEO support or strategy unit. As such, their role is to help executives translate strategic visions into specific projects and enforce a form of central control to ensure consistency. Consequently, Enforcers often have a quasi-policing role and are used to signal the strategic priorities of senior management across the organisation. In our research, it was most common for Enforcers to contain former external consultants whose perceived relative independence from (other) sectional interests meant that they were more likely to be considered as trusted advisors to senior management. This putative independence meant that Enforcers would work across a range of different topics, something that might be used tactically by CEOs if short-term change was required.

Across our sample, Enforcer units faced challenges in their ability to deliver change, mainly related to the risk that they were regarded with suspicion amongst operational managers. This was certainly the view of one unit manager in a Local Authority who explained that “*we’re very close to the Chief Executive in our unit, so there’s always a slight suspicion that we’d be feeding stuff back to him*”. In a similar vein, another change agent from an Enforcer unit in Financial Services told us, being seen as the eyes and ears of the Deputy CEO could “*close as many doors as it opens*”. This shows that Enforcer units may be subject to the whims and short-term interests of a particular senior manager.

TransCo

The CEO of TransCo (a publically owned organisation in the transport sector) referred to his Enforcer unit as “*the clever guys down the corridor*” and used their existence to threaten other managers with investigations into key operational processes. This was quite an extreme use of the change unit (and interestingly not one that the unit Manager was comfortable with), but it was emblematic of how this unit was both embedded within organisation structures and had a pan-organisational scope. The unit was formed almost exclusively of former external consultants and had to work hard to establish relationships with other Directors in an attempt to distance itself from its main sponsor. The unit claimed some notable successes in

delivering effective change in the organisation, particularly through the use of planned approaches to projects. However, as the senior manager commented to us when interviewed, *'should [the CEO] happen to move on somewhere at short notice, we would be somewhat stranded'*. Six months on from the interview, this actually occurred and the Enforcer unit was disbanded.

3. *Specialists*

Units do not always deliver change at the organisational level. If more incremental change is required, perhaps focused on developing particular functions and departments, then a Specialist change delivery unit is an option. These have a more limited (although not necessarily less important) impact scope because they typically have a functional focus. This also typically means that they are more embedded in organisational structures, often based in service functions such as IT or HR. They are staffed by subject matter experts who are likely to see opportunities to deliver change around their specialism through the adoption of consultancy practices and identities. They will also usually be funded through existing departmental budgets to offer advice and guidance where needed within parts of the organisation. In this way, Specialists present opportunities to develop the status and credibility of service functions like HR by combining distinctive knowledge with change management insights – insights that were typically associated with a rational planned approach to change. For example, in a multinational financial services organisation, the Specialist HR change agency unit had developed a tool that could be used to evaluate the impact of people management activity on the bottom line. This was cited as an innovative mechanism that could be used to build HR credibility by avoiding negative comparisons with other functions who, according to the unit head, *"have got data coming out their ears for all this stuff, and then what you've got is a HR guy running with a sheet of paper behind it. You think that's not a good place to be"*.

..

Risks or challenges relating to Specialists units are that they can struggle to overcome long-standing assumptions about particular service functions. In our research, Specialists with an HR focus faced particular difficulties because they found that they had to overcome traditional, negative perceptions of their role. Conversely Specialist units could end up

working within a function which they felt did not represent their expertise. For example, one Specialist unit in a Government agency that focused on business improvement had been shifted into the HR function which the unit manager reflected on with a lack of enthusiasm, explaining that “*there are certain members of my team who question whether or not HR is the right place for us to be. I’m comfortable with it on the basis of better the devil you know, I suppose*”. Moreover, the sometimes narrow focus of Specialists could mean they offered fairly limited problem-solving solutions, particularly if change issues did not map directly onto their interests.

ArtsCo

The Specialist change unit in *ArtsCo* was located within the organisation’s HR function. Its main specialism was around Organisational Development and the projects it delivered were localised and focused mainly on knowledge transfer of key OD change skills. The unit had originally existed more as an Independent (see below), but had been acquired by the HR function in a bid to support its desire to engage at a more strategic level of the organisation. Securing strategic work was challenging for the Specialist unit although they did achieve some success in this regard, acting as a form of hub for managers across the organisation with an interest in change and project management. This network enabled the unit to become involved in a number of projects, offering change expertise at the business unit level, although even then, its association with HR was, according to the Unit manager, ‘*the thing I have to get over more than anything else, so I kind of don’t tell people*’.

4. Independents

Where organisations identify the need for the persistent presence of a more generalist change delivery unit, then Independents are an option. The impact scope of these units tends to be localised as they deliver change through specific, often small, projects within business units. At the same time, Independents are detached from core structures and operational areas and so operate largely outside of managerial hierarchies. In this way, Independents most closely resemble external consultancies because they are required to source their own work and often to be self-funding. This is a clear point of contrast to the other units which are designed to deliver pre-defined projects and are not subject to the same level of resource constraints. As with Transformers, Independents can combine former external consultants and managers

from within the organisation in an attempt benefit from both the exotic-outsider status and detailed insider-knowledge. Given that Independents tend to have a more flexible role, they are sometimes involved in creating and managing links to external consultancies. Also, in some cases, Independents were involved in work with *external* clients. In one Healthcare organisation, the Independent unit believed that this had a positive impact on the way they were perceived inside the organisation. The manager of the Unit commented that *“part of the reason we’ve got so much credibility is that we’re not only internally focused, we also work outside the organisation. So it’s probably about 70% internal and 30% external, and the 30% external helps to fund the internal service”*.

Independents may have some autonomy over their work, but still face challenges. For example, as with external consultancies, the need to guarantee a pipeline of projects may mean that the unit’s focus shifts to fairly low status work with the result that they lose credibility over time. They may also find that a great deal of their role is involved with relationship management activity to ensure that they are the first choice for change delivery within the organisation. In one Government agency, the Independent unit were often faced with senior management selecting external change agents for work that the unit felt capable of undertaking. This was considered to be the result of a lack of profile amongst senior managers and projects that had limited scope across the organisation. It was summed up in a report written by the unit manager which was an attempt to defend the role of the unit:

“While on the whole enough work comes in, too much of this is low-level business. It also means that while (the unit) may have a decent reputation at lower levels of the organisation, it is not always well-known or respected at more senior levels”

Problems also emerged from the sometimes, complex funding arrangements of Independents as well as their extreme dependence on client resources and preferences in an internal market.

FinCo1

Working within a global financial services organisation, this Independent unit offered a range of change agency services across an entire global division. The unit had originally been created as part of a rationalisation agenda and was tasked with identifying efficiencies within business units. According to one senior manager this meant that it would approach each project with a view to saying *‘we’re going to stop watch you, clipboard you, and we’re going*

to present you with a document that says you've got to cut 15%'. In an effort to diversify, they hired former management consultants with knowledge of the use of certain tools and techniques which, over time, allowed the Unit's range of services to expand, along with their reputation and credibility. Although the unit did have a reporting line into senior management, their relative independence meant that they were not constrained by particular functional interests or having to work on distinct pan-organisational change programmes. Instead, the unit could be more opportunistic in their approach – something which led them to become involved in external work. This was not directly chargeable, but was instead offered to external clients of the host organisation as part of wider service contracts. Developing this external stream of work was a key aim of the unit because of a concern not to become dependent on a narrow range of project types and clients. As one of the change agents in the unit said, '*anyone can do what we do*' and so the unit sought distinctiveness and to demonstrate added value. This pressure was exacerbated by the presence of a number of other units across the organisation who offered similar services in change project management for example.

Shared Characteristics

As we have outlined, each type of change delivery unit addressed particular issues and faced distinctive challenges. However, they also shared a number of characteristics or experiences (see Figure 1), some of which are evident in other forms of change agency (see Armbrüster, 2006). First, is the importance of the ***credibility*** of individual change managers within the unit. This can stem either from an individual's insider knowledge or the extent to which external experience is considered new to the organisation. In some cases, particularly with Enforcers and Transformers, credibility may also come from structural features such as proximity to senior management, command of valued resources or perceptions about impact of projects upon the strategic direction of the client. At the same time, our research found that both personal and unit credibility could often be fragile. For example, change delivery units and their staff could find themselves in the position of the '*outsider within*', a dual identity that can impact negatively upon personal credibility in the eyes of significant others (also Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Indeed, the second shared characteristic is linked to this - the need to employ effective ***relationship management*** practices. Here, many units sought to mirror consultancy practices through activities which established strong trusting links with

key operational managers, ensuring that there was a clear pipeline of work for the unit. Effective relationship management can also act to convince operational managers to place change delivery units on their list of preferred suppliers, rather than just looking to bring in external expertise to assist with projects.

Successful relationship management was more likely to be in evidence when the units could point to examples of *added value*. This third shared characteristic was a critical factor for all the units in our study because unless they could construct an identifiable impact, they would often struggle to be accepted across the organisation and sustain their role. Of course, making an unambiguous link between the activities of the change delivery unit and performance outcomes is problematic, not least because some units pursued a degree of process consultancy in which the ‘client’ is considered to have done the work (and so achieved the objectives) with the change agent acting as a facilitator. As a result, units also shared a desire to develop a *range of tools and techniques* that would allow them to diversify the type of projects where they could play a role and so, hopefully, enhance the distinctiveness and visibility of their contribution. Moreover, units were consistently seeking to ensure that they were following systematic and planned approaches to change, to the extent that they would reject work when ‘client’ managers were not prepared to work in this way. The argument here was that the more distinctive and structured their tools, the more likely the change delivery unit will be seen to have played a key role in driving change impact. Also, some tools would help to strengthen the credibility of units, but once again, this was fragile as change tools are subject to the vagaries of fashion (Kieser, 1997).

Unit Dynamism and hybridity

The shared characteristics outlined above were fundamental in effecting the survival of the change delivery units. As we have also outlined, each type faced different challenges based on its impact scope and structural location. Indeed, change units were very often transitory - disbanding and/or being re-formed in different parts of the organisation. Thus, change delivery organisation can be a fundamentally dynamic activity, requiring units to adapt, not least because they will be partly involved in altering the organisational context. Indeed, the units in the model should not be seen as necessarily fixed in form. We saw a number of units where shifts had occurred as they became either more or less embedded in organisational structures or experienced a change in the scope of their projects. For example, one went from

being a Specialist to an Independent as it actively sought to enhance its role through recruiting externally and adopting more specific relationship management techniques. This shift was successful to the extent that the unit made a pitch to become Enforcers, working more directly on strategic organisational objectives. Such transitions could also occur in the other direction. A public sector unit for example, took a pragmatic approach to ensure its survival and went from being Independent with a fairly broad impact scope to being a Specialist working within a more limited functional domain.

In addition to recognising the dynamism of units, it is important to consider their complexity and the possibility of hybrids which combine unit features according to specific organisational contexts. For example, senior managers may seek to integrate the Transformer and Enforcer approaches in order to ensure that they assert greater control over significant change programmes. This might mean a change delivery unit that sits apart from the organisational structure (Transformer), but that is given the authority to drive through change by directly reporting to the CEO (Enforcer). As we saw above, this was partly the case with the Transformer unit in *CommsCo*, where the need to enforce change in some areas meant it had to exploit its links to senior management more in the style of an Enforcer unit. Equally, Specialist units might be best utilised if they are allowed to operate as Independents because this can help develop a commercial outlook driven by an enhanced need to demonstrate added value to help guarantee their existence.

CONCLUSION

Change agency is no longer a novel feature of management work. Indeed, it has become dispersed and decentred, taking various collective forms, including formal change agency groups or units. While much attention has been given to internal change agency at the *individual* level, as change agent or leader, much less so has been directed at collective forms and their structural variations, despite change units growing in significance in recent years. Our research points to four broad approaches or ideal types that managers pursue and adapt as they seek to support change internally and sustain a functional role over time. As we have demonstrated, no approach is risk-free, but the *TESI* framework provides concrete options for those seeking to exploit the potential advantages of keeping change management in-house and/or providing diverse alternatives to using external consultancy. This is particularly important in a context where many organisations are rationalising and seeking to manage

resources more carefully, but also in seeking to assume responsibility for change and to develop organisational resources internally.

In addition to addressing practitioner concerns and possibilities and filling an empirical gap, the model serves to develop our understanding of change agency conceptually. Research has rarely explored how organisational structures and hierarchies impact upon change delivery, except in a general sense of hierarchies supporting or impeding change efforts. We have shown how these issues need to be incorporated into the concept of change agency, especially when distributing change responsibilities across an organisation in collective forms. In short, the structural *organisation* of change assumes importance alongside the *management* of change. In other words, questions about where those with responsibility for change are situated within the organisation, to whom do they report and what is the scope of the change they are required to deliver, become as critical as concerns with how a specific change process is pursued and which tools and techniques are applied.

Aside from this general point about understanding change agency as a *structured* activity, we also offer a specific contribution in developing Caldwell's (2003) notion of team-based change agency. Caldwell's work is crucial in drawing attention to collective forms of change agency and its increased prominence and focuses on *informal* associations (e.g. guiding coalitions) or OD-based learning groups (e.g. communities of practice). Our research complements this by unpacking more *formal* means of embedding change agency. As demonstrated above, in each of the four types of change agency unit we identified, there was a preoccupation with establishing clarity of structure and purpose. This suggests that change agency roles were regarded as central and largely enduring, if adaptive, features of the host organisation and of how its changes are managed. Furthermore, we found that the presence of formal change agency units reflected the fact that rationalist assumptions about the viability of *planned* approaches to change continue to resonate across organisations. This suggests that the recent dispersal of change agency within organisations away from the traditional OD expert cannot necessarily be linked to an emergence of more constructivist, complexity views of change as Caldwell (2005) suggested, or that this turned out to be a short lived development. Rather, our research showed that the increasing range of groups or specialist management functions with a claim on change management mostly sought to adopt planned or rationalist models of change management, albeit with varying levels of managerially-defined success.

Our findings are based on a relatively large empirical study of change agency in relation to the available literature. However, there are a number of areas where future research could help to refine the TESI model and our understanding of formalised collective change agency. First, although we suggested that the value of distinguishing between sectors can be overplayed, it could nonetheless be useful to explore further how different types of units might be best adapted to specific sectors and change scenarios (e.g. mergers or organisational downsizing) and how this may affect unit dynamics and hybridity. Although our sample did not contain a unit which contained elements of all the four types, this remains a conceptual possibility. Second, additional research might focus not only on change outcomes for different forms of unit, but on how management and civil service specialisms such as HR, project management and accounting, can use units to enhance their occupational credibility and involvement in change agendas. Such a focus would also draw out the potential for political tensions between different groups seeking to establish an identity as change specialists. Finally, there is more work needed to examine the assumptions and models operating in collective forms of change agency, both formal and informal, in order to explore the extent to which less rationalist and planned approaches have developed outside of formal change units. More generally however, the above analysis reveals a range of options for formalised collective change agency and some of the advantages and challenges associated with them.

REFERENCES

- Armbrüster, T. (2006), *The Economics and Sociology of Management Consulting*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Bass, B., and Riggio, R. E. (2006), *Transformational leadership*. (2nd ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Battilana, J., Gilmartin, M., Sengul, M., Pache, A.C. and Alexander, J.A., (2010). 'Leadership competencies for implementing planned organizational change'. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol.21 No 3, pp. 422-438.
- Beatty, C.A. and Gordon, J.R., (1991) 'Preaching the gospel: The evangelists of new technology'. *California Management Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp.73-94.
- Boyatzis, R.E., (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage, London.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative research in psychology*, Vol. 3, No.2, pp.77-101.

Buchanan, D.A., (2003) 'Demands, instabilities, manipulations, careers: The lived experience of driving change'. *Human Relations*, Vol. 56, No.6, pp.663-684.

Buchanan, D.A., Addicott, R., Fitzgerald, L., Ferlie, E. and Baeza, J.I., (2007) 'Nobody in charge: Distributed change agency in healthcare'. *Human Relations*, Vol. 60, No. 7, pp.1065-1090.

Buono, A.F. and Subbiah, K., (2014) 'Internal consultants as change agents: Roles, responsibilities and organizational change capacity.' *Organization Development Journal*, Vol 32, No.2, pp..35-53.

Burke, W.W., (2013), *Organization change: Theory and practice*, Sage Publications, London.

Caldwell, R. (2003). 'Models of change agency: a fourfold classification', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 131–143.

Caldwell, R., (2005) 'Things fall apart? Discourses on agency and change in organizations'. *Human Relations*, Vol.58, No.1, pp.83-114.

Cameron, E and Green, M. (2012) *Making Sense of Change Management: A Complete Guide to the Models Tools and Techniques of Organizational Change*. Kogan Page, London.

Christensen, C.M., Wang, D. and van Bever, D. (2013) 'Consulting on the Cusp of Disruption', *Harvard Business Review* Vol. 91 No.10, pp. 106-14.

Cummings, S. et al (2016) 'Unfreezing change as three steps: Rethinking Kurt Lewin's legacy for change management'. *Human Relations*, 69, 1, 33-60.

Daudigeos, T. (2013) 'In Their Profession's Service: How Staff Professionals Exert Influence in Their Organization', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 5, pp. 722-49.

Eisenhardt, K.M., (1989). 'Building theories from case study research'. *Academy of management review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.532-550.

Gioia, D.A., Corley, K.G. and Hamilton, A.L., (2013) 'Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology'. *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol.16, No.1, pp.15-31.

Hammer, M. and Champy, J., (1993) *Reengineering the corporation*. HaperCollins, New York.

Hill, N.S., Seo, M.G., Kang, J.H. and Taylor, M.S., (2012) 'Building employee commitment to change across organizational levels: The influence of hierarchical distance and direct managers' transformational leadership'. *Organization Science*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp.758-777.

- Höpfl, H.M., (2006) 'Post-bureaucracy and Weber's "modern" bureaucrat'. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol.19, No. 1, pp.8-21.
- Hornstein, H., (2001) 'Organizational development and change management: Don't throw the baby out with the bath water'. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp.223-226.
- Keep, E. and Rainbird, H., (1999) 'Towards the learning organization?' in Bach, S, and Sisson, K. (eds) *Personnel Management in Britain* (3rd edition). Blackwell, Oxford
- Kieser, A. (1997), 'Rhetoric and myth in management fashion'. *Organization*, Vol.4, No. 1, pp. 49-74.
- Kotter, J.P., (1996) *Leading change*. Harvard Business Press, Boston, Mass.
- Law, M. (2009) 'Managing Consultants', *Business Strategy Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 62-66.
- Meyerson, D.E. and Scully, M.A. (1995) 'Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change', *Organization Science*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp. 585-600.
- Ottaway, R.N. (1983) 'The change agent: A taxonomy in relation to the change process'. *Human Relations*, Vol. 36, No.4, pp. 361—92
- Scott, B. (2000) *Consulting on the Inside: An Internal Consultant's Guide to Living and Working inside Organizations*, American Society for Training and Development, Alexandria, VA.
- Senge, P., (1990) *The fifth discipline: The art and science of the learning organization*. Currency Doubleday, New York.
- Stacey, R. D. (1995) 'The science of complexity: An alternative perspective for strategic change processes'. *Strategic management journal*, Vol. 16, No.6, pp. 477-495.
- Sturdy, A., Wright, C. and Wylie, N., (2015) *Management as Consultancy: Neo-bureaucracy and the Consultant Manager*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Vakola, M. and Nikolaou, I., (2005) 'Attitudes towards organizational change: What is the role of employees' stress and commitment?' *Employee Relations*, Vol.27, No. 2, pp. 160-174.
- Wylie, N., Sturdy, A. J. and Wright, C (2014) 'Change agency in occupational context: The challenges of congestion and credibility as lessons for HRM', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 24, 1, 95-110.

Table 1 – Overview of thematic analysis

<i>Research questions</i>	<i>Key findings to emerge from analysis</i>	<i>Link to themes in TESI model</i>
What are the reasons claimed behind the adoption of collective internal change agency?	<p>Units often established by specific (senior) individual(s)</p> <p>Units established for single transformational change or broad ranging ongoing change programme</p> <p>Units diversified to enhance development and increase organisational influence</p> <p>Units experienced regular changes to structural location (e.g. centralised to de-centralised)</p>	<p>Significance of senior management support and sponsorship</p> <p>Dynamic nature of CA units</p> <p>Scope of change key to unit identity</p>
What are the characteristics of formal internal change agency units?	<p>Variety of unit size – larger units associated with wider scope of change</p> <p>Range of change specialisms (e.g. project management, operational efficiency, OD, functional specialisms)</p> <p>Use of relationship management and work prioritisation processes to establish control over change projects</p> <p>Engagement with organisational politics – requirement to use position power to ensure change delivered</p>	<p>No consistent model of CA unit or type of change specialism</p> <p>Preoccupation with structural location and relationship to ‘client managers’</p> <p>Importance of control and authority to ensure change delivered</p> <p>Scope of change relevant to nature of relationships.</p>
What are the main organisational challenges facing unit managers?	<p>Establishing change impact and ‘added-value’</p> <p>Building credibility with ‘client managers’ – requirement to impose changes</p> <p>Subject to wider changes in organisational structures and change methodologies losing relevance</p> <p>Threat of substitution and/or disbanding</p>	<p>Value of CA units not assumed – has to be actively demonstrated</p> <p>Credibility not only associated with expert status</p> <p>Dynamic and shifting position within organisation</p>

Figure 1 – The TESI framework

