Making Change Work

What Managers, Executives and Staff Tell us that Really Matters[1]

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ABSTRACT

The difficulties, even frequent failures, of many strategy implementation and change programmes have been widely acknowledged, and still often not well understood, notwithstanding numerous popular change management models and frameworks. Little empirical research has been published on what is actually going on during these processes at different levels of the organisation.

Based on a unique and large number of actual strategy implementation and change programme discussions carried out in a variety of companies over several years, the current study reports on what managers and executives actually are concerned about and what they converge on with regard to key issues in the course of these change programmes and projects.

They seem to question some commonly accepted 'wisdoms' or assumptions about change management and shed a more in-depth and much richer light on various aspects of successful change management than often accepted. Managers actually seem to be positive about change, wanting to get involved, much less interested in 'what's in it for me?' than often thought, but they are critical of an over-emphasis on high-level leadership and communication. They rather like to see more values and action from their managers and organizational and process support throughout the process and – last but not least – they would like the time, tools and resources to be able to make it happen. While preliminary in nature, the results point to several interesting avenues for further research in this academically rather underdeveloped theme and approach.

JEL-CODES   J5, L10, L16, M10

KEY WORDS   strategy change, process management, change management, transformation

I. Introduction

Companies have grown larger and more global. Managing those companies has become more complex. Yet, the pressure on CEOs and executive teams to drive drastic change quickly is larger than ever. The average tenure of CEOs is in constant decline:

according to a recent Bain study; the average CEO tenure in the last years went from 8 to 5 in the US.

Most CEOs are equipped with tools and resources (internal and external) to find answers on 'what' to do. For instance, the agenda of the first 100 days of a new CEO is one of the most documented topics in management science. Executive teams can leverage many years of experiences in strategy to find the right answer for their business and define their vision in a relatively short time frame.

Yet, we believe there is more to be said beyond the first 100 days. How to trigger change quickly and sustain if afterwards? How to deploy the 'what' in dozens of markets and amongst hundreds of teams? Is it possible to identify the two to three things that will make a difference? How to measure the effectiveness of change on a monthly basis to allow course corrections if necessary?

The reality is that executive teams usually have another 100 days – perhaps not more – to insufflate the change momentum within their large, complex business. Management science in this area is far less advanced. After the initial kick-off, most executive teams are left with power point slides (that often lack any power), financial dashboards (that lack strategic direction or momentum) and thousands of people waiting for a sign!

II. **Our Project**

We joined our collective experiences from three different worlds: academic, strategy consulting and change programme support. Individually, we had accumulated significant experience in helping companies devise and implement new strategies, but each of us with a strong feeling that we lacked an end-to-end perspective to drive change from the CEO office to the front-line, from the text book to the results, from the analysis to the implementation.

This is why we decided to get a perspective from the 'field' by analysing in a bottom-up approach over 8,000 verbatims put forward by more than 4,000 participants (from top managers to frontline personnel) in up to 90 change management sessions run by the Synthetron team in 25 different – mostly international – companies as well as some public organisations across 12 industries and over a period of 5 years.

Synthetron provides a way to purposefully crowd source – engaging many (up to 1000) unthreatening (anonymous) peer discussion online from their own PC. A moderator guides participants (managers, staff, and project team members) through an engaging reflection process (from feedback to co-creation) on the specific topics that matters. Participants respond to a set of 5-7 well drafted questions and comment to the statements given by others, both in words and by scoring them on a scale.

The uniqueness of Synthetron is the evolutionary discussion: ideas that receive an initial high score migrate to more and more participants as long as they keep retaining a high average score: ideas with little support stay local, ideas with significant support are promoted further. The end result is both qualitative as quantitative: a structured short list of 'synthetrons' with their level of support (from tron = element of synthesis = those ideas that matter for the participants). It is an entirely bottom-up and objective process that avoids group think, authority or hierarchical arguments and top-down generalisations.[6]

The verbatims in the database are the synthetrons from discussions addressing the areas of strategy development and implementation, business transformation and change management. The participants were top and middle managers as well as staff mostly from multinational organisations. The discussion process focused on feedback, engagement and co-creating solutions regarding specific change and strategy projects

Typical themes for such bottom up brainstorming sessions relate to:

– Testing the 'stickiness' of the 'compelling' corporate vision/story at different levels, before, during and after the roll out of the strategy
– Capturing overall climate and the mindset of staff ahead or during of a change initiative
– Pre and post merger sensing of engagement and alignment
– Sensing the ownership and progress for a new strategy
– Co-creating or sensing the adoption of corporate values in support of new strategy
– Identifying barriers and acceleration levers in a reorganisation programme
– Collecting feedback on the roll-out of a change programme
– Understanding current dysfunctions and potential improvements with a major reengineering project
– Conducting a post-deployment review of a post-merger integration action plan

These themes in one way or another all refer to the implementation of broad strategy and change programmes.

III.   **Our Approach**

We conducted a bottom-up analysis of the 8000+ 'sanitised' verbatims (in order to strictly respect the confidentiality of the collected data), in what could resemble a 'grounded theory' or 'exploratory research' approach, keeping in mind that these data were not collected in the first place for research purposes but represented the outcome of actual strategy and change management discussions within the companies that organised them.

A key benefit of choosing this approach is that we may have avoided a possible 'observation bias' that may exist in various data collection processes, while of course being limited to what had been retained in the database from the actual discussions held in the companies concerned; with no possibility to go back for clarification or further investigation of the questions or answers discussed during the sessions.

We considered the participants' statements one by one in an attempt to structure them around some key clusters or categories, ending up with up to 25 sub-categories in 7 main categories – always trying to respect the 'MECE' principle (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive) or simply put 'no gaps, no overlaps' between the categories or (sub)categories. This was done on an individual basis, complemented with a series of team evaluations to check and improve the initial results.

We also tagged each of the verbatims using the following criteria in order to allow for some quantitative analysis as well:
- The phase in the change initiative during which the discussions took place. The 4 phases which have been retained for the purpose of our analysis can be described as follows
  - 'Scope' refers to measuring the underlying 'atmosphere' existing in the organisation before the change process gets started (*e.g.* the 'burning platform');
  - 'Design and Plan' refers to the conception/structuring of the transformation initiative;
  - 'Implement'" covers the roll-out phase of the change effort;
  - 'Ongoing'" relates to smaller size, ongoing change projects/adaptive measures; which take place after the main roll-out phase.
- How the issue was presented by the participant: as a critical factor, an enabler or a barrier for change or implementation. We categorised verbatims among these 3 categories if they included the following words or expressions::
  - Critical: 'must', 'should', 'key', 'critical', 'important', 'need', 'have to', etc.;
  - Enabler: 'would', 'better', 'suggest';
  - Barrier: 'problem', 'hurdle', 'should not', 'missing', 'shortage', etc. and a more general basis synthetrons which were negative or critical.
- The position (level) of the participants in the organisation (from top managerial level to frontline personnel).
- The geographical 'scope' of the project and the participants (global, regional, local).
- The type of company or institution organising the session: large global, medium-sized and small multinational, country-based, public institution (central or local).
- The 'weight' of the verbatim *i.e.* representing the level of support/the consensus it reached based on the number of 'votes' it received by the group of participants during the synthetron session.

Quotes cited below are in italic and are top or high synthetrons from specific discussions – this means that more the 80% of the participants in the particular discussion agreed with the quotes.

IV. **A Preview of the Results**

What is reported here is a first preview of the results and conclusions that we have reached so far in a collaborative effort based on the in-depth analysis of these verbatims over the last several years. As our research is still on-going these results can only be seen as preliminary, however some very interesting insights and first impressions seem to emerge that may be relevant for anyone interested in effective development and implementation of strategy and change programmes.

A. **If it Looks or Sounds Simple, Get Worried – "Whoever said it was Easy?"**

An amazing amount of books and articles about change management and strategy implementation have been written over the last decades. 'The three steps...', 'The 4 Conditions of Change ...', 'The 6 critical factors ...', 'The eight steps', do any of those titles look familiar? Any interested manager should have a couple of those books on her or his shiny bookshelf.[7]

What we found is a little more complex and perhaps complicated than what many top-down research efforts or how-to books may imply. If we try to organise and cluster what managers in the course of strategy and change programmes tell us what actually matters or what draws their attention as key drivers or issues, we end up with 7 broad categories (called 'Category' in the table below), the richness of which only comes to life when further distinguishing them into different sub-categories or themes.

At first sight, the almost 25 sub-categories in table 1 look like a lot, but when you think about it, it starts to make sense. To engage large organizations, a lot of those factors matter either because they will make change easier (*e.g.* an inspiring vision from the CEO), or because they will address key barriers for change (*e.g.* availability of resources). The data is context-driven and thus in some cases certain level of categories are bottom up more dominant then others.

As indicated above, our bottom-up approach was carried out in an attempt to conserve the richness of the data and the variety of the discussion topics. We further selected some key categories for further in-depth analysis and to show how rich and diverse the elements were that participants considered relevant within the given category.

Table 1. Categories of what Matters to Managers in the Course of Strategy and Change Programmes.

Category	Sub-category	Description	Main Orientation	Comments
Vision and Motivation	Alignment w/ Vision Scenariou Outlook	Understanding and agreement about where to go	hard	Refers to the overall vision of where the company/ institutio want to be in the future and why.
	Alignment w/ Strategy	Understanding and agreement on how to go about it	hard	Refers to the elements from the company strategy required to reach the vision (how) and also the references to the market, competitive position, excludes operational-, process- or organisation-related comments.
	Acknowledgement need for change	Acknowledgment of need to change	soft	clear statements about the necessity to change and/or about the impossibility to do it (barrier).
	Enthousiasm/Energy/ Positive Direction/Pride	Motivation positive energy for change	soft	clear sing of enthusiasm in the words used in the verbatims for going ahead with the vision/strategy/ change (ex. 'I will', 'ownership', 'engagement', 'supportive', 'motivated') with possibly reference to the advantage gained for the company.
Design and Plan	Clarity of Objectives and Alignment with implementation plan	Clarity on what plan entails and alignment with plan: accept or resit is	soft/hard	Verbatims here refers to the perceived links/adequation (or the discrepancy) between the proposed change programme and related actions; with the vision and strategy their implementation.
	Flexibility/Adaptibility of change plan	Flexibility of adapting change plan to reflect differentiated conditions among different part of the organisation	hard	Difficult cluster: verbatims include reaction to actions and components of the change plan to be adapted; with words such as 'prioritse', 'stop', 'simplify', 'adapt', 'obstacles' but do not refer to the timing or the place of (cluster 24) not to comments about resources (cluster 22), processes (cluster 23), etc.

Category	Sub-category	Description	Main Orientation	Comments
Leadership and Communication	Top management leadership and support	Top management is credible, convincing and showing support for strategy	hard/soft	Verbatims referring mostly to 'senior management', 'top management', 'leaders', 'the leadership', 'the board', etc. but not simply to 'manager'. They cover comments made either by those concerned (as 'us as leaders') or made by staff, etc.
	Communication (top down)	Sufficient communication to and with stakeholders about the change (top down)	hard	Verbatims relating to 'classic' internal top-down or external communication either with respect to content, frequency, channel, etc. This excludes bottom up communication (cluster 13) or collaboration (cluster 43).
	Communication (bottom up)	Asking change targets for their feedback, opinions, ideas, etc. (bottom up)	hard/soft	Verbatims relating to all aspects of 'bottum up' communication (*e.g.* more feedback from the troops, listening to employees, etc.) either posted by staff or management, but excludes performance related type of feedback (cluster 45).
	Change PGRM roi	Measuring and following the financial impact of the change initiative, change benefits	hard	A cluster including all verbatims addressing the evaluation and measurement of the benefits associated to the change programme *e.g.* words such as business case, benefits, metrics cost and benefits realisation, ...
Processes and Organisation	Organisation	Organisation is pertinent for strategy and plan implementation	hard	This covers all issues relating to the organisation (complicated organisation structure, number of levels, ...) but does not include comments on processes or rules.
	Budget, instrument, infrastructure, IT, tools and means	Enabling factors are available	hard	This is somewhat of a 'drop all' cluster covering all aspects of enabling resources associated with the change programme: financial manpower, IT support and programmers but excludes the 'time factor' (cluster 24).

Category	Sub-category	Description	Main Orientation	Comments
Processes and Organisation	Processes work practices	Required procedures, processes and working practices are available	hard	Includes all verbatims associated specific processes, procedures and rules but does not cover 'structural' organisational issues (cluster 21) or processes/rules linked to HR (cluster 31) or evaluation/compensation (cluster 35).
	Pace of change and reactivity	Capacity to move fast vs. workload	hard/soft	Including all verbatims referrin to the timing/the place of the change process: too fast, too slow, continuous changing, etc.
	Working atmosphere and facilities	Physical work environment	hard/soft	Includes verbatims focusing on the workplace atmosphere (soft) and facilities (hard) but excludes references to teams and collaboration (cluster 43) to managerial attitude and skills (cluster 34) or resources (cluster 22).
People	HR policies and processes	Overall HR policy and processes are supportive/adapted	hard/soft	This is another 'drop it all' cluster all issues relating to HR as an enabling function: organisation, processes, capabilities of HR people, recruitment policies, offering and support to the internal clients with the exception of 1) communcation internal and external HR communication goes to 2) topics relating to training and competency dvt which are posted in cluster 32, all verbatims relating to evaluation and compensation which are in cluster 35, all those relating to team and collaboration to be posted in cluster 43.

Category	Sub-category	Description	Main Orientation	Comments
People	People capabilities and competences	Adequate type of people resources are available to deploy plan/Listening to employees and developing them	hard	Includes all verbatims relating to people's abilities, capabilities and skills as well as all processes supporting this, but also to the adequate 'supply' of these.
	Managerial skills	Appropriate type of managerial skills is available	hard/soft	Includes all verbatims relating to skills and capacities as well as attitudes and behaviour of managers posterd either by staff or fram manager's own perspective (excepted comments associated with top management's support of the change programme (cluster 11).
	Reward and recognition	Adequate (people) performance measurement, deveopment, incentive and compensation systems are in place	hard	This cluster includes verbatims addressing the people performance measurement, development evaluation and compensation processes and practices, with words *e.g.*: 360° feedback, compensation policy, ...
Values and behaviour	Culture/Behaviours	Overall corporate values and habits, behaviour fostering changes	soft	Covers all verbatims referring to culture, attitudes, values and behaviours except for those relating to 1) empowerment (cluster 41), 2) trust and transparency (cluster 42) and team spirit/collaboration and knowledge sharing (cluster 43).
	Empowerment	Ability and willingness to delegate for people feel to take chare and act	soft	As stated verbatims referring directly to 'empowerment', 'delegate', 'autonomy', ... But exclused comments on bottom up communication (cluster 13).

Category	Sub-category	Description	Main Orientation	Comments
Values and behaviour	Trust and transparency	Required values conditions for enabling respect	soft	Includes verbatims mentioning e.g. 'trust', 'honesty', 'transparency', 'openness', 'fair', 'respect', 'genuine', ...
	Collaboration and information sharing	Sharing knowledge and information/Team culture	hard/soft	Includes verbatims mentioning e.g. 'team', 'support each other', 'common goals, common values', 'accountable for colleagues', 'cooperation', 'forum d'échanges', 'help colleagues', 'working together', 'share experiences', 'collaborate', ...
	Diversity	Enabling access to appropriate cultural diversity	hard/soft	Includes verbatims mentioning e.g. 'diversity', 'multi-cultural', 'cultural differences', 'working with different people', 'more diverse', ...
	Work/Life balance	Ability to balance work *vs.* personal life imperatives within one's work environment	hard/soft	Includes verbatims directly mentioning 'work/life' balance.
What's in it for me?	See value = What is in it for me?	Self value = what is in it for me?	hard/soft	Includes verbatims documentint the personal value-added participants see from the change initiative. Indicated directly when 'what is it for me' in the text of the verbatim; otherwise indicated by expressions such as 'I like ...', 'I enjoy ...', 'opportunities', ...

For instance, under 'process and organization', the concerns were very heterogeneous ranging from a sheer 'lack of resources' and 'inadequate IT systems and tools' to drive change to 'unduly complex processes' (see further point 4 below).

It would have been tempting to regroup the 8000 inputs into a few simple buckets and to even pretend there was *one trick to rule them all*. But in reality, 'addressing unrealistic planning' or 'lack of methodological support' are two very different things that call for very different solutions.

In conclusion, we do not believe that it would be very useful to oversimplify or aggregate; while in fact what managers and staff are really telling us is that it is important to pay attention to detail, to specific areas and issues, and that these they may vary by the phase and the type of project that one is working on. Whoever said that it was easy?

B. **Change is Seen as Positive and Pragmatic and Requires a Lot More than Vision, Mission, Leadership and Communication! – "Change is Good!"**

Overall, we were intrigued by the rather positive tone of the comments and discussions of our managers with regard to the change projects they were part of either as initiators, actors or targets and such across all the different types of projects. They are ready to consider change and want it to go well and are motivated to take part in it (see further below point 5 'change is collective').

- "This is a great opportunity for "x" to be ahead of developments and to respond successfully to market challenges"
- "I agree this is the way forward so can support the strategic direction. obviously some walls to break down at our and client side"
- "We need to be 100% aligned to the business we support, at all levels"
- "YES. Crucial to have streamlined and standardised global operations to be a Big Global business"

Designing and implementing change successfully does not mean focussing (only or even in the first place) on the 'burning platform', on 'strong leadership' and on 'efficient communication'. A change programme entails acting concurrently on a rather large range of levers and areas (as already implied by our previous observations under point 1 above):

More specifically, mention was made – more than much of the literature would suggest – of the need for adopting the appropriate values and behaviours as well as having adequate processes and the right type of organisation. 'Soft' issues appear to be seen as equally important as 'hard' issues during the change programme, even though there may be slight shifts in their relative importance throughout the different phases of the programme as illustrated further in the next point.

In line with these findings, we also observed that the discussions are generally domi-nated by enablers and critical factors, more than the traditional 'barriers' or 'road-blocks' so popular in the change literature and 2change models. Managers like to focus on the positive energy and constructive debate, except perhaps a bit more in the area of process and organizational issues, where barriers are relatively more fre-quently brought up. This is illustrated in the Table 2 below.

Table 2.   Factors vs. Type of Levers.

Mindset: categories vs. Type of Levers (sum of reach % (*))
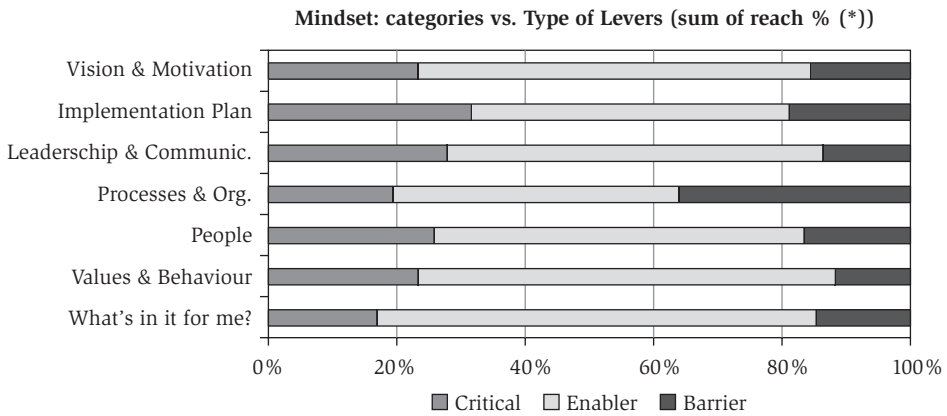
(*) the reach of a verbatim – a.k.a. of a 'synthetron' – reflects the level of support this specific comment posted by a participant has 'collected' in the course of the discussion, based on the evaluations made by the other participants. In other words it represents the level of consensus this idea or opinion has 'reached'. Hence the sum of reach for a given category (or sub-category) represents the addition of the individual reach for all verbatims included in that category and enables to measure the comparative level/strength of consensus it represents versus another one.

Table 3.   Key Factors Discussed vs. Participant's Level in the Organisation.

**Category vs. Participant's Level (sum of reach %)**
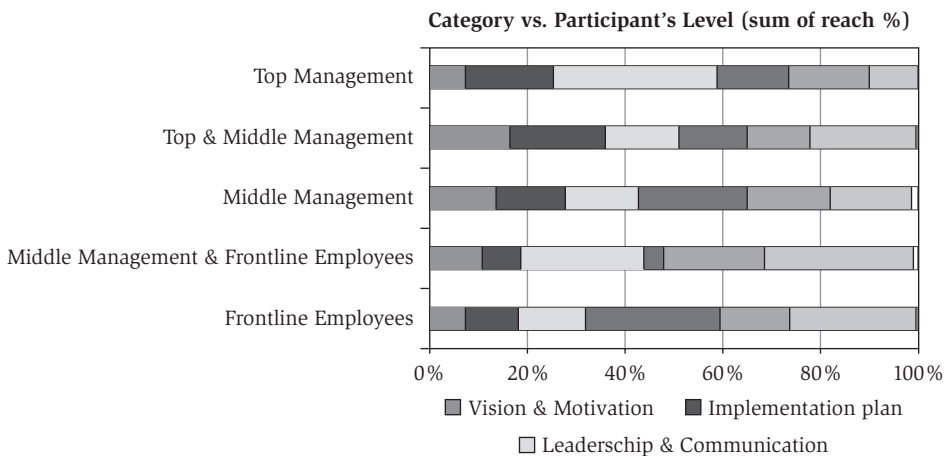
The above results may imply that if top management wants to be more effective, perhaps they ought to pay more attention to what the frontline and lower levels are worried about – more doing and behaving, organising and processing rather than talking and 'leading'!

C. **Change is Evolutive – "It's the Process, Stupid!"**

We analysed the data from companies in various phases of their change programmes (see above): from the early days to the post-completion evaluation, showing the following breakdown.

Table 4. Breakdown of Verbatims by Phase.

Breakdown of Verbatims by Phase (Sum of Reach %)
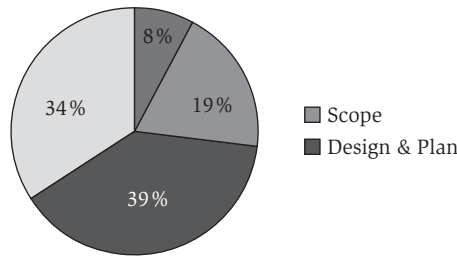
The key observation of these data is that the key drivers of change according to what managers within the company in the middle of the process themselves tell us, vary quite a bit with the life stage of the programme, as illustrated in Table 5 below.

More specifically, considering the 7 categories identified above, we observed that while each seems relevant in each phase of the transformation process, they do not seem to matter in equal proportion or absolute relevance across the stages of the programmes being implemented. Table 5 provides more detail of the importance (absolute frequency resp. relative frequency) of each category broken down by phase, as follows:

Table 5. Categories vs. Phases of Change.

Categories versus Phases of Change Programme
(sum of reach %)

Phases of Change Programme versus Categories
(sum of reach %)
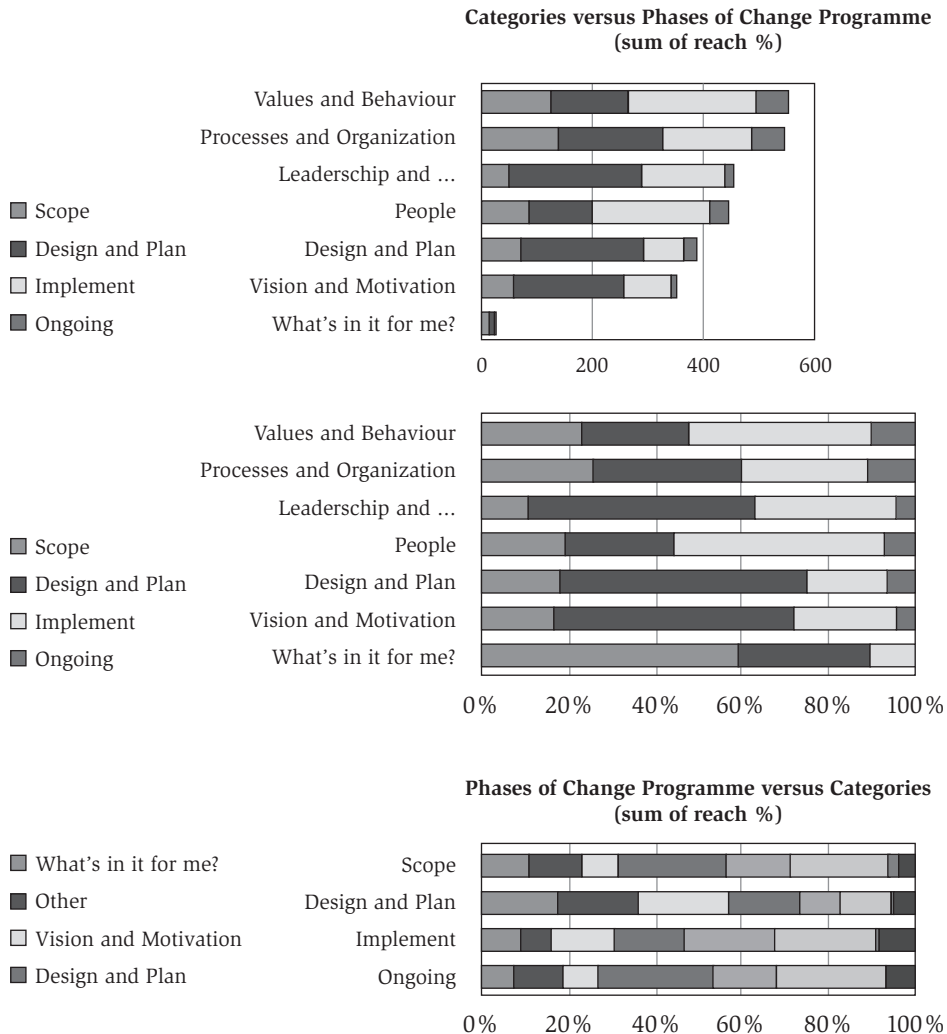
- "Our role as leaders is to drive behavioural change. We need to set the tone for the rest of the organization. And there needs to be clear rewards and consequences if we don't "
- "One main obstacle – it can't be just a piece a paper; it needs to be our mindset. It starts with all of us leaders"
- "We as leaders need to be positive and lead this change"
- "Leadership should cover 4 principles: 1/inspire people (vision + positive atmosphere) 2/commitment to the targets (to energize others) 3/empowerment (coaching + resources + recognition) 4/delivery of expected feedbacks (to be measured)"

More specifically, the following conclusions seem to emerge:

'Vision', 'Design' as well as 'Leadership and Communication' seem critical during the 'Design & Plan' stage of change, but less so in the 'Scope' as well as during the later stages especially towards the implementation. This is where the CEO and his/her management team have a clear role to play.

'Process and organization', while being the number one driver of change at almost every step of the change, becomes pivotal after the initial launch phase of the change programme. It is also relevant for the Scope stage, quite likely as managers and staff also want to share issues of more operational nature which prevent the organisation of 'functioning' efficiently. Soon after the big announcements and the first CEO presentation, people start realizing all the changes which will be required at their level in order for the change to happen:

- "Everyone must have clear sense of end game – also recognise we may need to be clever, thing will happen so we have to flex the plan on how to get there but goal remains the same"
- "Clear individual accountability, understand the role each team member is playing, regular communication within the team and with stakeholders"
- "now we have to further improve the organisation and create the space (= time) to be creative and innovative"

Furthermore 'Values & Behaviours' (what people do and what they live by) appear as the most important category throughout.

- "The biggest change is new way of working: more streamlined and standardised processes. It will require change of people's mentality and behaviour"
- "A learning organisation, intellectually curious about learning from the outside world and internalising that information and deriving value from it. We must find a way to be more flexible in our actions and perhaps more importantly in our thoughts"
- "Change in mindset and readiness to take the risk to fail"

The 'People' category referring to all aspects associated with the management of human resource issues seem very prevalent particularly during the implementation, and of course that is often underestimated or even overlooked in many strategy implementation plans

- "With more jobs than people to fill them, we need to be flexible to people's individual needs"
- "Concern: Losing really good talent because we could not keep them engaged and energized"
- "Provide training, communication and tools that reinforce the cultural and behavioural change that are required to improve the way we do staffing. Focusing solely on what the Widget Co says in courses is necessary, but not enough. Managers and HR advisors must have their beliefs and habits challenged."

This can be further illustrated by the 'word cloud'(*) on 'People' as illustrated below (*). Word clouds are created by considering the expressions that have been used by the participants in the course of the discussion. They are weighted by the frequency

of occurrence and the level of support they receive. In a word cloud the size of the word is a function of this frequency and support. Word clouds are created by using the 'Wordle software programme. (**Wordle**™)

In this word cloud, key words put forward by participants are: 'people', 'HR', 'training', 'managers'/'management', 'staff', 'work', 'good' and 'right.

Perhaps most surprising however is the observation on the "What's in it for me?" type of questions or comments. Contrary to what is suggested or even pretended in many change management approaches, theories or studies, this does not seem to be of primary importance when we look at what managers actually seem to be concerned about (see further below, point 5). Perhaps, as might be argued with regard to other debates about financial reward and compensation, it gains significance especially if all else fails and job satisfaction or strategic change performance is low due to other factors...

- "Staff and middle management need to understand what is in it for them"
- "Challenges and opportunity for personal growth"
- "What is attractive to new people is the depth of work possibilities"

In sum, thanks to the richness of the data and the different stages distinguished, there seems to be a clear indication that what really matters in staff and managers' mind and discussions, varies quite a bit depending on the phase or stage of change we (they...) are talking about. This is an additional reason why many of the 'simple theories' or 'simple tools or frameworks' for change may not be very effective – as they seldom seem to make such distinction within the overall process. Obviously, this is a topic for further fruitful research!

It certainly adds to the still limited but growing awareness among practitioners and researchers about the critical role of the process and a careful management of the various steps of the process needed to reach sustainable results in strategy and change implementation.[8] It also calls for more fine-grained analysis and appropriate management attention for the different steps to be taken across the phases or stages of any change programme.

D. **Change Requires Pragmatic Answers – "Please Give us the Means to do it!"**

When we assessed what really mattered to employees, and especially to front-line employees, we realized they were usually worried about very pragmatic, down to earth change blockers.

- "Better more efficient tools to help us meet the needs of the business"
- "Roadblocks include corporate red tape and individual work silos. Strategies must be supported by top management, not just at the local level".
- "Simpler ways of working, clearer responsibilities, more focus on core activities like sales…"
- "Celebrate even smaller achieved steps to show that we are on the right way and there is light at the end of the tunnel"

Employees provide useful, pragmatic inputs on what will accelerate change or on why it will eventually fail. Most change programmes fail to recognize those down-to-earth problems. In our view, it is because they are seen from the CEO-office point of view and fail to engage the front-line at the early stages of the change process.

In the word cloud of 'Process & Organisation' below, key expressions used by participants are: 'time', 'processes', 'resources', 'business', and 'need' as shown below.

In an attempt to gauge the richness and depth of the data and the messages managers are sending us, we have carried out a more detailed analysis of two subcategories.

1. **"Budget, Instruments, Infrastructure, IT, Tools and Means"**

The major concern resulting from the data is the issue of resources. First of all, there is the adequacy of those resources with regard to the nature and dimensions of the project but also to the timing (are they provided at the right moment?). The second aspect is the management of resources, which appears to be critical and challenging. The final take-away is a general sense of shortage of people, infrastructure and resources without distinction. These concerns appear to be particularly present in the elaboration/planning phase of the change.

Another point with regard to this sub-category is the importance of IT and Tools. Participants are concerned with the adequacy of tools or the use of up-to-date technology. They have also mentioned good available IT as enablers of the change or, on the contrary, complained about insufficiency of it. Further investigation reveals that the enabling function is much more prevalent in the discussions. Furthermore, tools also include good communication tools and good templates or guides to implement or follow new rules.

A third point deals with the simplification, the efficiency, the integration and the ease of use of resources. Participants are asking for systems to be integrated, tools rethought or systems to be integrated. These concerns were mostly underlined by people in the on-going phase, *i.e.* when the new strategy is being implemented.

The final major concern deals with work overload. One point is that people complain about too much useless work. The other point is the length of processes and too tight agendas.

Finally, it is interesting to note that 'budget' does not appear to be a major concern in the implementation of new strategies, be it as an enabler or barrier.

Table 6.   Further Analysis of Budget, Instruments, Infrastructure, IT, Tools and Means.
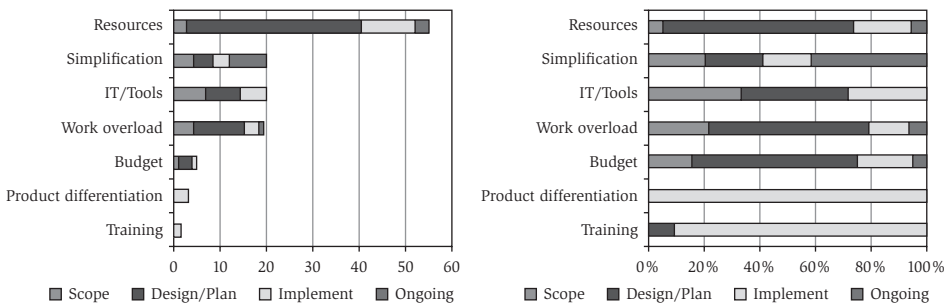
2. **'Processes & Work Practices'**

This sub-category is completely dominated by the key of '"Simplify processes, reduce their number". This covers several concerns. First, participants asked for the processes to be simplified, integrated and rationalised. They wanted them to be more user-friendly and based on state-of-the-art technology. Second, the discussions revealed a general feeling of overload with too long processes, too much controlling or reporting procedures.

Third, the participants ask for processes to be better supported by modern technologies. They asked for modern technologies such as Business intelligence to be used. Fourth, the question was raised about the pertinence of some processes and the adequacy of the timing of those processes. Finally, the last concern was to obtain clarifications and explanations about rules and plans. That major issue was mostly covered in the discussions during the scope phase and the implementation phase.

A smaller topic covers communication practices. People have often asked to increase physical contacts, meetings, phone calls. The purpose is to avoid e-mails and impersonal communication. Those practices seem to be particularly important as an enabler to the good implementation of a new strategy.

Another topic that was covered is the importance of focussing on the core activity. People should be occupied with value-added work and not with endless processes.

Finally, participants underlined the importance of efficient and flexible processes. They do not like the processes to be a goal by themselves, but to remain a tool that helps running the business. This topic was relatively more present during the design phase as shown in the Table below.

Table 7. Further Analysis of 'Processes & Work Practices'.
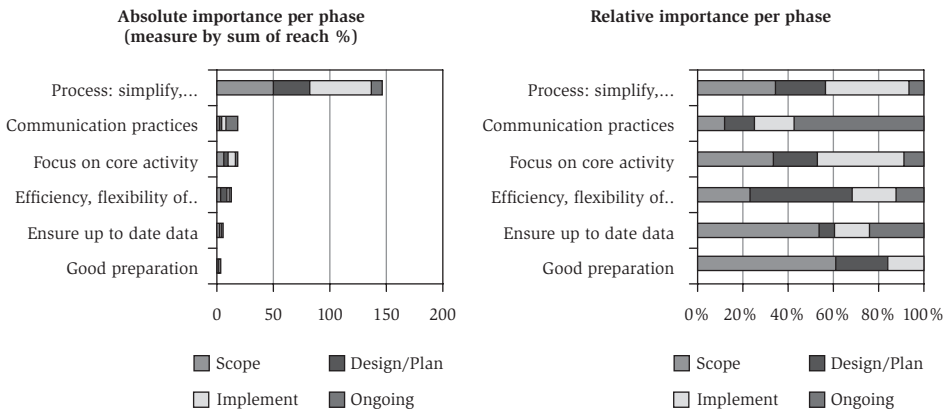
E. **Change is Collective – "We are All in it Together!"**

We were struck by the rather positive tone of the comments and discussions of the managers and staff with regard to the change projects they were part of; either as initiators, actors or targets. This came across all the different type of projects. Most are ready to consider change and want it to go well and are motivated to take part in it, as discussed under point 3 above. When reflecting on the change in whatever phase and almost on whatever category; only 18% of the comments can be categorised as "blockers" *i.e.* reasons for failure, resistance.

As Table 8 illustrates, the majority of statements can be categorised as 'enabler' or 'critical factors'. This means that participants, once engaged in feedback do not take a position of a resisting change 'object' but act as change subjects: co-generating the way forward. Leaders that can tap into these organisational wisdom stemming from their management and staff on regular basis not only get insights about what to do going forward and to accelerate or consolidate the change; but also engage them into the change process.

Table 8. Selected Factors vs. Type of Levers (sum of reach %).

**Mindset per selected categories
(sum of reach %)**
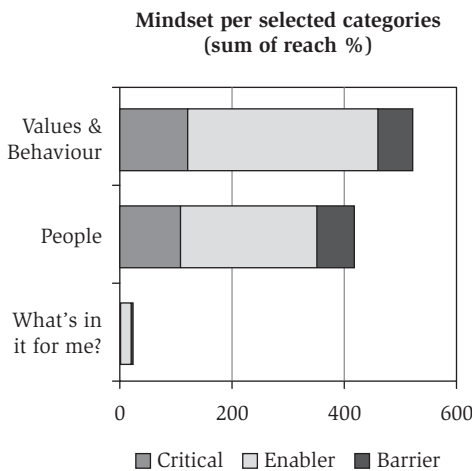
It is remarkable to see how little "what's in it for me" came to the table as part of the individual inputs. A lot of the change management literature talks about the need for change to become relevant to the individual employee...with a strong bias towards personal interest.

We found very little of that. This is obviously partly explained by the setting: they were discussion and identifying top issues as a group. The concerns which arise address more the 'hard' aspects of change and people management: the processes,

incentives, budgets, capabilities, IT enablers, etc. These often need to be adapted to support the change

The cold reality of corporate change is that it rarely benefits individual employees. It usually means more work, faster delivery, new things to learn, etc. Does what we come up with, simply reflect the fact that managers and employees have become quite realistic and mature about why they need to change?

We certainly found that employees show zero-tolerance for theoretical change that does not practically work and even less for change that is not embodied or embedded in strong values and behaviours. The only input from employees that does not seem to vary with the phase of the change programme indeed is linked to these values – a constant concern and driver thus throughout.

To further illustrate this point we digged deeper into the relevant subcategory and this is what we found.

'Collaboration, Team Spirit and Information Sharing'

Participants strongly put forward the need to act and work as a team and to behave in a collaborative manner. This applies not only to their group of direct colleagues/co-workers, but also 'horizontally' (across business, BUs, divisions, etc) as well as vertically across hierarchical levels (bottom). They also underline the relevance of adopting a collaborative attitude on an individual basis (low).They feel that acting as a team and collaboration is a key for success and leads to delivering good performance. They find that acting as a team and teamwork can be fun and exciting.

In addition they feel that efficient teamwork and strong collaboration is enabled by good and regular communication, but much more importantly by taking the time to interact in order to get to know better the "other party" whilst also meeting people face-to-face . Helping colleagues and providing reciprocal support is deemed of prime importance (very important). Removing silos and getting rid of silo mentality and behaviour is also necessary.

Collaboration and teamwork also implies sharing info & knowledge as well as best practices. Both of these in turn entail having the required information-sharing infrastructure and processes.

In the corresponding word cloud representing this sub-category 'Collaboration, Team Spirit and Information Sharing' we can see the following key topics brought forward by participants stand out: 'need', 'work', 'HR', 'share': 'sharing', 'people', 'colleagues', 'together', 'knowledge' and 'communication'.

Table 9. Teamwork and Collaboration: Topics vs. Levers.
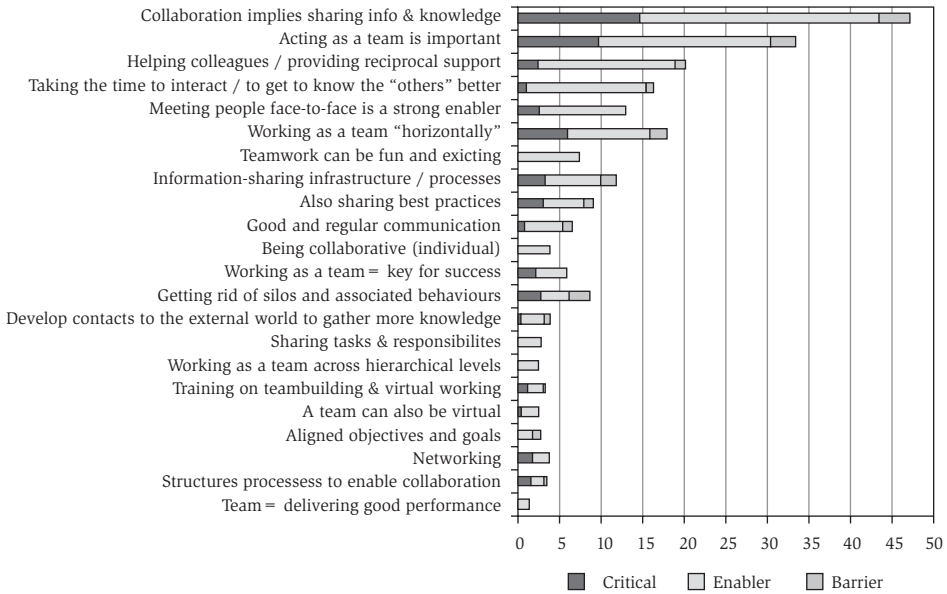
V. **Conclusions and Next Steps**

The difficulties, even frequent failures, of many strategy implementation and change programmes have been widely acknowledged, and still often not well understood, notwithstanding the existence of numerous popular change management models and frameworks. In particular, little empirical research has been published on what is actually going on during these processes at different levels of the organisation.

We had access to a unique and large number of actual strategy implementation and change programme discussions carried out in a variety of companies over several years, which – after substantial processing, streamlining and de-personalising all with respect for the essence of the statements or 'verbatims' – provide a rich and in-depth picture that is largely unprecedented in nature, coverage and depth. Our aim was in the first place to let the data which in the end consist of over 8000 verbatims 'speak for themselves' on what the managers and executives are actually concerned about and what they converge on with regard to what they see as the key issues in the course of these change programmes and projects.

Our findings, which obviously are preliminary and exploratory in nature at this stage, seem to put in to question some commonly accepted 'wisdoms' or assumptions about change management and shed a more in-depth and much richer light on various aspects of successful change management than often accepted.

Managers and staff actually seem to be rather positive about change ("Change is good!"), wanting to get involved ("Change is collective"), much less interested in 'what's in it for me?' than often thought, and they are critical of an over-emphasis on high-level leadership and communication. In fact, our findings very much illustrate that any attempt to identify the 'holy grail' of change management or strategy implementation seems futile, as there is a host of different factors that seem to matter, not just a handful of them, and the nuance and richness within each of the factors may even be more relevant than the general terms of characterisations.

In addition, these factors seem to vary in relative importance throughout the different phases of a change or implementation process – perhaps another reason why most simple or simplistic change theories or models often do not seem to work or are not to be recognised in practice.

Managers rather like to see more 'values and behaviour' from their superiors and colleagues, as well as 'organizational and process' support throughout the entire change process and – last but not least – they are mostly requesting the time, the tools and the resources to be able to make it happen.

Thus, it may well be that many change projects do not seem to work, not because managers do not want or are not interested, but once convinced and even involved in the strategic logic, they feel they are lacking the resources, the time and the means to implement them – a finding that is much line with casual observation about the mounting pressures and demands on managers' time and productivity in trying to always 'do more with less'. And last but not least, the primary emphasis on barriers or roadblock as the prime focus of popular change management models and literature does not find clear support in our observations, as managers seem much more interested in working on enablers and critical factors to make change happen – except if one would argue that precisely because most managers disregard the barriers they may matter even more...!

The 'soft' part of change turns out to be almost as important as the 'hard' factors. The corporate culture, values, role modelling, recognition, all have to be felt right and aligned with the change. The leadership, clear vision and good planning and communication (both telling and listening) are prerequisites not only when launching change but throughout the entire process.

Finally people want the change to happen in a positive and 'orderly' fashion: change is the result of a collective effort. Listening more frequently to managers and staff in the course of a change initiative will give to the change initiators the benefits of the 'wisdom' from the field and allow a more timely identification of necessary corrective actions.

The contextual focus of the different sessions may be different, but it is striking how over the many cases involved we notice that the challenge for strategy and change

implementation is about taking a 'multi-tasking' or perhaps better still a 'holistic' of 'integrative' approach rather than focusing on a few key levers. Indeed change is complex, leaders have an important role ensuring the organization handles the complexity. To really make this happen leaders can tap into the wisdom of very many in an organization in order to address timely those factors that staff or managers say matter.

Obviously, there are important limitations to the data used and the conclusions drawn. They were not collected for the purpose of testing any hypothesis or theory, and we do not claim any representativeness or statistical significance. They have though a common context: the discussions are all about change and strategy implementation, in a variety of different business contexts. Further contribution should come in the first place from a further analysis of the qualitative data as suggested, while the quantitative analysis is to be seen as mere exploratory and descriptive. In addition, we do not have any concrete or measurable reference to success or performance to our disposal that would enable us to link success in any reliable way with the kind of concerns and statements that are the building blocks of our qualitative data set.

While preliminary in nature, the results nevertheless point to several interesting avenues for further research, particularly given the rather scant evidence currently available in this academically rather underdeveloped theme and approach. First of all, further research on the importance of managing the process – possibly with respect for the distinct phases in any process – should be carried out. Second, with all the emphasis on leadership and high-level communication, the focus on practical feasibility and constraints might be re-visited. Thirdly the co-creative and engagement aspect of change maybe better understood. Fourth, a link with performance or success may need to be explored, as this remains of course the hall-mark of any strategic project or change management initiative not only to improve performance but to contribute to out-performing the market or the competition. In future contributions, we hope to be able to shed more light on some of these issues and corroborate our results with further empirical data and analysis.

NOTES

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6. For more details on the idea of a 'synthetron' and the principles and background of this approach, see *e.g.* P.C. Verhaeghe, Sluiers over Corporate, Roularta Books, 2002, esp. Ch. 4, pp. 111-130 (in Dutch; English version forthcoming).

7. For some popular examples, see selected references at the end of this article.

8. As argued, for example, in earlier studies based on in-depth case studies and experiences in the field of internationalization strategies: Alice de Koning, Paul Verdin and Peter Williamson, So You Want To Integrate Europe: How Do You Manage the Process?, *European Management Journal,* June 1997, pp. 252-265; Paul Verdin and Nick Van Heck, *From Local Champions to Global Masters – A Strategic Perspective on Managing Internationalization*, Palgrave Academic Publishers/Macmillan, London-New York, September 2001, 251 pp., particularly part III.

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