

Cultural Dynamism: Reimagining Team Building That Transcend Reflexive Individual Biography in a Post-Segregated Environment

Xolani Ngonini

Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority, Centurion, South Africa

In the Southern African context, businesses, governments, and community-based organizations have become reliant on teamwork to streamline processes, augment participation and improve performance. In this regard, the historically formalized, centralized, and departmentalized mechanistic structures are being replaced by team-based structures. Research from the North, on team building, suggests that teams have a potential to give diversity in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and experience, whose integration would make it possible to offer rapid, flexible and innovative responses to problems and challenges, promoting performance and improving the satisfaction of those making the team. In South Africa, a state-owned entity launched a team-building initiative to improve team effectiveness and functioning within the water sector. This initiative was implemented contemporaneously with climate and culture change management initiatives envisioned to usher in *a new culture*, to improve employee morale, and, ultimately, to ensure a high-performing organization. These initiatives sought to help articulate and cultivate leadership accord, create a common vision, as well as develop a consensus on a set of collective values that would become the bedrock of the organization. In the light of this background, this paper examines the effectiveness of the “growing-our-teams” initiative, with the goal of lending insights into the strengths and weaknesses of strategies and processes deployed to implement and manage the initiative. In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the program, the underpinning research was conducted by reviewing and analyzing related articles and papers, as well as interrogating employee experiences relating to the program. How do state-owned entities learn and implement lessons distilled from their programs or initiatives to build capacity and improve efficiencies?

Keywords: team dynamics, leadership, organizational culture, social context

Introduction

South Africa is a country in transition from an apartheid-based system towards a cohesive, collaborative society based on its *constitutional values*; however, her past seems to be the spectra that haunt change progress—especially in state-owned entities. Since 1994 (*first democratic elections*), the winds of change have been sweeping across structural, economic, and socio-demographical spheres—both at strategic and operational

Xolani Ngonini, Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority, Centurion, South Africa.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Xolani Ngonini, Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority, Tuinhof Building, Stinkhout Wing, 265 West Avenue, Centurion, South Africa.

levels. Indeed, the transition from the colonial system to a democratic one was largely successful, marked by intermittent violence; nevertheless, new institutions were established, laws were promulgated, with systems and processes being launched.

Given that the transition to the post-colonial system was a compromise, the effects of macro changes maybe trickling down to an organizational level at a snail's pace. This could be attributed to the fact the pre-1994 "developmental state" had bifurcated policy mandates: the white colonial system provided ample developmental resources to its "citizens" while limiting access to resources by the black "reserves", including access to basic resources such as potable water, health, and housing even access to knowledge—all this culminating in unequal development. Politically-engineered social inequality thwarted any chances of solidarity, destabilized society communities, and gashed social fabric.

Highlighting the long-term effects of policy-driven injustice and inequity, a World Bank's study, *overcoming the legacy of exclusion in South Africa*, contends that though "South Africa has come a long way since the advent of democracy, its transition remains incomplete" (World Bank Group, 2018, p. 95)—poverty, inequality and lack of access to services remain formidable bottlenecks.

Beyond the usually stated macro policy challenges ranging from poor governance frameworks, lack of technical skills to dire economic circumstances, this paper, extrapolating from a case study of a public entity mandated to provide strategic services and goods, argues that the extant literature has largely overlooked the challenges posed by socio-cultural-demographic, psycho-social and contextual factors as critical vectors with significant influence in either harnessing or inhibiting transitional or change initiatives. Examining the dominant organizational change, learning organization, and organizational learning models, the paper contends that such models pay insufficient attention to the historicity of practices, rules, and conditions that have underscored and informed the tenets of power relations—both at the social and organizational level. For change to be effective and sustainable, organizations ought to be viewed as living organisms within a larger socio-economic ecosystem: a correlative constitution of relations between social groups, their values, and customs, as well as organizational individual behaviours, exists (Foucault, 1972). Further, public entities are not merely driven by improved internal efficiencies, but also by issues about improved responsiveness in fulfilling strategic needs and providing goods to all citizens. As a consequence, there is a need to unravel the learning needs and challenges of Southern public entities. Mosse, Farrington, and Rew (1998) offer an argument for considering the crucial role of social relationships, the politics of knowledge distribution, and their use within and beyond the organization (Mosse, et al., 1998).

Furthermore, drawing on Michel Foucault's work, it is advanced that researchers and practitioners need to recognize that power produces knowledge and that knowledge and power directly imply each other (Foucault, 1972). Therefore, in the context of a transitional state, the following questions ought to come to the fore: Whose discursive practices influence the modalities of change, learning, and knowledge proper? How do people disentangle and disengage from the past common systems of conceptualizations, ways of reasoning, and define common conditions of existence? Moreover, given that organizations evolve a culture over years, how do employees unlearn that culture and manage the intensity of historical experience shared over time (Schein, 2016)?

Four main sections follow this introductory background. First, a brief description of the method used to gather data will be highlighted. Second, an overview of the change management initiative, the learning organization approach as well as organizational learning processes adopted by the publicly-owned entity will be

reviewed, acting as a springboard to broader issues around the discursive practices on the rationale for change management, organizational change management, individual change management and change competency, including learning to unlearn engendered historical practices. Third, a literature review will discuss dominant models of change management, learning, and team building—looking specifically at the main theoretical frameworks and key constructs. Fourth, in the conclusion, key points emanating from the findings will be juxtaposed with the dominant discursive practices in traditional change management and learning organization approaches and, finally, a need for a socially-embedded notion of change management and organizational learning will be proposed.

The Rationale for the Change Management and the Learning Organization Initiative

Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority (TCTA) plays a critical role in the advancement of socio-economic development in South Africa. TCTA (1986) was established in terms of the government Notice of Establishment and the National Water Act (No. 36 of 1998), to facilitate water security through planning, financing, and implementation of bulk water infrastructure, in the most cost-effective manner that benefits water users (Ngonini & Busari, 2017). To fulfill its key role within the dynamic water sector, the organization recognizes the pivotal part knowledge, learning, and effective teamwork play in its pursuit of optimal development impact and organizational efficiency. In the main, two main strategic objectives drive TCTA's business: a) to be regarded as a Centre of Excellence in the water sector; and b) to improve livelihoods, and contribute to transformation and sustainability in line with the government's developmental agenda (Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority, 2013).

Established under a diametrically different government system, because of its importance in the water sector and response to broader national changes, TCTA foresaw the need to review its organizational culture (Schein, 2016) to be consistent with the *new government agenda*; that is, gearing its ethos towards reducing inequality, creating employment and improving livelihoods. In this respect, the organization conceptualized change management and organizational learning project aimed at building consensus among the leadership about TCTA's vision, stimulating their energies to drive the cultural change, and securing buy-in from general employees. The centre of the next phase was on raising awareness about the need for change and learning, and harvested support for the co-creation of common organizational vision and values, and supporting leadership behaviors. And the last phased focused on rolling out and mainstreaming the collaboratively created vision and values. The initiative was implemented over three years (Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority, 2010).

Fundamentals of Organizational Learning and Change Management

The TCTA of the 2000s was markedly different from the TCTA of the 1980s: in 1994, a new democratic government with a mandate to build a united, non-sexist and non-racial and cohesive society had materialized.

In its original mandate, the organization was established to fulfill South Africa's treaty obligations in respect of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, a bi-national infrastructure project between the governments of the Republic of South Africa and the Kingdom of Lesotho. Over the years, TCTA's activities grew considerably in scale and complexity—from managing only a treasury function on a single project, to the management of a current portfolio of several major infrastructure projects, in various stages of the project life-cycle. The growth in scale and the expansion of its mandate signaled the increase of the organization's footprint and the concomitant need for it to be demographically representative of project-affected communities.

Like all social science subject matters, several definitions of organizational learning and change management abound in the literature. Some definitions emphasize the etymology of change in terms of origin, result and process of change. Origins of change are influenced by how change manifests in the organization, either as emanating from the surrounding environment or intrinsic in the organizational processes (Nadler & Tushman, 1989). Change may also appear as a process of transition from a known state to an unknown future state (Cummings, et al., 1985; Kanter, 1983). The human-process paradigm was pioneered by social psychologists, especially Kurt Lewin. On the other hand, the learning organization framework is premised on the implementation of changes, partnerships, and the formation of innovative teams. It presumes a continuous search for, acquiring and testing of knowledge in practice, learning from its own and others' mistakes and successes (Cesnovar, 2010; Nonaka, 1991; Argyris & Schon, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 2006).

Change and knowledge management, as well as the learning organization, can no longer be treated separately. Aggestam (2006) aptly describes the occurrence of learning: "learning is when the change in knowledge happens inside an individual, learning and accumulation of (new) knowledge always start with the individual" (Aggestam, 2006, p. 296).

Emphasizing the individual agency, the majority of theoretical models for change management draw on Lewin's linear and static three-prong approach: freezing, changing and unfreezing, as well as his action research model. According to Lewin's pioneering model, during the first stage, an organization recognized the need to change, based on the changing market conditions, advances in technology or internal restructuring needs. In the second phase, the organization undergoes transformation or transition, with the physical manifestation of change efforts flourishing. And in the last phase, transformational manifestations become a routine within the organization. Further, his action research model is closely related to or could be perceived as an extension of the equilibrium-based three-step methodology. The action research model, in its turn, outlines typical research to dealing or identifying a problem, developing a hypothesis, testing its validity and relevance, and integrating feedback from those affected by the change effort (Lewin, 1951). Several other post-Lewin change models have emerged, including, among the dominant ones, Kotter's (1995) strategic eight-step model for transforming the organization; Jick's (1991) tactical ten-step model, providing a map for change and tools for evaluating the change effort; and General Electric's (Garvin, 2000) seven-step change acceleration process (Garvin, 2000; Kotter, 1995; Jick, 1991). Similarly, Aggestam (2006, p. 296) states that the environment influences the organization by creating a community of learners, promoting a culture of learning and thereby ensuring that individual learning enriches and enhances the organization as a whole. However, Levitt and March (1998) cited in Hovland (2003) contend that such romantic views of change and learning underplay the complexity of organizational experiences, human habits, hierarchical structures, routines, and differing interpretations by different sub-groups with an organization (Hovland, 2003).

Indeed, later models built on the foundational approaches have introduced climate and culture. This approach to learning and understating organizational change has the potential to reduce the rational, scientific biases of the early social psychological models through re-emphasizing organization climate, culture and the reality of politics as a critical aspect of organizational change. In terms of the later paradigms, climate relates to the employees' perceptions and attitudes towards whether the organization is an "employer of choice" or not, a sociable or hostile environment. Perceptions and attitudes are relatively easy to change. However, culture—the sum of key principles, accepted values, and very unconscious values—in transitional societies often prove hard to modify. As a point of departure, this paper underscores culture and the political as the emergent forces for

change and willingness to learn (new) knowledge in the post-modern world: access to information, global activism and democratization provide citizens with platforms to contest the truthfulness of beliefs.

Amagoh (2008, p. 2) asserts that “all conventional models and theories of organizations typically embraced the closed systems approach to the study of organizations by assuming that the main features of an organization are its internal elements”. However, recent literature on change management and the learning organization in public organization accentuates the view of public entity entities as dissipate structures; that is, semi-stable configurations, operating with non-linear logic (Amagoh, 2008, p. 7). Further, the complexity paradigm recognizes that the external environment—the competition, socio-cultural demographic factors, political-legal-government aspects—beyond the control of the organization may result in instability. According to Ferlie, such turbulence can be attributed to the context of the emergence of public entities in a special threshold in the evolutionary process of political, social, and economic systems (Ferlie, 2007). However, at the point of crisis, the managerial leader with a complex and integrative comprehension of the environment can devise strategies to hold the internal structure together and dissipate the “fluxes of energy” coming to it (Amagoh, 2008).

In the face of multiple challenges, the managerial leader ought to pay attention to “power, conflict, negating over scarce resources, the messy marketplace of ideas, and the organization as a battlefield” of ideas (Corlett, n.d.). In this paper, it is argued that change and learning by their very nature cause anxiety, bring about uncertainties and raise tensions; therefore, Mill’s idea in a post-segregated scenario (like South Africa) is utopian—as there is generally lack of trust, heightened prejudices and stereotypes.

Drawing on Mento et al. (2002), this paper reviews procedure adopted to implement a change initiative and the framing of a learning organization, with particular focus on the effects of socio-cultural demographics in a transitional state. Most literature has tended to ignore the crucial role played by these forces as well as by political changes, both on the idea and context, and the need for change (Mento, et al., 2002).

Framing the Change Management and the Learning Organization

In South Africa, the transition from an autocratic regime to a democratic one—from a white minority rule to majority rule—was consummated in 1994. The initiative under review was implemented in the post-apartheid era, and thus its motif followed the systemic changes taking place during the institution-building phase. As stated earlier, having been established in 1986, to fulfill South Africa’s treaty obligations in respect of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project—an iconic bi-national infrastructure project between the governments of the Republic of South Africa and Kingdom of Lesotho—TCTA had to adapt to the environment to align with the new regime’s transformational agenda (Ngonini & Busari, 2017). In this context, the environment of the 1980s was being replaced by a more turbulent and uncertain context of a post-colonial regime since 1994. Owing to this socio-political change, it became necessary for the organization to change and adapt to the new regime’s program.

In widening the conception of change and learning beyond the institution, Drucker (1997) has argued that an organization:

...will require information about events and conditions outside the institution...only with this information can a business...prepare for new changes and challenges arising from sudden shifts in the world economy and in the nature and content of knowledge itself (Drucker, 1997, pp. 20-24).

Given the above proposition, adaptation is the ability of an organization to modify itself or its environment in response to disturbances that threaten the system's efficiency (Amagoh, 2008). In this context, organizations reposition their internal processes to become more competitive and to remain socially relevant in respect of public entities (Levinthal, 1997). However, the reality of change and learning for TCTA was beyond improving internal organizational efficiencies; it required knowledge about the broader changes taking place in the country and the world economy.

Managing Change and Learning in the Organization

Unlike entities in the private sector, public entities do not have to strive to be competitive; however, they need to be relevant to enhance the efficient and effective delivery of government mandates to the citizenry. So, public entities need to be innovative in finding better ways to provide services to communities in a manner that does not burden the taxpayer but rather improves access to services and livelihoods. The centre of TCTA's change and learning conception were on becoming a Center of Excellence in the water sector. In this regard, there was a tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic need for change: change and learning at the organizational and individual levels influenced by the transition at the national political.

To apprehend and appreciate the effects of political transition on the organization and employee levels, TCTA undertook climate and culture surveys, held several employee engagement sessions and one feedback event (Ngonini & Busari, 2017). The organization introduced new units to create, organize, share and use knowledge towards becoming a thought leader in the water sector (Ngonini & Busari, 2017). At face value, this approach justified visioning the new organization and identifying new learning needs—both from addressing external and internal demands. Senge's five disciplines (Senge, 2006) were integral components for the organization, rolled out in several workshops. Though the approach to developing the case for change and learning followed the standard models (Garvin, 2000; Jick, 1991; Lewin, 1951; Kotter, 1995), the roll-out reflected tensions about the vision, values, and the actual essence of change. There were limitations to learning within the organization due to a top-down approach adopted in the implementation of the initiative.

Employees felt that they were not fully engaged in the process, stating that management pursued a top-down approach: the feedback sessions mimicked the hierarchy of the organization rather than being a collaborative and organization-wide information-sharing session. As such, the strategic intent contradicted the process content. While the two are distinguishable but inseparable processes, management ought to have incorporated and appreciated the macro sentiments at the national level. Further, recipients of the program felt that a disconnect between the national change efforts and the learning organizational change existed. Looking at the Kotter's model (1995), in particular, step seven—lining up political sponsorship—the managerial leadership should have leveraged political sponsorship to align the internal change effort with government transformation goals. In this regard, the change management approach should have appreciated both the “people side of change” (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012), as well as the overarching political changes. To influence cultural change and learning, management ought to have adopted a pro-social approach to learning, away from linear-feedback sessions, to support and strengthen creativity as well as enhance adoption and adaptation to the new environment. By micro-managing the learning processes, management missed the opportunity to address long-held views, prejudices, and sub-groups historical experiences.

Creating a Cultural Fit

Literature on the learning organization and organizational learning emphasizes the importance of climate and culture and developing a detailed implementation plan (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012; Mento, et al., 2002). Even when change is limited to improving internal processes, organizations must know how many employees would be affected and how many would opt out; because “change occurs when employees accept the vision of change” (Mento, et al., 2002). In the context of TCTA, the organization sought to get some “quick wins” by attempting to co-create a new vision and new values, as well as develop mechanisms to anchor change in the form of rewards.

Despite the intention of a collective effort, employees/recipients of change felt that their ideas about new values were not incorporated in the final values. While employees were rewarded for embracing the vision, there was a disagreement about the values and by extension culture in the organization. In this regard, employees could not trust each other and did not trust management. This was largely due to the legacy of the political history of the country, as well as how shows how shows how the initiative was managed: people’s transitions were not steered toward a collective outcome. Also, it must be pointed out the weight of political uncertainty weighed heavily on the implementation of the initiative.

Conclusion

By exploring several theories of perspectives change management, learning organization and knowledge management as well as juxtaposing them with a case in a public entity during a period of transition, the paper attempts to describe the complexity of implementing change in “unstable” environments. In these contexts, learning organization and change paradigms should not only focus on the “people side of change” but explore socio-cultural demographics of the context of change, beyond the linearity of traditional frameworks. No matter how potent a vision for change, in a transitional state, it will nevertheless be thwarted by resistant forces, spurred by past prejudices and the lack of faith in the new regime. It has been highlighted that in communities where unequal access to resources, which bred inequality, often results in low cultural capital and trust among the employees. There is a need for further research to establish more widely the impact of socio-political changes on organizational learning processes within state-owned entities, especially in post-segregated societies with limited levels of trust among the groups.

References

- Aggestam, L. (2006). Learning organization or knowledge management—Which came first, the chicken or the egg? *Information Technology and Control*, 35(3), 295-302.
- Amagoh, F. (2008). Perspectives on organizational change: Systems and complexity theories. *The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 13(3), 1-13.
- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1996). *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Cesnovar, T. (2010). Influences of implementing the learning organization on companies’ financial and non-financial performances. *Managing Global Transitions*, 8(3), 285-306.
- Corlett, J. (n.d.). *Systems Theory Applied to Organizations*, s.l.: I. purceco research unpublished organization-JC.
- Cummings, G. G., Thomas, H., & Edgar, F. (1985). *Organization Development and Change*. Minnesota.: West Publishing Company.
- Drucker, P. (1997). *Managing in a Time of Great Change*. Oxford: Butterworths.
- Ferlie, E. (2007). Complex organization and contemporary public sector organizations. *International Public Management Journal*, 10(2), 153-165.

- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. In: New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 30-40.
- Garvin, D. (2000). *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hiatt, J. M., & Creasey, T. (2012). *Change Management: The People Side of Change*. Colorado: Prosci.
- Hovland, I. (2003). *Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning: An Internation Development Perspective*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Jick, T. (1991). *Implementing Change, Note 9-191-114*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kanter, R. M. (1983). *The Change Masters: Innovation for Productivity in the American Corporation*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kotter, J. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(2), 59-67.
- Levinthal, D. (1997). Adaptation and rugged landscapes. *Management Science*, 43, 934-950.
- Levitt, B., & March, G. J. (1988). Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, 319-340.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Mento, A., Jones, R., & Dirdorfer, W. (2002). A change management process: Grounded in both theory and practice. *Journal of Change Management*, 3(1), 49-59.
- Mosse, D., Farrington, J., & Rew, A. (1998). *Development as Process: Concepts and Methods for Working With Complexity*. London: Overseas Development Institute and Routledge.
- Nadler, D., & Tushman, M. (1989). Organizational frame bending: principles for managing reorientation. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 3(3), 194-204.
- Ngonini, X., & Busari, O. (2017). Sustaining the gains of change: Lessons for organizational leadership. *Management Studies*, 5(6), 606-620.
- Nonaka, I. (1991). The knowledge-creating company. *Harvard Business Review*, 69(6), 96-104.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schein, E. H. (2016). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 5th ed. John Wiley & Sons.
- Senge, P. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Organizational Learning*. London: Random House.
- Tran-Caledon Tunnel Authority (1986). *Notice of Establishment*, Government Gazettee No. 10545, 12 December 1986. Centurion: Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority
- Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority. (2010). *Project Bosele Progress Report*, Centurion: Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority.
- Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority. (2013). *New Beginnings*, Centurion: Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority.
- World Bank Group. (2018). *An Incomplete Transition: Overcoming the Legacy of Exclusion in South Africa. Systematic Country Diagnostic*, Washington: World Bank.