



Journal of Organizational Change Management

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Irena Descubes Tom McNamara , (2015), "Theatre-based learning to foster corporate legacy change", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 28 Iss 4 pp. 565 - 578

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-11-2013-0232>

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Theatre-based learning to foster corporate legacy change

Corporate
legacy change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore post-Bolian reflexive theatre-based learning (TBL) theory and practice, in conjunction with meta-language and learning from experiences to address the gaps and silos between top-level macro strategy planning and operational micro-management on-going challenges in a contemporary new public management (NPM) major organizational change context.

Design/methodology/approach – An investigation was carried out over three months at a major French utility in a praxis-related action research context (PRAR). TBL formats, i.e. “improvisational wrestling” and “improvisational cabaret”, were adapted and put into practice.

Findings – A reflective process in which participants developed an enhanced sense of ownership and interest in the targeted organizational structure was developed. It allowed for collectively created contextual in-house knowledge, innovative practices and tools that supported the change initiative.

Research limitations/implications – The main limitation of this research is that it is case-based, restricting the generalizability of its findings. Future research could examine the general validity of improvisational TBL forms and the way they can contribute to the creation of participatory innovation oriented corporate cultures. Also, an interesting research question would be to investigate how organizations, once having undertaken NPM initiatives, can continue nurturing a collaborative practice-based organizational culture over the long-haul, showing a clear need for longitudinal studies.

Practical implications – The present initiative and case study was deemed as successful by all stakeholders, and the programme of engaged change management sustainable and self-reinforcing.

Originality/value – This study extends the knowledge of the role of arts in enhancing organizational reflection. To the best of the knowledge, the TBL formats employed have never been used previously in PRAR. The paper builds links between organizational management, knowledge creation and micro-level organizational innovation. It fills a research gap concerning the content and the practices enabling innovation processes. Last but not the least, this study builds an actionable and replicable (yet not generalizable) framework based on reflexive theatre techniques as a novel learning approach in knowledge production in public sector enterprises undergoing a major organizational change.

Keywords Organizational change, New public management, Practice-based innovation, Theatre-based learning techniques

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Starting in the late 1990s, the market for electricity in the European Union (EU) was slowly deregulated (EU Directive 96/92/EC, 1996), with the goal being to introduce liberalization and increase competition. As a result, customers were eventually given the right to choose their electricity supplier and the ability to change suppliers easily. A ruling issued in 2003 (EU Directive 2003/54/EC, 2003) forced all EU countries to “unbundle” transmission systems from transmission system operators. In France, this resulted in the generation of electricity and the distribution of electricity being broken into two different activities run by separate companies. Electricité de France (EDF), the French historical public provider of both production and distribution of electricity, has



kept the activities linked to the generation of electricity, while a 100 per cent wholly owned subsidiary, Électricité Réseau Distribution France (ERDF), was created in 2008 to manage the electrical distribution network. The organization has 36,770 employees, spread out over eight different regions.

This paper discusses a case study conducted in one region in particular, ERDF-West (ERDF-Ouest). Shortly after its establishment, ERDF (case company) faced a major management challenge as it was required to have a new “ethos”, different from that of EDF, its nominal parent company. EDF being the dominant national electric company has developed a clearly more competitive and sales oriented corporate culture, compliant with new public management (NPM) orientations. Employees had to acquire new skills and competences that would allow them to become more commercially aware and foster relationships with new and alternative suppliers of electricity, while maintaining good relations with EDF, its parent company.

This study primarily extends the concept of “Theatre-based” learning (TBL) in the context of praxis-related action research (PRAR) (Mattson and Kemmis, 2007). A case study was developed and carried out based on the spiral of reflexive cycles (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000), i.e. planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning, re-acting, re-observing and re-reflecting. The decision to use a case study framework was based on support in the literature with regards to its appropriateness towards doing empirical observations or exploratory research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), especially with regards to change management and NPM initiatives (Johnson, 2002; Kelman, 2006; Sundström, 2006). As Anand and Winters (2008) note “It [TBL] allows participants to vicariously experience the issues, especially the subtle ones, which workers face” in the course of their day-to-day activities, enabling them to develop and hone such skills as “communication, providing feedback, reflective listening, [and] problem solving”. A key and vital component of this custom designed research project was the use of two professional actors, who assisted the researchers in their field work”. This PRAR followed multi-layered research interests as well as organizational ones, creating a rich and challenging context, critical for an effective and efficient learning environment.

The chosen methodology gives a depth of information and experience-based findings, and is useful as a learning exercise to see how TBL can positively impact organizational change in the context of an NPM initiative. TBL is hereby linked to the selected PRAR framework as a means of creating, conducting, recording and analyzing the research process and outcomes (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2011; Eisner, 2008). The relative lack of studies into how critical utilities and infrastructure are affected by NPM initiatives would give credit and currency to the topic and method chosen (de Bruijne and van Eeten, 2007; Antonsen *et al.*, 2010; Almklov and Antonsen, 2014).

The following sections provide a background to the research grounded in the NPM and TBL literature, present the methodology, introduce and analyse the case and use of innovative improvisational theatre forms in semi-public corporate context having undergone a major organizational change, and conclude with a discussion of the findings.

2. Literature review

NPM has concerned itself for the past 30 years with the study of how the public sector can institute effective organizational change by using (mostly) private sector managerial methods and tools in order to increase its efficacy and efficiency. In this way state enterprises can be “modernized”, allowing for the more rational use of

resources and improved economic performance (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013, 2011; Jääskeläinen and Lönnqvist, 2011). Its main focus is on actions designed to bring about hierarchical changes in public institutions, making them more accountable and more reactive to the customers they serve, and duplicating best practices in terms of those found in private corporate governance (Hood, 1991; Christensen and Lægreid, 2001, 2007; Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006a). Since there is no agreement upon the definition of what exactly NPM is (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006b), an argument can be made that it is better to discuss NPM in terms of it being a mixture of principles mostly taken from the business world (Simonet, 2013). There are several different aspects associated with NPM. One is a general belief that public sector performance can be improved through the implementation and use of good commercial practices and the introduction of competitive markets (Pollitt, 2003a, 2007). An associated key element involves the promotion and use of empowered managers who are then, ideally, subjected to “free market” forces (Hood, 1995; Kettl, 1997). This is usually done in an atmosphere of an improved regulatory framework, i.e. one that is less burdensome and better coordinated (Kickert, 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). NPM is generally thought of as an Anglo-Saxon concept, with the UK and its “Thatcherite” reforms being some of the earliest examples we have of its implementation (Simonet, 2013). Curiously enough, the USA, at least at the Federal government level, would appear to be a laggard with regards to the adoption of NPM principles (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). While sometimes referred to as “neo-liberal” in nature (Pollitt, 2007), NPM advocates say that the focus should not be so much on deregulation or less regulation, but rather on better forms of regulations and policies (Hood and Jackson 1992; Sheil, 2004). The clarification and definition of NPM theory is further complicated by the various meanings and nuances it can take in a trans-national context or across different sectors within the same country (Christensen and Laegreid, 1999; Schedler and Proeller, 2000; Sahlin-Andersson, 2001; Smullen, 2004, 2007; Pollitt, 2003b; Pollitt *et al.*, 2007). This can have the not insignificant result of NPM meaning different things to different people. Regarding their implementation and success, NPM initiatives have had, generally speaking, mixed results (Hood and Dixon, 2013). And while many governments and agencies are continuing ahead with their own programmes guided by NPM principles, in some areas we are seeing a certain degree of “roll back” (Ashton *et al.*, 2005; Chapman and Duncan, 2007; Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006b; Johnson and Talbot, 2007).

NPM theory and programmes are, for the most part, focused on the achievement of quantifiable results (Hughes, 1998; Strathern, 2000). In this regard they appear to have had a lower degree of success in the provision of such social needs as health and education, and the government outsourcing of IT contracts. However, in the case where the service being provided is well understood and its production and provision is easily quantifiable, NPM initiatives have been met with an overall higher degree of success and satisfaction (Pollitt, 2007). Unfortunately, there is still a lack of understanding and a limited amount of actual field data that explain how organizational changes made under NPM initiatives impact workers, especially those in a production environment (Pollitt, 2009; Andrews and Boyne, 2012; Almklov and Antonsen, 2014).

When one looks at NPM at the “micro” or implementation level, one finds that a key component has been the use of “employee empowerment programs” (Bowen and Lawler, 1995) which quite often are put in place in the hopes that they will improve performance by finding innovative ways of correcting deficiencies in the delivery of services by reconfiguring work processes with active employees’ participation, both in terms of their design and operational delivery. The success with regards to the

implementation of major organizational change is increasingly measured by standardized quality management tools, again, used mainly by the private sector, such as balanced scorecards or performance-related salaries (Biron and Bamberger, 2010). While these managerial devices are, for the most part, understood and readily accepted by internal stakeholders in the private sector, studies have shown (Kim, 2002; O'Flynn, 2007) that they can trigger unexpected and unwanted dynamics in public companies, which often have a larger mandate, both in scope and purpose, than their private counterparts. An increasing number of scholars (Halvorsen *et al.*, 2005; Perry *et al.*, 2006; Walker *et al.*, 2011) argue that private sector managerial tools and methods cannot be merely imposed upon employees in the public sector due to the possible generation of resistance or detriment to the intended outcomes of the organizational change desired, especially in cases that concern companies undergoing a major status change from public to private or semi-private. When exploring organizational situations with complex dynamics generated by historic and newly created organizational structures and players, new forms of action research are increasingly appreciated, especially by the practitioners' community. Action research differs from traditional academic research in terms of scope and focus. While academics mostly continue to produce discipline- and specific science-based knowledge, participatory action researchers expand their interest into context-driven, problem-oriented and interdisciplinary knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). Melkas and Harmaakorpi (2012) stress the fact that practice-based innovation and knowledge production are strongly influenced by the social context in which they take place. In the present study, the reputation and accumulated corporate knowledge and experience was considered as an initial "transformational asset" (Soparnot, 2012). The implementation of new managerial patterns in the context of existing structural frameworks present a major challenge for all stakeholders and may generate tensions and frustrations, especially in a French context (Minvielle, 2006; Bezes, 2009). That is why it is important to provide them with an interpretative action set of tools and processes that facilitate an organizational learning and practice-based innovation (Barry and Meisiek, 2010).

Theatre-based learning (TBL) is one of many applied drama and theatre forms used outside of the classical art institutions, mostly in adult education in a social or healthcare context, or for the purposes of community development, the aim being to observe, interpret and create shared understanding of issues. It is based on post-Boalian theatre practices (Boal, 1979/2000) which apply various theatrical techniques, allowing participants to interpret existing organizational situations and conflicts (i.e. understand them in terms of "as they are today") as well as with a sufficient inter-personal distance and through a collective mode (i.e. imagining them in terms of "how they can be"). TBL creates a type of "meta-language" that allows and/or reinforces the generation of dialogue by "making thought visible" (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick, 1976; Hayakawa and Hayakawa, 1990). Meta-language has been successfully used in the past with people who have undergone stress or who have been exposed to stressful situations or environments that Boal (1995) called "internal hardships" (e.g. people living in economically challenged areas, or under repressive regimes, or who have been addicted to drugs). The researchers' interest in using TBL was enhanced by the current innovation literature that includes the active participation of organizational stakeholders among the studied innovation phenomena (Melkas and Harmaakorpi, 2012; Hasu *et al.*, 2012). The choice of TBL for the present PRAR was further confirmed by the fact that despite its epistemological potential in organizational learning and change, TBL has not yet been widely used as a method for affecting

organizational change in a European context, as opposed to its developing use in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada (Beck *et al.*, 2011; Nisker, 2008; Saldaña, 2008; White and Belliveau, 2010, 2011).

In the present study, the participants were exposed to two improvisational theatre forms, “wrestling” and “cabaret” (further explained in Section 3 given below). The present PRAR explores and extends the use of TBL to a new geographic territory and to an NPM corporate context, based on the assumption that workers in the situation of a major organizational change from a public to a private or semi-private entity, be they “white” or “blue” collar, continuously reframe and reinterpret organizational processes, hence they are implicitly involved in an innovation process. In order to generate an explicit and actionable corpus of knowledge, a TBL initiative was considered as being an appropriate approach and framework for harnessing organizational change. According to Vince (2002), critical reflection is only possible when various types of resistance become “visible” to participants. “Visible” means that participants can put the pieces of personal experiences into an articulate and meaningful inter-personal organizational context. This can be difficult to do via traditional managerial training techniques, but through the use of role-play and imagination, new outlooks and perceptions can be generated in order to provide all stakeholders with innovative solutions and courses of action that otherwise would not have been achieved (Mirvis *et al.*, 2001; Abma, 2003; Marshak and Grant, 2008; Reissner, 2008).

3. Methodology and conceptual frame

In the current study, the research team partners developed a TBL framework that offers nurturing grounds for reflection and innovation dynamics, both in terms of what enables and what prevents creative managerial practices (Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Gherrardi, 2006; Pässilä *et al.*, 2012).

Boal (1995) describes acting out and reflecting upon embodied experiences and perplexed situations through “voicing thoughts”. This approach was applied over a period of three months, between February and April 2012. The researchers first conducted ten pre-planning interviews, two structured brainstorming sessions and one workshop with the case company top management. Based on these meetings, the authors, as researchers and TBL practitioners, engaged themselves in six two-and-a-half-day PRAR sessions. These sessions were conducted from May to December 2012, involving 70 case company employees who were divided into groups of eight to 12 people each. The groups were deliberately comprised of both blue collar in-field technicians and white collar business development specialists and engineers. The group dynamics, i.e. the interactive behavioural effects and factors that arise as a result of people working closely together (Allport, 1948; Bargal and Bar, 1992), were further reinforced by the fact that some of the employees were former workers from the parent company EDF and therefore had a “legacy” or “institutional” outlook. Other employees were former technicians who had been promoted to business engineers, while some were new recruits from outside the company. This diversity was encouraged, for it was deemed as being useful in acting as a catalyst towards creating inter-personal dialogue, which in conjunction with theatre techniques, would allow for both the expressing and challenging of individual views, attitudes and effective behaviour. Each group’s work was facilitated by the researchers and helped by the professional actors in a complex process blending tacit knowledge elicitation, steps of participatory reflection (Oelkers and Dewey, 1993) and action. The researchers acted as facilitators and scholars while applying the principles of quality and validity in action research

(Bradbury and Reason, 2006), i.e. quality in participation and relationships, quality of useful and pragmatic outcomes, quality of conceptual-theoretical integrity, quality of work and purpose and quality of consequences. The data were collected via participation observation and documented in ten meeting memoranda and minutes, 24 hours of videotaped rush sequences (approximately four hours per group), 140 paperboard storyboards (including participants' drawings) and a 60-page researchers' handwritten fieldwork reflexive diary. The storyboards and drawings were categorized and scripted following Saldaña's interactive ethnodrama methodology (2008).

In the context of the present study, two improvisational theatre formats were adapted by the facilitators; "improvisational wrestling" and "improvisational cabaret". These two theatrical forms were created by Robert Gravel and Yvon Leduc, with the founding of their improvisational group the "Ligue nationale d'improvisation" (LNI) in Montreal, Canada (Feral, 1983; Gravel and Lavergne, 1989). To the best of our knowledge, these two elements have never been used before in a TBL format and NPM corporate context. As the name implies, in improvisational wrestling two actors "fight" verbally and artistically in a "ring" based on topics suggested by the "spectators" (the participants in the study). The length of improvisation varies from between three and ten minutes and there is a "referee" (the participant who suggested the performed topic). Improvisational cabaret is an alternative, and calmer, form of improvisational wrestling. It is much simpler and easier to organize and run (with there being no "ring" or "referees"). The group participants are the ones who determine the topics and the way the improvisation should be performed (in the format of a musical, drama, comedy, etc.). Here, the actors invited participants to take part in the improvisational exercises and sketches. The logic behind using the above two methods was to provide the non-homogeneous groups with experiential and transformative theatrical arts-based processes/techniques. This involved the use of: projective techniques: revealing tacit and embodied collective knowledge as well as individual inner feelings and hidden unconscious processes; critical reflection: identifying and raising awareness of social/inter-professional structures inside the organization in order to discover various process and structural overlap; and generative questioning: exploration and understanding of how individuals inside the organization experience various aspects of issues or phenomena.

The chosen methodology "broke" the classical linear analytical approach in current management processes at the case company and introduced an innovative and holistic process based on collective interpretation and theatre-assisted learning. As a result, TBL narratives and performances facilitated the framing of new and shared meanings, providing the stakeholders with a self-understanding that allows for an accelerated collective mind-set change (Ford and Ford, 1995; Mashak and Grant, 2008). The function of improvisational theatre was to act as a catalyst for change and to engage the participants in the process. The themes and narratives were drawn from the freely expressed participants' ideas and improvised by the actors. They were conceptualized and played out in a two-stage format. First, the actors alone performed short three to five minute "wrestling scenes". The fact that it was the actors who played the roles of participants facing difficult customer relationship issues with "phantom" customers allowed the participants to disengage themselves from the context and the specific elements of the problem at hand. They were then able to focus on the underlying "inter-textual" hidden agenda managerial issues and progressively channel an intuitive yet logical and emotionally sound understanding of how the current way customer relationships are managed. This stage was vital in that it has been argued that a lack of

reflection with regards to the way people interact and communicate can be a major contributor to why change management initiatives fail (Pieters *et al.*, 2012). The second stage involved participatory understanding of the current unsatisfactory processes expressed during the previous art-based exercises. The facilitators identified and introduced a conceptual framework that would give the participants a mechanism for engaging in critical reflection. The participants were progressively engaged in the creation of a “New Paradigm” (a vision of what an ideal and genuine customer relationship managerial culture should consist of), a “Road Map” (prioritized goals, actions and best practices in order to reach the above customer relationship managerial culture), a “Legacy prospective conservation” (collective “future oriented” corporate memory of past positive public entity practices) and finally, a “Toolbox” (the prioritized goals matched with means and tools).

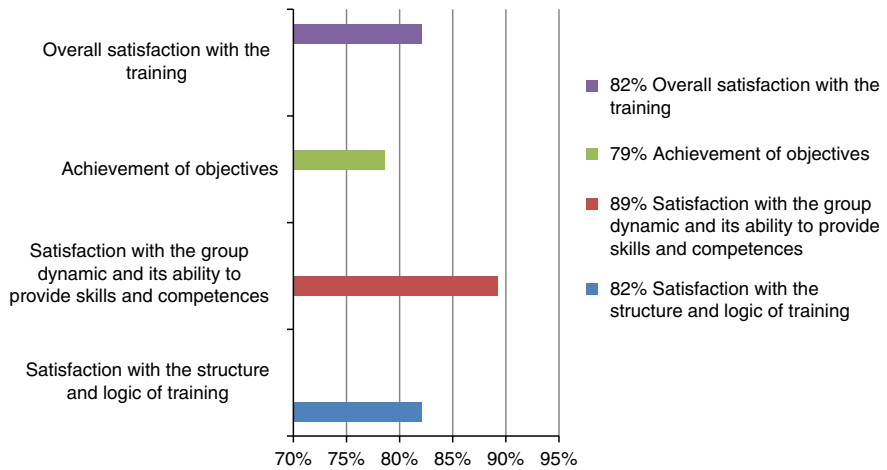
4. Results and findings

The two TBL improvisational forms used in this corporate context have proven to be valuable post-Boalian theatrical methods. The reflection occurred when participants “voiced” perplexing and complex professional situations, highlighting the dynamics of unequal power distribution caused by the recent application of certain NPM principles within the organization. The fact that it occurred during the filmed aesthetic TBL improvisational forms provided an opportunity for deeper analysis. It allowed for the exploration of issues in terms of “cycles”, where the original narrators as “owners” of the narrated perplexed situations could first deescalate their frustration in order to be able to begin to interpret and reflect upon them in a post-performance participatory setting and allow the use of interactive ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2008) as an analytical framework. The facilitators used the filmed footage in order to create a cumulative co-operative learning space in an interactive way, i.e. they confronted their embedded experiences, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge as ethnographic actors and interpreters. It enabled multi-layered knowledge production and contributed to an individual personal and professional reflexion, as well as to the institutional reflexive structuring and action toolbox creation.

The professional actors’ role of “mirror” sense-makers was very important in the reflection stage, during which the participants needed to be assisted in the process of their separation from what they perceived as an unsatisfactory reality (Schön, 1983). The aesthetic distancing through the theatre forms used allowed the participants in the subsequent reflexive stage to talk freely about their changed professional roles, as well as their learning gaps and needs. In other words, they could critically discuss the socially and professionally structured nature of the above unsatisfactory reality and start questioning its roots and meanings (Cunliffe, 2009). The use of post-Boalian TBL allowed for sensing, sharing, repeating, amplifying and interpreting perplexity of intertwined former and current work processes.

In the subsequent written survey, 82 per cent of participants in the training initiative stated they were satisfied. They considered that the objective of creating a workable and actionable NPM environment was achieved thanks to the reinitiated organizational dialogue about what makes professional and personal sense to them. In the interviews conducted by the researchers with the case company management and the participants in the post-mortem debriefing session held in January 2013, it was noted that the participant employees were perceived as “empowered”, i.e. ready to use a team-based and interactive management style. For the detailed results of participants’ satisfaction survey, see Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Results of the participants' satisfaction of the training initiative under study



5. Conclusion

Kemmis (2006) points out three interests of praxis-oriented action research: empirical-analytical (positivist), hermeneutic (interpretative) and critical (actionable). During the post-mortem meeting, 20 per cent of participants were considered by the case company management to be what could be described as “early adopters”, that is to say, people who jumped eagerly at an offered opportunity for empowerment. Totally, 75 per cent of participants were perceived to be “general and late adopters” in that they accepted empowerment and were able to thrive under it. These participants undertook concrete steps in the NPM process and started putting change into practice (Heron and Reason, 2006). Unfortunately, 5 per cent were deemed as being “left out”, in that they were unable to move past their “nostalgia for the good old days”. People in this last group can often see change as a “generator of chaos” (Fronda and Moriceau, 2008). From the researcher’s viewpoint, this study resulted in a noticeable improvement with regards to: creation of an open-source portfolio of in-house best practices; identification of the need on the part of employees to get further training in customer relationship management; organization of regular collective debriefing sessions so to avoid “mission creep”; and development of a customer based problem solving decision matrix (see Figure 2).

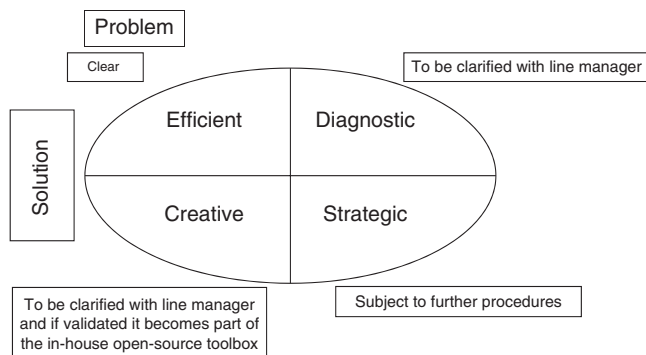


Figure 2.
Four-box problem solving matrix

The main limitation of this research is that it is case-based, restricting the generalizability of its findings from the positivist viewpoint. Nonetheless, given the gap in the literature that addresses both NPM and organizational innovation, especially in the European and/or Asian high-context cultures (Hall, 1976), future research could examine the general validity of improvisational TBL forms and the way they can contribute to the creation of participatory innovation-oriented corporate cultures. Furthermore, an interesting research question would be to investigate how organizations, once having undertaken NPM initiatives, can continue nurturing a collaborative practice-based organizational culture over the long-haul, showing a clear need for longitudinal studies.

Changing the existing culture of any institution is a difficult endeavour, usually met with extremely low success rates (Smith, 2003; Burnes, 2009; Senturia *et al.*, 2008; Rogers *et al.*, 2006). A study done by McKinsey and Company (2008) showed that almost two-thirds of change management initiatives failed to achieve the results management desired, with failure rates on the order of 70 per cent being generally accepted as the norm found in practice (Wall, 2005; Werkman, 2009). In comparison, the present initiative and case study was deemed as successful by all stakeholders, and the programme of engaged change management sustainable and self-reinforcing. As one of the participants stated, it was “something I have been waiting to be able to do for a long time”.

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