

What are the Essential Elements for Supporting Organizational Change?

by

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Abstract

This capstone project examines the main themes that arise from scholarly literature relevant to supporting effective organizational change. The main themes addressed are how focusing on the positive elements of an organization leading to organizational change, collaboration is a necessary aspect for positive change, and lastly, storytelling can be used as an effective tool for driving organizational change. The theoretical framework of “Appreciative Inquiry” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011) is a significant theoretical framework for organizational change, and the 4-D model of change is further discussed in this literature review as well as other theoretical frameworks found in literature relating to positive organization change.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, organizational development, organizational change, change leadership, organizational transformation.

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Introduction

Organizational change is likely to occur at some point in all businesses (Hussain, 2018). The reasons for change to occur and how it may present itself can vary on each organization, however individuals must keep up to pace with the constantly changing world that we live in, and respond to changes in social, economic, and political environments (Richer, 2010, p. 164). According to Moran and Brightman (2001, as cited in Hussain, 2018), organizational change is “the process of continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers” (p. 124). Organizations can vary from education institutions, healthcare, to Information technology companies, and can undergo change in various capacities (Drew & Wallis, 2014, Hart, 2008, Kelly, 2010). The common approach to organizational change is the traditional problem-solving approach, a top-down approach that focuses on an organization's weaknesses and. However, studies show that this approach is not most effective for organizational change, and that another approach is necessary (Carter, 2007). This literature review will highlight the approaches to organizational change that were noted as successful and effective through the literature. For example, “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI) is utilized as an effective framework organizational change approach that many organizations use today (Drew & Wallis, 2014). The specific principles of AI that create successful organizational change will be further discussed as well as other theoretical frameworks that support the approaches to change such as aspects of positive psychology as well as the influence of Kurt Lewin’s theory of Organizational Change. The main themes that will be discussed for supporting organizational change are the significance of discovering the strengths of an organization, the importance of collaboration, and the value of storytelling for effective organizational change.

Methodology

To determine the articles to include for this literature review, the following keywords were used for the Google Scholar search engine: appreciative Inquiry, AI, organizational development, organizational change, change leadership, and organizational transformation. The themes for this literature review were determined by a thorough examination of the literature that discussed successful organizational change in some capacity. After reading several articles relevant to the topic of organizational change, there were recurring themes that emerged for successful organizations and the factors that led to effective organizational change, even though each article presented situations of organizations facing their own unique challenges. All of the articles that were relevant to the literature review were then located on the University of Alberta library database to ensure they were reliable and peer reviewed. All articles were located on the database, and additional articles supporting the key points relevant to the themes were found through citations from the initial articles examined. Since the topic of organizational change covers a wide range of educational fields of study, the articles ranged from the field of education, social sciences, health sciences, and commerce. The abstract of each article as well as the first couple of paragraphs were read during the article selection to check for relevancy to the topic of positive organizational change approaches. Throughout the articles, recurring themes emerged as well as discussion of similar theoretical frameworks. The theoretical frameworks that will be discussed in this literature review are “Appreciative Inquiry” (Cooperrider, 2011), aspects of positive psychology and Kurt Lewin’s model (Hussain, 2018). The significance of the research on organizational change and the gaps prevalent in the literature are discussed as well.

Results: Themes from the Literature

When examining how change is successfully supported and sustained in various types of organizations, “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI) is frequently discussed in the literature and utilized by various organizations (Busche, 2005, Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, Cooperrider & Fry, 2020, Drew & Wallis, 2014, Finegold, 2002, Johnson, 2001, Richer, 2010, Storace, 2021). For supporting organizational change, the main themes that emerged from the literature were related to the 4-D cycle of AI and the “Positive Core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2015), which is an essential component of AI. The themes that I will be discussing are how focusing on the strengths, collaboration, and storytelling are significant contributors to creating change in various organizations.

Focusing on the Strengths

“...the capacity to see the best in the world around us...the capacity to see with an appreciative eye the true and the good, the better and the possible”

(Creelman, 2001, as cited in Storace, 2021, p. 54)

Focussing on the strengths of an organization and discovering its “Positive Core” is an essential element for organization change (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2015). According to Richer et al. (2010), many organizations approach change through a problem-solving approach rather than “building on the successes and potential of individuals and groups” (p.165). This approach rarely results in innovation and can lead to defensiveness between the workers of the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). According to Cameron (2008), a focus on negative aspects can lead to “paranoia, defensiveness, and degeneration” (p. 16). When organizations focus on the positive experiences and the strengths in their workplace, it promotes innovative thinking, leading to effective organizational change (Richer et al., 2010). Identification of

strengths in an organization to produce organizational change is demonstrated as well in the article by Waters and White (2015) through the example of the Physical education department in a school improving their department culture by launching a weekly staff well-being initiative. The workers were able to identify what was working well in their school, and other staff members outside of the department shared success stories and positive aspects of their work. The outcome of this experience led to a reform in the department culture and a greater understanding of what staff well-being looks like (Waters and White, 2015). Keefe and Pesut (2004) experienced positive change effects as well by focusing on strengths of the College of Nursing organization during a time of leadership transition. In this case study (Keefe & Pesut, 2004), the Dean invited all willing members of the department to create a strategic plan together to decide on the college's future directions. The process involved the Dean inviting the members to affirm and discuss the strengths of the current state of their organization. When the members of the College of Nursing heard all the accomplishments and positive discussions, people became more uplifted and motivated to engage in the change process. The research by Frederickson (2001, 2006) also illustrates the importance of qualities central to an organizational process, which were joy, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and hope, all positive emotions. Organizational change can also occur in various settings including whole systems change in non-profit sectors (Finegold, 2002). A whole system change initiative in a Midwestern university was successful through the positive dialogue that occurred between organizational members (Finegold, 2002). In this particular case study (Finegold, 2002), individuals discussed strengths, and reflected on a time of employment where they felt valued and energized in their workplace. Along with the strengths of their organizations, individuals also discussed what they value most about themselves. By "accentuating the positives" (Lewis, 2004, p. 22) and recognizing the positive

qualities of each member, confidence is built between the members resulting in a ‘catalyst of change’ (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015) as demonstrated in the previous case studies. Storage (2021) raises a point, supporting the literature by Finegold (2002) and Richter et al (2010), that organizational change becomes more achievable when starting from a place of positivity and aiming for greater success, rather than starting in a place of negativity. In order to aim for greater success, Johnson (2001) explains that the focus should be placed on the strengths of the people, rather than the problem.

Collaboration

“if we can create a collective sense of what needs to be achieved, create new models or theories of how to achieve that, and align those with the inherent motivation of people in relation to their organizational life, then a great deal of change leading to increased organizational performance can occur if people are allowed and encouraged to take initiative and make it happen.” (Busche & Kassam, 2005, as cited in Openo, 2016, p. 47).

Another theme that emerged from the research on effective organizational change is the importance of collaboration (Drew & Wallis, 2014, Hattori, 2003, Trajkovski, 2012, Waters & White, 2015). Drew and Wallis (2014) note that in order for a positive change approach to work successfully, effective communication in the form of collaboration is essential. Collaborating with others enhances positive relationship building, and positive relationships can result in greater trust between members, ultimately leading to sharing of opinions and ideas (Drew and Wallis, 2014, Trajkovski, 2012). In the change process initiation in the school case study by Waters and White (2015), all members of the school community were involved in the planning, implementing and monitoring stages of change. By working together, Waters and white (2015)

notes how the division between the teachers was diminished and how the teachers all worked together toward a common goal: focusing on the well-being of the students. By collaborating with one another, organizations are able to break down barriers, and create new networks with individuals they may not have connected with before (Richer et al, 2010, and Waters & White, 2015). Richer et al (2010) illustrates the importance of involving healthcare workers during a change initiative that occurred in a healthcare organization due to workers becoming dissatisfied over time and the organization failing to meet the needs of the workers. The healthcare organization used aspects of Appreciative Inquiry and involved the opinions of all healthcare workers. By collaborating with all members of the organization, innovative ideas were discussed, and the healthcare organization was able to successfully initiate change (Richer et al, 2010).

Another example of the significance of collaborating for organizational change is demonstrated through the case study of the ‘whole systems change’ in a midwestern university (Finegold, 2002). A three-day session was held with over 400 members from the finance and administrative division of the university. With the great number of members involved, the organization was able to come up with a great number of suggestions for possibilities for the future and how to implement changes (Finegold, 2002). By bringing individuals together to collaborate, common ground can be created through individual indifferences, and individuals can work together toward change (Storace, 2021). The founder of Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider (2020) argues that we change most effectively and positively when we collaborate with all people in an organization to enhance creativity and strengths. He further explains how the power of collaboration can have the ability to empower change capacity, specifically for organizations struggling during the Covid-19 pandemic (Cooperrider, 2020). Johnson (2001) illustrates that when a collaborative approach is used rather than an individual approach for initiating change,

new ideas become generated and used toward change. The Appreciative Inquiry process was initiated with The City of Hamilton government in efforts to re-energize the workforce. 246 city employers collaborated to celebrate the various successes of their organization and use the ideas generated to create an 'action agenda' (Johnson, 2001). What they found was that many individuals felt "overwhelmingly positive" (134) from this experience and many new ideas for improvements were generated.

Collaborating with other members in an organization is an effective part of change in schools as well. By building a school culture that values collaboration, Dickerson (2011) discovered that this positively impacted teachers' professional development and opened the members of the school to change and innovation. When individuals were placed in teams, it promoted group discussion and a stronger cohesion between the team members, allowing them to drive results and increase their performance level (Dickerson, 2011). A recent article by Amis and Janz (2020) discuss the positive impact of collaboration during organizational change in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. During a time of rapid changes in an organization, the researchers place emphasis on the need for developing "purpose-led" organizational change (Amis & Janz, 2020, p. 272) and how changes should be approached by placing its people as the focus and how collaborative efforts can foster an environment where individuals feel that they are able to share information in a safe environment. Christenson et al. (2019) describe the complexity of collaboration as much more than simply communicating with others in the organization. It involves "altering relationships" (p. 187), and that our personal growth and the relationships that we develop with others lead to successful organizational change efforts. The Christenson et al (2019) raise the question of how collaborative efforts work when individuals are at all different levels of "readiness" (p. 195). In order to successfully work collectively with

the individuals of our organization during times of change, Christenson et al (2019) suggest that telling our own stories of change can help to explain the “viability” (p. 195) of the change, the final reoccurring theme that will be discussed.

Value of Storytelling

Lastly, storytelling, or the sharing of stories, is discussed as any effective way to initiate organizational change in various situations (Andrus, 2010, Busche, 2005, Carter, 2007, Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, Drew & Wallis, 2014). Storytelling has several benefits for organizational change including its ability to increase organizational strength, induce innovation, raising member participation, and a commitment to change initiatives (Andrus, 2010, Drew & Wallis, 2014). Storytelling is discussed as a key component of the Appreciative Inquiry approach in order to discover what is possible within an organization and viewed as an effective way to explore the strengths of an organization (Busche, 2005, Drew & Wallis, 2014). Through the experience of storytelling, The Heartland Clinic was able to move through challenging circumstances and increase their financial margin (Carter 2007). By sharing stories, the potential to “enhance buy-in and motivation to change” increased significantly, leading to sustaining organizational improvement and transformative change (Carter, 2007, p. 203). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) described the case study of the organization: GTE (General Telephone and Electronics) Telops to convey the significance of storytelling for organizational change. Members of the organization shared stories with one another about successful situations the employees individually experienced, while working with their teams and through their customer service experiences. By sharing stories, the organization was successful in shifting their organizational culture to one of positive and won the best organization change program in the century during this time (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The purpose of storytelling is not only

for individuals to reminisce on the positive aspects of their organization; however, the power of storytelling is from the ability of these stories is to remember what it was like for the organization to experience success and the emotions that it elicited in order to bring it back to life and revitalize the organization (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). According to Bryant and Cox (2004), each individual brings their own unique perspective regarding their experiences in their workplace, and storytelling is an effective tool for sharing these experiences. As a result of sharing experiences during a time of change in one's organization, Bryant and Cox (2004) described how employees felt a shift in their opinion regarding organizational change from one of negative emotion to "embracing views of the new post-change workplace" (p. 589), furthermore, the researchers discuss how sharing stories is a way to "rebalance their lives when their social or political ideologies have been disturbed by organizational change processes" (p. 589).

Theoretical Frameworks

The scholarly literature presented several conceptual and theoretical frameworks relevant to the themes of effective organizational change. The frameworks I will be discussing are the few that were reoccurring throughout the literature. The Appreciative Inquiry Framework (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987) provides a solid foundation for the elements required for effective organizational change. The aspects of the 4-D cycle and positive core are a significant part of Appreciative Inquiry, and necessary to discuss for the topic of focus. Secondly, positive psychology describes the strengths and positive emotions that we have examined in the literature through the examples provided by Frederickson (2001, 2004). Lastly, the Kurt Lewin Model provides a 3-stage model that delves into the various phases that individuals may experience during organization change (Burnes, 2009, Hussain 2018, & Pawar, 2017).

Appreciative Inquiry

The theory of positive organizational change, commonly referred to as “Appreciative Inquiry” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006) is a framework that is frequently discussed throughout the scholarly literature focusing on organizational change. Unlike the problem-solving approach to facing organizational change, appreciative inquiry discovers the strengths and assets of the organizations and individuals within to produce lasting transformational effects (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2015). This approach to organizational change is a relatively new social research method developed by Cooperrider and Srivasta (1987), professors from Case Western University in response to a need for a new approach to organizational change. The professors believed that the problem-solving approach did not lead to lasting social improvements or positive changes in an organization and that this approach searches for the best in people and revitalizes an organization (Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D., 2005). The 4-D cycle of AI is a commonly used model for organizational change within the Appreciative Inquiry framework (Araujo, 2003, Carter, 2007, Openo, 2016, Somerville & Farner, 2012, Waters and White, 2015). The first part of the cycle is the “discovery” phase where individuals come together to discuss and share the factors that give their organization life, the “best of what is” (Araujo, 2003, p. 59). During this phase, the positive qualities of an organization are examined and analyzed. The second phase: “dream” is the imagining of what the organization “could be” (Araujo, 2003, p. 59), the third phase: “design” focuses on the planning stage where individuals collaborate to create an “inclusive and supportive context for conversation and co-creation” (Araujo, 2003, p. 60). Lastly, “destiny” is the action and innovation stage. This stage is accomplished collectively, as people work to support their organization in the desired direction and to implement any necessary changes. “Reflexivity” is included as a quality for researchers in the AI process, and

an ongoing part of each stage (Nel & Govender, 2019). If a researcher is reflexive, this means that they are able to critically examine the organizational situation and to understand their role in the process and the “limitations of the knowledge that is produced” (p. 342).

A major component of AI is the “Positive Core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), which recognizes the good in an organization, and views the organization as “a glass half-full rather than half-empty” (Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004, as cited in Drew & Wallis, 2014, p. 5). In order to identify the “Positive Core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) of an organization, questions are asked throughout the change process to elicit positive responses and emotions (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). This framework is based on the assumption that the questions we ask will lead to open dialogue, encouraging all individuals of the organization to come together and take part to support positive change.

Appreciative Inquiry is influenced by the theoretical bases of “Building on strengths” (Bushe, 2011, p. 6), as well as “Discourse and Narratives” (Bushe, 2011, p. 4) for effective organizational change. Bushe (2011) suggests that the “key engine of change” (p. 6) is to focus on the positive aspects of an organization, which includes the model proposed by Cooperrider and Sekerka (2006) where there is first an elevation of inquiry, followed by a fusion of strengths, which leads to an activation of energy, where individuals build the courage to take action. The second theoretical base is discourse, or narrative, where individuals in an organization share stories of successes for “setting the tone of an AI intervention” (Bushe, 2011, p. 4).

Positive Psychology

A theoretical perspective of positive psychology is also relevant to the emerging themes in the literature (Bright and Cameron, 2014, & Fredrickson, 2001, 2004). Fredrickson (2001) explains the theory of positive emotions as an essential element for enhancing resiliency for

dealing with challenging and stressful situations that individuals may encounter in organizations. During a time of organizational change, positive emotions provide the ability to “integrate diverse material” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 221), which can be helpful for navigating organizational change. In a later article, Fredrickson (2004) further explains positive emotions by discussing the “broaden-and-build” theory. This theory proposes that positive emotions enhance an individual's ability to act (Frederickson, 2004). For example, when there is an interest in a particular topic, individuals are more likely to explore that topic, rather than if there were no interest. This theory suggests that positive emotions are linked to psychological resiliency, which could provide an explanation for effective organizational change (Frederickson, 2004). During a time of organizational change, particularly during challenging situations, positive emotions can help people to cope and resiliency has allowed individuals to “bounce back from stressful experiences quickly” (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1371). According to the article (Fredrickson, 2004), individuals who possess positive emotions and resiliency are open to new experiences in life, a significant quality for navigating change in an organization.

Bright and Cameron (2014) discuss Positive organizational scholarship (POS), and how it is a useful framework for organizational development, including any level of change that occur. This framework aims to discover the strengths of individuals and the empowering relationships that exist within an organization. This model explains two motivations for change: “resolution of deficit gaps” and changing from “normal to extraordinary performance” (Bright & Cameron, 2014, p. 400). The second motivation for change is relevant to the themes discussed in the literature review, where focusing on the strengths of an organization can lead to improved performance.

Kurt Lewin's Model

A well-known Social Psychologist, Kurt Lewin, presented a model for organizational change that focuses on the role of leadership and employees' part of the organization (Hussain, 2018). The three stages in this model are known as: "unfreezing", "moving", and "refreezing" (Hussain, 2018). Pawar (2017) explains the stages in more depth, the first stage of "unfreezing" is where the perception for a need of change is established. Communication is important for this stage in order for individuals in an organization to understand the importance of the change initiation and how it benefits the current organization (Hussain, 2018). Not only is communication an important factor, but more specifically the sharing of knowledge, motivation, and the involvement of employees are vital components for successful change according to this model (Hussain, 2018). The second stage, "moving", is the transitioning phase, where the specific need for change is identified and responsible for implementing the changes. The final stage moves individuals to a "steady and beneficial state" (Pawar, 2017, p. 82) following the changes that occur and the impact of those changes. According to Lewin, the three requirements for change are: individuals involved in the organization free to make their own decisions, having an understanding of their own behaviours and perceptions, and to understand their motivations (Burnes, 2009). This framework presents an optimistic view of individuals' abilities to reform an organization (Burnes, 2009).

Gaps in the literature

There are a few limitations in the literature to note when examining how positivity, collaboration, and storytelling support positive organizational change. First, it is difficult to determine how much of the organizational change is attributed to the factors examined. For example, as Richer et al (2010) describes, healthcare organizations vary and are extremely

complex. It is challenging to understand whether the positive changes that result from the change initiatives are a result of collaboration and a focus on positive aspects, or rather on a factor that was not examined or considered during research. Secondly, the majority of the articles that were examined for this literature review date greater than 10 years ago. It is difficult to find articles that are more recent in publication date, so the themes discussed may not all be applicable to current organizations, or there may be new discoveries for effective organizational change approaches. Also, a significant amount of the research examined were conducted in Europe or North America. It would be interesting to examine whether non-Western organizations would implement similar approaches to organizational change. Lastly, it would be interesting to learn more about whether or not the themes that were discussed are applicable to all types of organizations for supporting change, or only the specific organizations from the literature, which includes educational institutions, healthcare clinics and Informational Technology (IT) companies. Even though there are many case studies available regarding the effects of positivity, collaboration and storytelling, how long the positive effects are sustained are not included in the literature that I included.

Another gap found in the literature the little discuss around the reasons to why organizations fail, particularly during change efforts. By understanding the reasons, it could possibly provide a clearer image of what factors organizations can avoid when experiencing change initiatives. An article by Kotter (2006) explains eight different errors that organizations can face that could negatively affect their organization and change approach. A couple of examples include that if organizations do not establish a “sense of urgency” or have a “lack of vision”, it could lead to organizational change failure (Kotter, 2006, pp. 240-244). The article by Kotter (2006) raises the point that starting the process of change is more challenging than it

seems, requiring cooperation and motivation between the individuals in the organization. Secondly, having a “sensible vision” (p. 244) can mitigate any confusion as to the direction that the organization is striving towards (Kotter, 2006).

Significance of the literature review

The significance of my literature review is that it will inspire organizations to approach change in a way that will be positive. The purpose is to identify the essential aspects necessary to support organizational change to inform organizations how a shift from the traditional problem-solving approach to a greater focus on aspects that are working well, can result in positive change. The theoretical framework of Appreciative Inquiry, proposed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), provides a practical 4-D phase model that could be utilized by an organization of any type and scale, as well as other frameworks that organizations can examine to determine which is best for navigating change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The approaches that are discussed in this literature review may also provide useful information for organizations facing challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Concluding Remarks

By shifting toward a positive approach to organizational change, rather than the traditional problem-solving approach, organizations are more likely to experience an effective change process (Richer et al., 2010, Drew & Wallis, 2014). A positive approach, known as “Appreciative Inquiry,” has been discussed in multiple articles and its popularity in the workplace has been growing (Drew & Wallis, 2014). The research on organizational change has identified themes of the elements essential for creating change in organizations. A range of organizations were examined, and these themes discussed were all related to the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, specifically relevant to the 4-D cycle of change and the ‘Positive Core’

(David Cooperrider, 2020). The themes that emerged were focusing on the strengths of organizations, collaboration, and the value of storytelling, each having significant positive effects on supporting effective change in organizations. Each theme is interrelated with one another and provides benefits to an organization such as promoting innovative thinking, revitalizing an organization, breaking down relational barriers in organizations, increasing performance level, and generating ideas for what the change should look like (Richer et al., 2010, Waters & White, 2015). During the Covid-19 pandemic, where organizations are constantly facing uncertainties and complexities in response to the economic downturn, the themes discussed can have positive implications for initiating successful organizational change, allowing individuals to build positive relationships and to work together toward positive change.

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