Operational Excellence within Continuous Change

A Shared Services Strategic Perspective
on becoming a Systemic Learning Organization

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The Context of Discontinuous Change

Organizational change has become the norm for many people in all types of organizations (Drucker, 1995; Kotter, 1996; Reinhard, 2007; Williams, 2003). As early as the mid-1990’s, theories have commented on the unprecedented amount of change that is often traumatic in a global economy (e.g., Drucker, 1995; Kotter, 1996). Today, the massive changes in large and complex organizations are more frequent than ever. Especially in Shared Services Organizations, the rate of change is continuing to increase in order to maintain a competitive advantage.

With globalization, many organizations employ people from numerous ethnic and cultural foundations. This diverse workforce further complicates organizational change issues (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998; Reinhard, 2007). In addition, the increase of technological advances further challenges people at all levels within corporations, especially with organizations’ hierarchical decisions on technology infrastructure – the level of stress adopting new technologies further complicate the employees’ perception of numerous organizational changes (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998). These environmental forces drive organizational change to be discontinuous, traumatic and constantly increasing (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998; Reinhard, 2007; Williams, 2003).

Shared Service Organizations (SSO) represents a prime example of the 21st century fast-paced changing business environment. In proper definition terms, a SSO characterizes a way of re-organizing support functions (i.e. Finance, HR, IT, etc.) where people, processes and systems are co-located and established in the form of an independent business unit. While building a commercial relationship with its internal customers, the aim of standardising processes and continuously improving the enterprise end-to-end process competitiveness will be its change target (Laghi, 2008).
In Shared Services, change happens at multiple levels and within a systemic and integrated means: teams, leadership, processes, technology, locations (often within an international dimension), business model and business relationships. All of these levels are interconnected components of a single change mechanism; and too often, SSO’s lack such a holistic change system. This mechanism is also a recognized factor in the industry, alongside the initial (often traumatic) implementation wave, and successful SSO’s need to possess the key feature of being continuous improvement drivers inside the end-to-end processes that sees them involved; therefore, possessing the intrinsic nature of a continuously changing and evolving system.

**Conventional Wisdom of Change Management**

Significant amount of theories and models exist for change management from various authors (e.g., Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1974; Moss-Kanter, 1977).

Building organizational change models on the principles of management in the knowledge economy is a challenge on a fundamental level (Drucker, 1968, 1993; Jacques, 1996; Senge, 1990). The principles of management grew from the industrial revolution with concepts like Taylor’s scientific principles of management. During this period, the lack of organizational management theories drove theorists to model management principles from the military. For the industrial revolution, labor was the primary resource. While the mechanistic principles were effective for labor resources, it does not meet the needs of a knowledge economy (Clawson, 2006; Jacques, 1996; Morgan, 2006). For example, change management makes an assumption that managers can specify behaviors related to change. Such an assumption falls on the premise of behaviorism; it assumes that people will simply follow a specified set of behaviors based on perceived consequences. This perspective does not recognize the cognitive aspect of humanity (Clawson, 2006; Ormrod, 2006; Sun, 2006). Before individuals change their behaviors,
congruence theory calls for an alignment of values and beliefs for such behaviors (Sun, 2006; Williams, 1993). The knowledge workforce is more complex than the laborer during the industrial revolution (Jacques, 1996; Morgan, 2006). Mechanistic principles and behaviorist approaches from management further complicate and increase workplace stress, especially during organizational change (Clawson, 2006; DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998; Jacques, 1996).

Collins (2001a, 2001b) discussed the personality traits of humility and self-awareness for effective leadership. His research found many specific traits and behaviors of past effective leaders in challenging times such as confronting the real facts and not blaming people for mistakes. While many more studies continue to focus on traits of leaders, Stogdill’s (1948) studies debunked trait theory. He concluded that there are many other factors besides traits that predict effective leadership. Other factors like a situational context are also crucial to effective leadership (Bass, 1990). Schein (1992, 1999) also felt that leaders and organizational cultures cannot be separated when studying organizational effectiveness. Within the organizational environment, many levels of culture need attention in addition to the traits and behaviors of leaders. Change management’s common practice of separating people, processes and environments miss the connected nature of organizational change.

A final limitation within the mental prison of change management is the change theories. For example, many strategies for working with, creating and implementing change call on Lewin’s (1947) three step change model: unfreeze, make the change and refreeze. While the model provides a simple guideline, the last step of refreeze or institutionalize the changes goes against the need for constant adaptation and learning within a fast changing environment (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990). Especially with discontinuous and traumatic changes, the last step builds resistance for the next change. While the conventional wisdom of Lewin
functioned well before the knowledge economy, the current environment requires organizations to be learning organisms. Since knowledge is never frozen, organizational change is a reflection of the constant learning process for new knowledge (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Gogus, 2003; Jacques, 1996).

In order for Shared Service Organisations to be successful, organizational learning has to be a basic foundation of change. The vital behaviors required at all organisational levels (i.e. SSO teams, leaders and their stakeholders across all of the impacted process domains) to make SSO change initiatives successful calls for a strong and genuine alignment of a facts driven improvement mindset, coupled by the ability and willpower to develop strong and positive relationships and partnerships across many departmental boundaries. These essential soft skills change within the organizational context will hardly ever happen or maintain sustainability following traditional and expensive behaviorist training initiatives. Such initiatives fail to address the primary force that leverages true sustainable change which is represented by a profound shift in thinking and realignment of values and beliefs at both individual and organisational levels. Failing to take the right cultural steps at the very beginning of the SSO change journey is generally the root-cause of the traumatic Shared Services project failures. The impact may include high levels of workplace stress, which ultimately accompany much loss of talent and material hidden costs, not to mention the loss of investment from capital to human resources.

A New Paradigm of Leading Change

A crucial aspect of strategic thinking necessitates the critical assessment of the conventional change management wisdom. The focus of strategic thought for future years is aligned with leading change or change leadership, rather than managing change or change management which can be rather reactive. According to Herold, Fedor, Caldwell and Liu (2008),
change leadership keeps a focus on the vision for the change. It has many parallel elements that directly relate to transformational leadership. Rather than focus on desired behaviors, leaders take on an inspirational role and place focus on the end without forcing the means onto their followers. Reinhard (2007) adds the common notion of sustainability to this paradigm. Within change leadership, leaders instill a sense of purpose that authentically engages people in the process so that organizations achieve sustainable success.

Purpose-driven Shared Services represent the SSO of the future. In the current economic climate and competitive environment, Shared Services cannot survive to be the mere cost-reduction exercise of the ‘80s and ‘90s anymore. The top SSO leaders must realize that their organizations would need to be something more than that, as the future success of the SSO model will be increasingly measured on its ability to continuously drive the value-add agenda of the corporations. The winning SSO’s of the future will possess organizational capability to continuously identify process improvement opportunities driven by all stakeholders, and the ability to orchestrate the shift from low value to higher value-added activities. These are the critical success factors and core skills of a true business partnership between the SSO’s and their business stakeholders. One’s ability to aligning teams within multiple dimensions of thought is a critical skill of Shared Services leaders of the future. This core skill will also be the vital dynamic that enables the strategic congruence between SSO and core business. To lead change is to start with alignment of individuals. When SSO leaders achieve this alignment, the continuous change environment has virtually no resistance.

**Strategic Perspective on Change Leadership**

A future perspective on change leadership calls for the creation of a learning cycle. Since the speed and intensity of change continues to increase, the strategic perspective involves a
process that encompasses systems thinking (Checkland, 1999), leadership theories (Bass, 1990) and learning organizations (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990; Sun, 2007). This strategic cycle provides a context for leading organizational change. Rather than a focus on outcomes alone within the paradigm of change management, the context balances the need for performance as well as the need for learning (Seijts & Latham, 2005). This strategic perspective has seven phases that create a cycle of learning.

**Phase I: Identifying the Stakeholders**

The first step of Shared Services organizational change is to clearly identify their stakeholders. In traditional management principles, lower level employees do not contribute with their ideas. Only top level management creates and drives changes (Jacques, 1996; Morgan, 2006). This hierarchical system naturally creates significant resistance to change – a Theory-X management style as opposed to a Theory-Y leadership style (McGregor, 1960), because very few people enjoy being told what to do, especially when it involves their basic daily work routines (Long & Spurlock, 2008). This first phase invites people who would have a stake in the organizational changes to engage, and it may include stakeholders at all levels from top level executives down to front-line employees. Involving stakeholders at multiple levels of the organization can provide a catalyst for authentic and powerful organizational changes (Cook, Holley & Andrew, 2007).

**Phase II: Establish a Common Ground**

“Establishing the Right Culture”

The common ground of values and beliefs set the stage for future behaviors and decisions (Clawson, 2006; Sun, 2006). In relation to Shared Services, this approach encompasses Creating a Culture of Operational Excellence (Laghi, 2007). Using the various stakeholder groups, this
second phase sets out to seek understanding of the core values and beliefs in various teams enabling a healthy cross-functional collaborative alignment. The process treats people as individuals while minimizing hierarchies (McGregor, 1960). Many psychology theorists proposed the importance of understanding the system of values and beliefs that drive behaviors (Aycan et al., 2000; Clawson, 2006; O’Roark, 2002; Williams, 1993). Creating a comprehensive set of values and beliefs as a common ground guides future behaviors and decisions in the change process. It establishes a context of thought that builds mutual trust and respect (Sun, 2006).

**Phase III: Creating a Genuine Interest for Learning**

The third phase is the final step of establishing a solid foundation to build change. A foundation of trust and respect creates a responsive and sustainable change process (Downe, McKeown, Johnson, Koloczek, Grunwald & Malihi-Shoja, 2007). To initiate any form of change, individuals involved cannot be afraid of failure. During this phase, stakeholders transform their thinking towards a balance between performance outcomes and learning processes. A focus on learning processes helps people engage authentically, without fear of consequences for failure (Seijts & Latham, 2005). This authentic engagement fuels the change process with passion. As discontinuous and turbulent changes impact individuals and organization, the shared focus on collective learning becomes the focus of change processes (Cook, Holley & Andrew, 2007; Reinhard, 2007; Williams, 2003).

**Phase IV: Change Creation**

“Motivated Shared Service Teams and Leaders understanding Change through Lean Six Sigma Performance Measurement Systems”

The creation of change within Shared Services does not come from the top or the bottom.
This fourth phase eliminates the hierarchical system that naturally causes organizational dissonance (Jacques, 1996; Morgan, 2006; Williams, 1993; Wrighton, 2008). Using information technology as a medium, all stakeholders process their thoughts and performance evidence as individuals and teams into the system. When the facts and ideas appear to the group, they appear as a unique identifier or some alias within a Knowledge Management System. This provides anonymity while maintaining accountability for important improvement opportunities identification and great ideas. A simple question or situational statement initiates the transfer of tacit ideas into explicit forms (Mathew & Kavitha; 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Sun, 2007). In addition, the specific measurements for outcomes and learning processes will also accompany the ideas to establish an accountability structure to each idea (Seijts & Latham, 2005).

Within operational excellence oriented Shared Services, this typically happens through the utilisation of Lean Six Sigma (LSS) systems, which gathers improvement opportunities and evidence-based ideas from the teams and the underlying transactional processing systems. In true customer service oriented Shared Services (internal), customer survey tools are also utilized. These same tools conduct Shared Services employee surveys and represent a useful methodology to gather and drive improvement opportunities. While this sounds great in theory, the lack of consideration on the human dimension often presents serious validity concerns for the data gathered. Often, political and psychological barriers prevent employees and stakeholders from providing accurate and timely information. Furthermore, the surveys used also lack the scientific perspective of validity and reliability. These two factors may lead towards a significant waste of resources as the unclear data influences future strategies. Successful SSO leaders must take these factors into consideration in order to obtain valid data.
**Phase V: Synthesizing Collective Wisdom**

*Shared Services Competitiveness Model: Bringing SSO Teams and Leadership together
‘A Collective Lean Six Sigma System’*

To overcome the challenges within the political and human dimensions, Sun (2007) created a process that enables valid collection of change related knowledge. With SSO’s, this performance measurement and knowledge management system captures the various individual and teams evidence-based improvement ideas, the challenging aspect of the cycle rests on a cross-functional team of individuals to synthesize the collective wisdom. The participative process ensures engagement of individuals with each others’ ideas to further solidify a set of plans for action. Mathew and Kavitha (2008) phrase this as the knowledge identification stage. Guidelines that lead towards change decisions include resource considerations such as benefits, complexity, costs and time. All activities and dialogues occur in an open forum where all stakeholders see the performance evidence, improvement ideas and the quantification of value creation of each idea. This further builds trust, which is a crucial organizational context for change (Jones, 2001).

**Phase VI: Implementation**

Building off the involvement from the beginning of the process, all SSO teams, leaders and stakeholders will have a foundation of trust and respect in the change process. The implementation of the decisions from Phase V will have very limited resistance (Cook, Holley & Andrew, 2007; Long & Spurlock, 2008) and a simple plan of action will guide participants’ involvement.
Phase VII: Evaluation and the Learning Spiral

The final phase of the cycle feeds back into Phase IV to establish a Learning Spiral. The data from the SSO Performance Measurement and Knowledge Management Systems established in Phase IV provides further knowledge for organizational change. Feeding the information back into the knowledge management system captures lessons from the organizational change (Mathew & Kavitha; 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Shared Services Operational Excellence Learning Spirals utilize LSS based information technology to drive the process from tacit to explicit knowledge and from explicit to shared knowledge (see Appendix: Integrated MOPEX® and Learning Spiral chart).

- Tacit to Explicit knowledge – extract organizational knowledge base into explicit form to produce and publish process improvement evidence
- Explicit to Shared knowledge – SSO’s engage all stakeholders in utilizing the process improvement evidence to drive operational excellence
- Shared Knowledge to Application & Knowledge Creation – all stakeholders apply newly gained knowledge and measures its effectiveness
Conclusion

As the Shared Services industry continues to evolve with increasing complexity, many organizations will either succeed or fail in their journeys based on the level of congruence between their critical strategic decisions and their overall Shared Services intent. In the move to become a true Shared Services Center of Operational Excellence, authentic engagement in the performance measurement and knowledge management systems requires organizations to invest time, resources and efforts. A significant cultural preparation includes crucial steps that organisations must first embark upon before deploying any improvement methodologies (i.e. LSS) and information technology platforms (i.e. ERP Systems). Having the right culture from the very beginning of the Shared Services journey will drive organizations from sharing knowledge to applying knowledge, and will serve the continuous process improvement objectives and ultimate operational excellence purpose agreed by all levels of the organization. All of this starts with insightful organizational leaders who engage with experts to gain a systemic and holistic perspective with careful consideration of the human dimension at all levels.

At the individual level, team members will help leaders develop key skills to lead change in both their personal and professional lives (Axelrod, 2005; O'Roark, 2002), and establish healthy group dynamics guided by principles of learning and empowerment (Sun, 2007). At the organizational level, a new generation of inspired Shared Service leaders will help their organizations re-design and re-implement a continuous-improvement-driven learning organization which will authentically engage all stakeholders. Through the application of key theories such as systems thinking, the strategic perspective will move organizations from reacting to change towards leading change (Checkland, 1999; Leonard, 2002).
Appendix

I. Executive Balance Learning Spiral

Knowledge Creation Spiral
(True Knowledge Management from a Systemic Perspective)

Knowledge Transfer

Organizational Learning System

Explicit Knowledge

Application of Knowledge

Tacit Knowledge


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II. Y6Sigma® Model of Operational Excellence – MOPEX®
III. Integrated MOPEX® and Learning Spiral
References


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