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Managing Change within a Project Context: Local NGO's Experience

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Abstract:
Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) implement change in order to improve performance and efficiency. Therefore, understanding what makes change management a successful process is crucial. Secondary research suggests that for a change process to be effective, it requires a vision, objectives, change framework, commitment of employees, change readiness, consistent communication, involvement, strong leadership and understanding the change context. This study sought to establish factors that trigger change and affect change management using a single case study of an NGO. The study adopted a qualitative approach and interviewees were selected using purposive sampling method. Data was collected using a piloted semi-structured interview guide. The study observed that both internal and external aspects influenced how organizations manage the change process. The study identified that some activities undertaken to some extent aligned to Kotter's 8 steps and this concurs with research studies that suggest that change frameworks when contextualized, may be useful and applicable among NGOs. Based on the findings the study recommends the development of a comprehensive change management plan that focuses on the technical and people aspects, undertaking organizational force field and stakeholder analysis, development of change management capacity and adoption of a learning perspective

Keywords: Change, change management, project, project management, non-governmental organizations, Local NGOs

1. Introduction

Organizations undertake projects to improve their competitive position through the change of the products and services developed and through changing how these projects are developed (Abrantes & Figueiredo, 2013). Porter (1980), is of the view that organizations have to change with the dynamics of the industry if they are to survive a familiar and deterministic assertion. However, the competencies required to effectively plan and implement change are lacking in many organizations (Hayes, 2014) and this skills gap is likely linked to the high failure rates observed.

According to KPMG, (2017) projects are about change and they observed that 29 % of projects do not undertake change management practices and 71% who do, only 3% are seen as effective. A survey done in New Zealand in 2010 revealed that 70% of the organizations suffered at-least one project failure (KPMG, 2010).

A change process that is not well managed is most likely to lead to unintended effects that may lower an organization's performance or sustainability. Change requires an organization to alter or introduce new operations or infrastructure to support the transition. Unfortunately structures or systems that seemed to function well in the past become outdated and inefficient (Jayawickrama,etal 2010). If these structures are not modified or replaced then the desired change outcomes will not be realized.

Many organizations are experiencing diverse changes within their context and task environments and the ability to manage change is key to their survival (Kotter& Schlesinger, 2008;Beer et al, 2014). Unfortunately, even as the importance of managing change is increasingly evident, studies show that change efforts often do not realize their objectives and that 70-80% of change initiatives are unsuccessful (Shin et al, 2012; Askenas, 2013). These failure rates suggest the need for exploring and identifying what factors aid or hinder successful organizational change, so that the process may be done better in the future

2. Change Management Perspectives

Change involves both the doing of something new or different, as well as a process of moving from one state to another. Change is a process that causes a shift from one form of organizing to another and is sometimes defined as an alteration, transition or adjustment (Stadtländer, 2006; Moreira et al, 2016).

Organizations experiencing and implementing change vary greatly in their mandates, operations, human resources, strategies and structures. Both Kovač, (2000) and Mironescu, (2009) identify individual and organizational level aspects that affect the change process.

Every change process has factors that need to be explored to improve the change management process. For example, change initiatives may fail due to differences between values of the organization and type of change approach

adopted (Al-Haddad et al., 2015). Therefore, for any change intervention to succeed, it must take into account the values, practices, behaviours and structures that exist within the organization.

An organization's preparedness for change is a catalyst that facilitates success during execution (Pellettiere,2006). Failure to adequately explore and establish the level of readiness for change has been observed to contribute to failed change efforts. An organization's responsiveness determines its success in dealing with change (Al-Haddad et al., 2015). Previous experience and outcomes resulting from implementing organizational changes has an impact on subsequent efforts to undertake change initiatives. A history of positive change provides a motivation for change (Weiner 2009,; Heckmann et al, 2016). If in the past, organizational changes have failed, then employees will be apprehensive and cautious to embrace any new change efforts. There are, in other words, evident path dependent or hysteresis effects (Setterfield, 2008 ; Davis, 2015).

When an organization decides to introduce any change initiatives, they should take into account the effect of the change on specific groups. Resistance to change has been observed as one among the key factors that often compromise effective change management (Paton &McCalman, 2008; Serban & Iorga 2016). Resistance may occur when individuals distrust or have previous resentments towards those managing the change. The main levels of resistance to change, that are related to personnel include: rational, emotional and relational level (Laurentiu, 2016).

Managers have also been observed to resist some change initiatives (Washington & Hacker, 2005) and this may lead to failure during execution. Any effort to minimize resistance requires the support of employees and senior management. However, Paton & McCalman (2008) note that not all resistance to change should be viewed as negative; while Jarrett (2003) and Ford et al. (2008) observe that resistance provides an opportunity for progression and balance. Predişcan & Roiban, (2014) state that individual readiness to change is key to promoting success during change implementation. Change efforts succeed when the individual impacted by the change is willing and embraces the process Therefore, one can conclude that active participation of those impacted by change leads to self-discovery, learning and increases ownership for the change. This perspective adopts the action research approach that involves a combination of changing attitudes and behaviour while at the same time testing the change method being utilized (Lewin, 1951;Schein, 1980). It is argued here, that both organizations and individuals need to consistently build their capacity to learn to manage change.

Anderson & Anderson, (2011) argues that all organizational change requires attention to three central areas: content, people, and process. The content of change is 'what' needs to change. 'People' involves the human dynamics, lastly 'process' refers to how the content and people changes will be planned and implemented(Anderson & Anderson, 2011). Al-Haddad et al, (2015) concurs with this perspective and states that the alignment between content, people and process facilitates successful change.

Hughes, (2011) also notes that organizational change is context specific and thus of limited transferability. He also points to the fact that many organizations wrongly assume that the results of change in one continent are applicable or replicable in other places. However, successful replication or application of change management practices requires deliberate and planned actions that are based on understanding the existing context.

Drucker (1999) underscores the fact that managing change may not be the ideal approach and suggests that focus should be on leading the change. This view differs from those identified by other scholars, as it proposes a more proactive approach that involves organizations adapting and steering the change process.Therefore,organizations need to understand the change being implemented and assess how aspects like content, people and process will be managed within their project context to ensure success.

3. Research Purpose and Design

3.1. Purpose and Objectives of Study

Many NGOs experience change; however, the skills and knowledge about key issues involved in the management of change is often lacking. Barton (1992) observes that recurring failures in the change process are as a result of the gap between the existing environmental requirements and an organization's core capabilities.

Local NGOs in developing countries are project-oriented and hence the successful management of change within a project environment is critical for continued competitive advantage and funding. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies utilized when planning and executing change within a project context.

3.1.1. Research Question

What factors do NGOs need to consider when managing organizational change?

3.1.2. Research Objectives
- To evaluate relevant secondary research theories and perspectives of change management.
- To explore the practical factors that aid or hinder change management processes among a subset of NGOs.
- To analyze and compare the research findings with literature on organizational change management.
- To identify strategies that will bring about the desired change among a subset of NGOs.

3.2. Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a single instrumental case study. Case studies involve an in-depth investigation of a situation within its context (Creswell, 2007;Denscombe, 2010); hence the suitability of the method in understanding a complex phenomenon. The case study research design was appropriate for the study because the intent was to explore the

processes and practices undertaken by a local NGO while introducing change initiatives within a project context; sharing this rich data may contribute to a better understanding of the challenges that local NGOs face when initiating change within a project context and how they navigate to address the challenges experienced to achieve the project outcomes.

This research study utilized a purposive sampling technique that allowed comparison between the interviewees' experiences and the change management models highlighted in the literature review. Sampling in a qualitative study includes using a small number of participants or locations to collect information to generalize the findings to a limited geographic location (Silverman, 2015).

The sample selected for this case study was done using purposeful criterion sampling to select the organization and participants. A local NGO implementing a community project in Tanzania with support from the government and an international NGO was sampled.The institution was suitable for the study because it had previously initiated changes within the existing project, majority of the staff were present when the changes were implemented and finally the management of the institution provided consent for the study to be undertaken.

To ensure a diverse range of views and perceptions, interviewees from different levels in the organization were interviewed. Seven interviewees were selected who comprised of two leaders and five employees who were present when the change was being initiated and implemented.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was structured based on topics and sub-questions and sought to explore insights based on the interviewees' experience, knowledge and perceptions related to aspects that aid or hinder management of change. Several closed and open-ended questions were asked, that addressed the research questions and allowed for in-depth explorations on the interviewees' experiences.

Thematic content analysis approach was utilized to systematically search and interpret the data into critical aspects or themes. This method was most suitable, because it is flexible and focusses on the data content by emphasizing the interviewees' perspectives. The data was summarized, coded and categorized into common themes and then compared with existing literature to establish areas of congruence or divergence.

4. Presentation of Data Analysis and Findings

The data was summarized, coded and categorized into common themes and then compared with existing literature to establish areas of congruence or divergence. The following sections discuss and highlights the key findings and analysis from the research.

4.1. Overview of the Interviewees

The interviewees were aged 43% above 40 and 57% below 40 years out of which were 71 % male and 29 % female and an average of 8 years working for the organization.

4.2. Management of Change

The findings revealed that the change was externally triggered by changes introduced by an external stakeholder. The causal factors for the change were identified as the need to improve performance and efficiency. There was the general understanding amongst the interviewees that the objective of the change was to improve service delivery and performance.

The findings revealed that the change introduction process largely involved a linear movement from an inception meeting called to introduce the change and then followed by meetings with those stakeholders who would be impacted or involved in the change.

The findings also revealed that those directly involved in the initial meetings with the stakeholder had a better grasp of the change and all its associated parameters, than those indirectly involved at lower levels in the organization.

'Actually, I was aware but not deeply…., so most of the meeting were attended bycoordinator, accountant and director. So, most of the objectives are explained within the meeting, …..we just get a little of information explained.'Interviewee 4.

This scenariowould likely lead to misunderstanding on the change process. During the preparation phase; the findings indicate scanning and mapping out the project site, meetings with different stakeholders, documenting feedback from the communities and beneficiaries were done to understand the project area and beneficiaries;

During the execution phase, the findings indicated that this phase focused on the handing over of activities, funding the project activities and feedback from the community and stakeholders.The interviewees acknowledged different stakeholders were involved during the different stages from planning to execution.

4.3. Factors That Contributed to Successful Implementation of Change

The following were the factors listed by the interviewees on factors that facilitated the successful execution of the change within the project;

4.3.1. Presence of a Plan

The vision and objective of the change being introduced within the project were crucial in guiding employees and other stakeholders on how to move forward in a positive manner. Discussions with the interviewees revealed the availability of a plans that focused on how the change would be executed and the project overall targets guided the implementation.

'Yes, a plan was there. A plan developed on the steps to follow…….'Interviewee 3

The purpose and the need for the change were clearly stated by the key stakeholderwho also happened to provide funding for the project and the same message was used to create awareness on why the change. The change plan included activities such as handover sessions, mapping of project site needs, stakeholder meetings, site visits, identification of beneficiaries and recruitment of new staff.

4.3.2. Availability of Resources

The findings indicated there was funding, technical supplies and sponsorship to implement the change agenda. When the plans were complete funds were provided by the donor to facilitate implementation of project activities on the ground and the associated expenses. The increase in the numbers of staff to cover the expanded scope of work was also crucial. The interviewees' responses however indicated that the rate of implementation of the change was influenced by the funds and resources available.

4.3.3. Organizational Capacity and Reputation

The findings highlight good management practices and presence of qualified staff at the organization level. The awareness of the organization by the relevant stakeholders enabled the organization execute the change and the presence of the organization's office on the ground served to build their visibility. This was corroborated by one interviewee;

'First is that organization X is known by the government and it has a good report. Second presence of skilled staff that were adaptable to the change and able to persevere and move forward. Organization X is flexible, presence of beneficiaries whom we are serving so we give services that people need and they are satisfied .'Interviewee 3

The interviews with staff   and leaders revealed that guidelines, memos, training and tools for implementing the change were in existence. The capacity of the staff to accept the change enabled them move forward.

4.3.4. Creating Awareness on the Need for Change

Several consultative meetings were undertaken to get buy in from local government, partners, other providers, health facilities and beneficiaries. Continuous community education enabled successful implementation of the change.

4.3.5. Stakeholder Involvement

The findings highlighted the importance of stakeholder participation. There was the need to ensure there was mutual understanding and cooperation with the donor and other government officials to facilitate execution of the change. Political goodwill and involvement of other stakeholders was therefore identified as key in implementing the changes.

4.3.6. Consistent Communication

Communication to all those to be impacted by the organizational change before initiating the change and continuously throughout the process is crucial. Different communication mechanisms were used before and during the change process was a key.

'……., to communicate with our fellow partners involved in change. This change involved two partners. So, we consulted our fellow partner, who handed us community health service providers with numbers of their clients then we attended a meeting with the community service providers'. Interviewee 4.

Consistent dialogue with diverse stakeholders to communicate the change objectives was a recurring theme mentioned by the interviewees in the study. Dialogues also served to garner needed support and leverage resources. At organizational level staff meetings were the key communication mechanism used for updates and feedback.

4.3.7. Leadership Support

The interviewees highlighted the key role played by the leaders as follows; Approval of plan and budget, Encouragement and support from the director, motivating individuals to change behaviour and have a positive outlook. However, the findings also indicated that the board was clearly not aware of their role or contribution to the change.

'My role was to actually see that plans are implemented effectively, people are going to the site to implement the work, made sure that funds were available on time. I also go to the site to see if things were really working and again another role was to chair monthly meetings and adhoc meetings as well as supervision and actually monitoring the funds.'Interviewee 1

4.3.8. Minimizing the Barriers to Change

When implementing change there are bound to be obstacles or barriers that may affect the speed or rate of change. The interviewees highlighted a host of challenges encountered which revolved around infrastructural, cultural, operational, resource constraints. Therefore, initial scanning or mapping exercises, scheduled monitoring and review of progress assisted in the identification and addressing of the gaps.

'In management meeting, we always talk about these changes and expected changes and also trying to figure out what kind of problems and difficulties we could encounter in changes and what should we do once we encounter those difficulties? ….. created some sort of a plan about what should be done'Interviewee 4

The interviewees also mentioned that monthly and quarterly review meetings were done to monitor progress. The interviewees described the process progress was compared to specific project implementation targets, to verify that change was happening. The achievement of project targets was therefore used as a measure to gauge success of the change initiatives introduced.

5. Analysis of the Findings

This section discusses the results in relation to the academic literature highlighted in the literature. When comparing the perception of change and change management as a body of practice, the interviewees' responses differ slightly from the theoretical perspective. However, the characteristic of a never-ending process and an open-ended transition from one state to another was highlighted by both theory and empirical study.

The findings show that the change was triggered externally by a donor and government requirements but the actual execution of the change was undertaken by the organization. The presence of a plan facilitated the execution of the planned change. This finding concurs with both Heifetz and Laurie, (1997) and Kotter et al, (2013) on the importance of a strategy and the capacity for adaptation to manage change.

The change was perceived to have been implemented successfully by the project team respondents based on the improved efficiency, expansion of services, increased visibility of the organization; Even though the interviewees perceived that the change initiative was implemented as envisioned, the missing element was the systematic involvement of the organization during the process, to avoid them being perceived as passive objects of the change. The analysis of the results showed there was minimal engagement of the organization in determining process or structures to facilitate the change.

The study revealed that a structured change team was not in existence, minimal understanding of why the change was required at community level and limited knowledge on the objectives among some staff. Views collected from interviewees revealed that stakeholder acceptance and involvement relied on their understanding of the change agenda. This observation concurs with both Predişcan & Roiban, (2014) and Carnall, (2007) who state that understanding at individual level is key. The findings also concur with Johnson etal, (2007) regarding ensuring alignment between the change efforts and the operational level interventions.

The findings did not reveal that a specific change model was followed by the organization. However, the interviewees identified activities implemented that were similar to the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. Some of the activities undertaken were meetings, planning, communication on the change, resource allocation, training and monitoring and reviews.

The findings indicate that the theoretical change frameworks steps maybe applicable among NGOs. However, it may-be argued that due to the Ngo characteristics and the changing development context, it may be difficult to consistently execute a comprehensive planned change framework. This may prove challenging but highly desirable.

The primary research findings revealed similarities between theory and practice on factors that influence effective management of change such as understanding the change, resources, leadership, consistent communication, collaborative process, presence of a plan and involvement. However, none of the theoretical studies emphasized the importance of project management practices. Nevertheless, the findings showed that project management skills and procedures were crucial during execution. Furthermore, it was interesting to note that diverse external support contributed to implementation of the change at both organizational and project level.

The organization encountered diverse obstacles during the implementation of change that may have affected the speed of execution. However, the organization was able to overcome these through developing diverse strategies to manage the change. It can be concluded that the organization was able to successfully navigate the change process due to this proactive approach. According to Beer et al, (1990) monitoring and adjusting strategies during implementation through multiple course corrections of the change enables an organization to adapt to change.

The study findings emphasized the importance of having an empowering leadership to gain commitment and involvement of the team. The findings concur with both Carnall, (2007) andKotter,(2007) who highlighted leadership as one of the factors that support execution of change.However, the board members seemed to have been the least involved during implementation of the change, yet its role is critical in mobilizing political good will among the stakeholders throughout the change process.

The findings also concurred with Tudor, (2014) and Mariana et al, (2013) that resistance encountered by the organization was inevitable. Resistance is likely to come from those who perceive themselves as inconvenienced by the change, largely due to a fear of the unknown. The change was perceived as a threat to established stakeholder needs and employee job security. The analysis shows that the part of the change agenda that evoked most resistance at community level was the introduction of a different implementing organization. It can be concluded that this organization experienced relational level resistance. Relational resistance occurs when individuals are uncomfortable with the change agent, particularly if the actor is new to the circumstance.

The research findings further indicated that the changes the organization underwent had animpact on both targeted and untargeted aspects. All interviewees perceived that the change process was successful. This seems to confirm Al-Haddad et al's (2015) observation that short-term change tends to be more successful in comparison to long-term change. However, and based on the findings it was observed that the change was initiated with minimal consideration to the community and organizational context. Commitments were then often rhetorical and essentially performative.

The interviewees mentioned that their past success in the execution of the project related changes contributed to the current expansion of their geographic coverage by the donor. This is consistent with findings in previous research (Weiner, 2009; Heckmann,2016)that indicate that previous change management success serves as motivation and strengthens commitment to undertake subsequent change efforts.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The research highlights evidence-based insights on factors that need to be considered when managing change from an NGO perspective. The organization had to adapt to the changes triggered externally and incidentally, in order to survive. It emerged from the research that identifying and understanding the why and the benefits of the change was crucial in keeping the team focused.

This research found out that some key aspects that enabled the organization to manage the changes was the fact that the organization was keen to undertake some planning initiatives before they begun implementing the changes. There was evidence of objectives and a plan to guide the change process being available. The team also assigned roles to different individuals and it was observed that the leadership provided during execution of the change enabled the staff overcome the uncertainty and fears while implementing the project activities.

It was observed that the presence and access to context-specific resources were key in enabling the NGO manage the changes introduced within the project. This implies that it is the successful combination of the NGO's flexibility and competencies and the enabling context that permits change to be negotiated, each on its own tend to prove inadequate.

This research found that, even though the organization did not use any formalized framework to guide the implementation of change, they included some steps that are similar to Kotter's framework and this could have contributed to their success in implementing the changes. However, adopting a framework from the onset is crucial and has the benefit of developing an NGO's change capabilities and practices especially in ensuring project success. This argument is supported by both Senge et al, (1999) and Cameron et al, (2001) who state the need for organizations to adopt a systematic framework for effective management of change is imperative. In these readings, a planned framework lends confidence to the actors and aligns them more tightly, building determination and a capacity for unity.

The study also concludes that the staff were not against the change in principle; however, the consequence of its implementation on their individual lives was their main concern. The fear and uncertainty were a normal reaction because initially it was unclear how the changes would impact both their personal lives and career.

Even though the interviewees indicated that the change process was a success. Nonetheless, the findings indicated that no documented indicators existed to systematically evaluate the process and outcome of the change. These findings concur with observations made by Skinner, (2004) and Griffin et al, (2006) that evaluation of change is often overlooked. Yet, undertaking a simple reflection exercise during various stages provides an opportunity for learning and may minimize failure during implementation of subsequent change initiatives.

6.2. Recommendations

The study alluded to the fact that combining project and change management practices played an important role in the management and delivery of envisioned organizational changes. There was evidence of objectives and a plan to guide the change process being available. However, the level of detailed planning required for the execution of the desired change was not entirely complete.This led to underestimation of resource requirements needed to support the project execution. The study recommends the development of a comprehensive change plan that clearly highlights the change process, defines roles of actors and project resource requirements.

The study also recommends planning for both people and technical issues to support the achievement of successful change outcomes within a project context.Johnson & Scholes (1993)observed that organizations need to include steps that help employees understand the reasons, purpose and benefits of the change initiatives while Abrantes & Figueiredo, (2013) propose the combination of both hard and soft aspects of change management.

The current research has further highlighted the potential for resistance from diverse stakeholders at the community level that may impact the implementation of change within a project.This reflects a need for undertaking stakeholder analysis to identify and address project stakeholder concerns and needs.

The study also recommends the undertaking of force-field, context and stakeholder analysis before and during the change process. This will ensure that the planned change initiatives take into consideration the existing context, organizational capacity and project stakeholder expectations. This view concurs with Rod et al., (2009) who noted that conducting an audit to assists in the assessment of the receptivity of those stakeholders being impacted by the change in order to better understand any underlying resistance.

Finally, based on the finding the study recommends the enhancement of the capacity of both the organization and leaders to effectively manage projects when initiating change. (Parker, et al, 2013) observed that using a project-based approach increases the chances for the success of organizational changes, while Hornstein, (2015) has made a case for change management to be a fundamental part of the training of project managers to enhance project success. The use of training and mentorship approaches concurrently with having a structured change management framework during implementation would be ideal. This continuous effort has the capability of building both individual and organizational capacity.

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