Reflections on Employees' Lived Experiences of Organisational Change

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Abstract

The paper draws on the lived experiences of change for employees working in SMEs whose business's future became highly challenged in a volatile, competitive UK market environment. The empirical materials provide the basis for this paper as links to existing studies enhance its additional insights. The examination of two models, namely the Universal and Contingency Models, whose assumptions in supporting similarly challenged employees and organisations were found to have fallen short of the anticipated promises in the four SMEs studied. From the empirical responses and as a contribution to the models, it proved possible to identify a change management approach that could help organisations that have been similarly challenged in recognising individuals' expertise. The capability of becoming an expert highlighted that employees became resilient and goal-directed as they were able to take action given the types of challenges they faced. Implications for organisational change research and management practice are highlighted.

Keywords: employees, SMEs, universal and contingency models, experiences of change, data.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes organisations work, sometimes they do not especially when they have to deal with a multiplicity of challenges with finite resources. Challenges may include mismanagement, corruption, lack of productivity, a wasteful depletion of resources and adapting to changing and volatile market environments. Responses to the challenges are designed to make organisations work well even during uncertain times (e.g. Brexit Britain). Indications how to do this have come from many directions – from wizards to astrologers and business consultants. Relatively recent entrants are academics using the tools of science perhaps in attempts to exert some control on the volatilities (Burnes, 2004; Helfat and Peteraf, 2003). The general conclusion appears to be that their results have been disappointing thereby prompting calls to modify approaches that may have been designed to deal with a different type of uncertainty and difficulty (Sanders et al., 2014) or where possible, design new ones to cope with the uncertainties.

In the next section it is attempted to identify the sources of this appointment by searching the literature. The search has been limited to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as these seem less inclined to mix management methods and have been generally neglected in studies that attempt to find an adaptation approach or a model in volatile, competitive market environments. Having noted part of the reasons why organisations fail under such volatility, it is attempted to formulate the research question to guide the search for potential answers from the empirical data. The research question is 'can the lived experiences of employees and organisations whose employment and business futures have been adversely challenged in a volatile market provide insights into an approach to support organisational change?' The answer to this question is sought from arguments concerning research approaches and models that are purported to support employees and organisations in similar situations as well as from the results of a study of employees whose organisations were reported to face challenging uncertain times (Todnem By, 2005). Next an attempt is made to examine theories and models on different ways organisations adapt to change and whether individuals who are also challenged may play a role. An analysis of the models is followed by the research methods used to obtain the empirical materials that form the basis for this paper's proposed approach. Insights and implications are drawn from the findings and their discussions provided the basis for the concluding remarks and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kelly and Amburgey (1991) suggested that when some organisation is challenged and is in need of change, what is usually meant is not that it should change its behaviour. This is already variable given the constraints imposed by its structure (Dunphy and Stace, 1988). Therefore, one might be inclined to modify the structure systematically. However, doing so may entail modelling that behaviour so that the model may serve as a representation of the organisation's structure. This allows one to modify values on some of the independent variables in that model as a way to change values on some of the dependent variables so they approximate values on those variables showing organisations that work well even when adversely challenged (Vakola et al., 2004). Planned changes in the structure may be relatively small compared to the variation in the types of behavioural change they allow. This approach has been tried many times but has been shown to fail – apparently as the model itself imposes constraints on how modifications can be exerted at the higher organisational level. Calls to modify the approach to organisational change (Sanders et al., 2014) have evoked earlier pleas for researchers to look for a change in the way one models structure, therefore (Cummings and Worley, 2005; Moran and Brightman, 2001). To search for such type of change the author examines organisational structures and strategies that might help in bringing about change at the individual, employee level of analysis and two models that are reputed to support this type of adaptation from the extant literature are examined and used for this purpose.

Adapting to change

Organisational structure is only part of the picture of adapting to uncertainty/volatility however – although there are many ways to change it, with or without an approach as advised by Sanders et al. (2014). One may think of making vertical structures horizontal or change the way directives and information are communicated (Reckwitz, 2002). The obvious label for such changes is that they are structural in nature and organisationally or macro-level-specific. The other part is to look at how individual employees at the micro-level of analysis act within the structure: they are assigned agency. Do they allow the organisation's objectives to dominate their own micro-objectives or do they try to gain in terms of their micro-objectives as well as those of their macro-level-organisation (Pryor et al., 2007; Wischnevsky et al., 2004 Buchanan and Storey, 1997)? The two types of change approaches differ in fundamental aspects. However, examining and interpreting change in terms of micro-level-agency may lead to paradoxes like the 'Tragedy of the Commons' (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Hardin, 2009), while

the interpretation in structures may not. They also differ in terms of the specifications of their research paradigms (Burnes, 2004; Tichy, 1983; Smircich, 1983), i.e. whether they include communication or discourse (see Mumby, 1988).

In this paper the focus is on whether there might exist an approach drawn from the data provided by employees who were experiencing change at the micro-level of analysis. Attempts are made to interpret what this might mean for SME employees experiencing adverse challenges to adapt to deal with uncertainty/change in terms of (people's) agency (Todnem By, 2005). This restricts change to two types. One is how agency is carried, i.e. what individuals are selected to act in certain ways at certain times and certain places (Todnem By, 2005) and the other is what objectives agents may make their own (Smith and Lewis, 2011). However, research that identifies what resources change agents may find and use and what scheme they will use to identify the errors to deal with the challenges of uncertainty is under-reported in the extant literature. Theoretical debates and discussions on the contributions of the two types of change follow.

The first type of change concerns human resources: people in existing organisations do not necessarily like to fire themselves (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017; Morley, Scullion, Collings and Schuler, 2015; Festing, Schafer and Scullion, 2013). Research thus focuses on modelling what exists or has grown into stable structures. Examples include the effort to model changes in terms of herding behaviour (Shah, Shah and Ullah-Khan, 2017) or in terms of market relations or family structures as sources of leadership (Lwango et al., 2017). Studies of this type are elaborated below (i.e. under the Universal Model). They focus on changing and managing people, i.e. agents in the here and now.

The second type concerns the way individuals may change their strategies, i.e. their objectives, resources and initiatives in order to deal with the volatility. Research includes the study of strategies that may be chosen to reduce risk when operating in international markets (Kola and Kodongo, 2017) and when attempting to have one's organisation grow (Quaicoe et al., 2017). Or one may wish to identify what types of interactions between agents contribute to productivity (von Bonsdorff et al., 2015) or whether the dominance of leadership roles may help alleviate the challenges of uncertainty (Top et al., 2015). Studies of the two types have been selected on the basis of characteristics supporting individuals and organisations that need

to change. The extant literatures are further elaborated below (i.e. using constructs of the Universal and Contingency Models) to see what else could be contributed.

Models Supporting Adaptation to Change

Universal Model

The Universal Model has been proposed as a 'best' way to deal with the challenges faced by organisations (Huselid, 1995; Jack et al., 2013). The name of 'Universal Model' seems a bit pretentious as the focus is only on changing and managing an organisation's staff internally. Most attempts under this model include what sets of practices HR professionals need to adopt in the process of supporting and developing staff competence (Boxall, 1996). Selecting the right people and applying appropriate internal flexible working practices can also be helpful help deal with a specific challenge regarding performance (Phillips, 1996). If this does not work one may introduce policies to raise employees' morale and motivation (Paul and Anantharaman, 2003) or re-organise work, incentivise and reward people (Patterson and Spreng, 1997). Perkins and White (2011) and Armstrong (2015) claim that using job-evaluation payment-by-results can be beneficial in boosting organisation's finances as supported by Van Wanrooy et al. (2013) and Perkins and White (2011). However, negotiating employer/employee objectives may not yield the anticipated outcomes (Marsden and Dickinson, 2013) as these become part of the organisational culture that further cement the challenges. Participating in the Universal Model is contested (Jimenez et al., 2017; Goerzen, 2017) and the practices used to support staff deal with the challenges can no longer be claimed to apply universally (Guest, 2001).

Contingency Model

The Contingency Model is premised on the assumption that there is a strong relationship between an organisation's internal and external environment. It focuses on the strategies that can be changed even when the employees aren't changed. One of its most famous advocates include Fiedler (1964; 1986). They view organisations as open structures that constrain employees' actions in terms of their expectations, desires and needs, but do not prohibit change. Managers have to learn new ways of changing their strategies of adopting and working with events and activities in their business environments (e.g. high rates of immigration and emigration, growing health problems, lack of productivity and performance, abdication of

state's responsibilities). Proponents of the theory appear to share the belief that new forms of research are needed to organise and manage activities (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Jack et al., 2013; Huselid, 1995; Lepak and Snell, 1999).

Others like Pfeffer (1994) rather believe that the internal organisational operations and HRM strategies ought to drive the anticipated alignment between the internal and external activities. The term used to capture its occurrence is 'best fit'- i.e. between business goals of raising productivity and performance and the external factors (e.g. changing legislation, volatile political and socio-economic demographics). Scholars such as Fiedler (1964; 1986) and Scott (1981) include additional properties around leadership. Fiedler refers to situations where the driving force for change is a leader and his or her ability to make use of locally available resources to achieve an organisation's objectives. He reminds us about contingency factors and their impact on organisational structures and fortunes. A leader may bring flexibility and increase resilience. Hudson, Okhuysen and Creed (2015) highlight the role of an organisation's decision-making structures. Focusing on the role of the leader may be criticised, however, as it demonstrates the lack of a general procedure to have employees act on the basis of variable resources in fast changing and challenging environmental situations.

Other proponents of the Contingency Model take this criticism to heart and highlight the need to increase individual competences as part of an organisation's resources (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 2001). People/staff need to be retained and developed (Horgan and Muhlau, 2005; Dolan, Mach and Olivera, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002). This implies that members or employees should have a voice, i.e. be part of a communication system (Perkins and White, 2011; Marsden and Dickinson, 2013). This might involve a bundling of practices such that these become part of an organisation's way of doing things or, if one wills, its business culture (Okpara and Kabongo, 2010; Hofstede, 2001). While the openness of and the numerous additions made over the years onto contingency theory continue to stimulate debates, discussions and questions, authors have yet to agree on what policies and practices may actually support staff in dealing with the overall challenges (Huselid and Jackson, 1997; Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2003) or whether there is a single best way of escaping the trap of failure to adapt (Todnem By, 2005).

Analysis of Models

The literature reviewed above suggests that neither type of change-supporting models (Universal or Contingent) has yet gained dominance. Some aspects concerning further work seem warranted, however. One is that the method of science, which facilitates finding representations of the properties or variables of organisations, seems particularly suited to deal with the first type of change, i.e. treating members of organisations as similar and comparable except for aspects such as training and experience. This means these aspects can be modelled. This result may indicate what persons should be removed, replaced or trained. This type of approach doesn't seem well suited to deal with the second type of change. While strategies may be developed in external explorations like those of decision theory, game theory, operations research and cybernetics, what seems especially important is that individuals become able to improve their contributions in terms of their own development. This implies that such contributions depend heavily on people's personal experiences – precisely those experiences that are excluded when it is attempted to reduce bias (as the method of science requires). A new approach is necessary to prevent such exclusion at uncertain times when its inclusion can prove beneficial. A possible form of this approach is developed from the data based on a study of organisations that had to respond to life-threatening challenges. This approach makes it possible to change strategies (i.e. elements of the second type) that may be applied by any individual in an organisation, although its actual realisation will still depend on when it takes place and where.

Data Collection Methods

Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted separately in 2004/2005 and 2011 with eighty-five staff in four SMEs that faced a number of challenges. The choice of the four organisations depended on the fact that each claimed to be challenged to change their operations under threat of becoming extinct (Todnem By, 2005). The companies had operations in the Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire areas. Anonymity was waived by each group of companies, whose background information is reported individually below as part of context setting.

The volatile situations that the four companies faced were as follows. Longhurst Housing Association runs a group of organisations that provide housing for rent. They had to deal with an increased clientele and were urged by regulators to modernise their provision and make

homes available and more affordable. Bakkavor-Laurens Patisserie is the UK's largest cake manufacturer. They had to expand, satisfy an increasing demand for their products and work closely with their new parent company, the Bakkavor Group, the headquarters of which are based in Iceland. UK Bakkavor was also running branches globally. Eden Enhanced Housing provides care and housing services to nearly a hundred and fifty people. The company was trying to expand to other parts of the UK and look after a growing number of people with disability in an expansive stretch of geographical locations. Lagat provides a range of services including educational and career counselling to students. They faced market pressures, changing customer demands and reduced financial support from government. Employees in each company were challenged to make the changes introduced by management work and thereby to respond to the overall challenges.

The research question was whether an approach could be drawn from the data to reflect on how employees experienced and dealt with the changes that appeared to be based mainly on results from studies of the first type of change (Kjaerbeck, 2017). Would they be able to develop an approach or a modified approach (Sanders et al., 2014) that would help make their companies adapt better to volatile, changing market conditions, gain resilience and become stronger through responding to their companies' challenges or would their reactions indicate some other type of change?

The methodology required selecting employees from the four organisations whose characteristics fitted the theoretical description of individuals and companies whose objectives were challenged in volatile markets (Smith and Lewis, 2011). The number of 85 respondents can be broken down as follows: Longhurst Housing - 10 employees and 7 management staff, Bakkavor-Lauren's Patisserie - 10 employees and 7 management staff, Lagat -10 employees and 7 management staff and Eden Housing - 10 employees and 7 management staff. Interviews lasted roughly an hour and were started with the question 'What changes have happened in your firm and how did you experience them?' Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses given the specific identity of their respective companies.

Results from empirical data
The results of my study were quite unexpected – although a study of the literature seems to indicate that they were not unique, they were underreported. The employees appeared to doubt

the value of the changes as they seemed to be based only on information gathered by treating them as objects with properties that might be supported or not (see first type of change). Gathering the data involved activities that seemed to impede normal activities such as an intensification of monitoring, supervision, appraisals/evaluation and staff development sessions by management – as advocated by the Universal model. Employees who failed to meet strict performance criteria were scolded in a framework that appeared, in employees' eyes, as a tightening of a disciplinary maze and therefore a departure from the type of support posited in the Contingency and Universal Models.

Some of the responses provide insights as to the way the changes were operationalised. An employee at Bakkavor said in 2011 '*we will have to start taking disciplinary action on employees who don't want to change because they don't see the need; these are minimum wage jobs and we are being asked too much*'. The HR Manager at Eden remarked in 2004/05 '*there is a lot of work on disciplinary issues, staff training and quality support…*'whilst the HR Director at Longhurst remarked in 2011 '*you need to be very disciplined; it is important to have the plan and revisit it…we ask staff views and they participate in focus groups, it may take time for a seed to germinate*.' One of the Business Advisors at Lagat said in 2004/05 '*we have regular communication, operations meetings to rectify communication blockage…*' A Senior Training Officer at the same company mentioned in 2011 '*some management are also Internal Verifiers for various courses and they work with employers*.' Discipline and upskilling appeared to be the order of the day in Lagat and Bakkarvor respectively as ways to deal with the challenges.

The changes that were implemented did not seem to bring the companies around quickly enough in a way its employees thought were appropriate to the challenges. There was an increase in clients' complaints about service and product quality even as quality inspections became the order of the day. Reminders to boost performance had to be put up on notice boards. At Longhurst in 2011 an employee remarked that there is 'a *breakdown of communication*' which increased staff frustration as they felt their efforts were under-valued. This led employees to start their own communication networks as they realised the damage caused by management's behaviour and activities, leaving their managers out (noted in 2011 by the Training Officer at Lagat). When jobs were handed down, staff started interpreting how these might be carried out using their own strategies. They began to (re)define their jobs and

responsibilities in carrying them out. Employees at Bakkavor spoke about wanting to '*have responsibility*' and to '*operate on a higher role*' post 2004/05. They did not like being '*told*' and spoke openly about how they were enjoying '*a more collaborative*' form of individual interaction. Longhurst staff observed how employees '*dipped into other people's roles*' and went '*beyond their job descriptions*'.

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS FROM DATA

This section draws on insights and implications for research and management practice from the empirical data's findings on employees' experiences of how they dealt with the changes. Two main areas are of particular interest given their recurrence in the data; firstly gaining experience and secondly, an alternative approach to managing change in volatile situations similar to the ones faced by the SMEs studied here. The discussions and concluding remarks that follow are intended to highlight potential linkages of the proposed notion of 'becoming an expert' and the change management approach, their benefits and future work in this area.

Becoming an expert

Employees' experiences of the change situations described earlier can be reflected upon as a way that they chose to deal with the challenges of uncertainty. Firstly, it was clear from the data that those involved became aware that managers had to develop their own approach to respond to the challenges. This was achieved through announcements and instructions. Additionally, employees saw the strategies used by the managers as reducing rather than increasing the available resource-capacity to deal with the pressures. Employees noted that they were imposed upon to carry out management's wishes even if they disagreed based on their experiences of local situations. It would seem that this situation created a personal challenge: how to act such that one would seem to follow commands, but at the same time deviate to ensure that one could contribute the way one deemed best. This meant creating a personal sphere (domain) in which to experiment: to explore what alternative objectives might be identified and what resources become necessary to realise the objectives. To do so objectives and resources had to be linked and the links compared – such that employees were able to identify which objective might be most easily achieved given existing resources and which objective might provide better results given additional resources. It is also worth considering whether using one or more of the possible resource linkages would make it possible to convert the managers' preferred ways of interacting with employees into ones that can be shown to be

effective. When no such result proves yet possible, one could explore alternative ways to bring about the required change.

An alternative approach

Further reflections on the data showed that employees started to become more strategic as they started to experiment with and find alternatives from the tasks imposed by the managers. They introduced new objectives for themselves and explored how they might be realised. This suggests that they were trying to increase their personal contributions as different from the ones management required: they did not intend to convince the managers of their superior insights into good management. Via this approach, staff appeared able to learn how they could engage productively with colleagues and management as a way to deal with the uncertainty and existential threats they faced (James, 2014).

Employees brought about a form of change that may be considered an application of the Contingency Model. Their way of working should not be seen as a theory of what employees may do when they face imprudent strategies of change. Some form of systematic search was involved, though, i.e. a change management approach similar to what Sanders et al. (2014) advised as necessary in change management studies. Individuals tried to contribute their personal objectives (what they thought would be best for the future of all concerned) and resources (what they saw as making it possible to realise the objectives), selecting combinations that each considered to have higher quality and would help realise further improvement. This form of search seems in line with the possibility of focusing on the second type of change as a way to gain agency and drive organisational change in the tradition of Smith and Lewis (2011).

By implementing the characteristic and activities in the approach one does not build up knowledge in the sense of the Universal Model (as descriptions of how to manage available resources), but one structures one's personal experience such that one goes beyond the agency recommended by Smith and Lewis (2011) and needed to make the changes work. The findings here show that employees at the micro-level of analysis started to act as experts: resilient, adaptive, providing resources to others as well as recognising the contributions of others as a resource, etc. Two aspects would be important: recognition of what objectives one might realise by recognising what resources to use, but also the formulation of a scheme as defined above,

i.e. a way for individuals to recognise what to do to start increasing quality whenever quality is no longer increased by the imposed models to deal with the challenges. Being aware of the characteristics of such an approach and gaining access to its core aspects can be interpreted as becoming conscious of the process of improving one's ability to contribute more effectively to change, i.e. of becoming an expert.

DISCUSSIONS

The approach presented above is proposed as a way employees chose to implement organisational change when market conditions made their organisations' and their survival precarious. It is intended to support employees in similar situations who wish to contribute by changing their contribution such that optimal use is made of personal resources (i.e. becoming an expert) – rather than having such resources curtailed by adhering to instructions by managers who rely on the Universal Model. This raises the question to what extent the approach has sufficient quality to achieve what is intended (a company being able to survive both small and large challenges/uncertainties). To answer this question one may consider an evaluation of a number of applications of the approach.

Some other aspects might be considered, however, to show that this approach is justifiable. First it should be pointed out that the approach is derived from reports of employees who needed to increase their expertise – given the difficulties their companies were in and given the mechanistic behaviour of many managers ('mechanistic' in that they behaved according to theories that developed as part of the Universal Model). Such reports may confirm, but not falsify however. Second, there is another way to look at the approach. What is proposed is similar to the method of science, which also proceeds by following steps – according to Descartes (1993) and other philosophers of science (Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1976). This method consists of collecting observations and searching for a high quality mapping onto a set of statements or theory. Both the collection and the search can also be recognised in the characteristics and activities presented above. The sets of activities and how they are implemented contribute to identifying and increasing the quality of a mapping, in this case the link or mapping between personal objectives and the resources that can be expected to help realise the objectives – the better the higher the quality of the mapping.

This argument suggests that the approach to manage change by becoming an expert is similar to the scientific method - but not only that. It also can be considered equivalent as the main

characteristic is shared: the development of a system that helps to identify areas of correcting any error or deviation from the approach. The relative advantage of the approach via which becoming an expert occurs is that it accepts non - observations like personal, lived experiences, intentions and bias as input (this increases the probability that something can still be gained whenever the method of science fails). Based on the findings, this approach is part of an attempt in this paper to contribute to the theoretical debates and insights concerning organisational change and how to deal with volatilities and uncertainties faced by SME employees in a competitive and volatile market environment.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although organisational studies and part of its history suggest that cooperating brings about beneficial achievements (Vakola et al., 2004), sometimes something more dynamic is needed (Smith and Lewis, 2011) to limit organisations' exposure to risky challenges (Kola and Kodongo, 2017). This type of development suggested that I search the literature: how does an organisation survive in the midst of uncertainty and challenging pressures. The main impression from my exploration is that there are *individuals* at the micro-level who can turn an organisation around – and that systematic studies based on the application of the method of science does not lead to methods that have practical value (see Kuhn, 1970). When reading the empirical reports I remembered one of my own research experiences: people do take initiatives that have value for their organisations. I then tried to abstract their way of doing things (approach), which in hindsight, seems to fit with the various theoretical attempts that go under the name of Contingency Model and that were calling for a modified approach for the model to be able to deal with volatile situations (Sanders et al., 2014). For this reason I reported the approach I found in the above – as it may contribute to the theoretical debates concerning that model and how to deal with uncertain times in competitive market environments.

The main advantage of the change management approach proposed in the above seems to be that its aim is not to search for representations of what happened in the past – as a knowledgeable resource to further action. Its aim is to help individuals live in their world and help them recognise that not only is this world full of resources, but that it contains resources for many types of activities and modifications. The connection between objectives and resources cannot be identified only through observation, as those in favour of the method of science seem to want us to believe (Lakatos, 1976; Wischnevsky, 2004). To do so all personal experiences have to be made available (one may decide to focus on objectives and resources –

Smith and Lewis, 2011), including a person's position in the world at some time and place. In this sense the method is closer to what the magicians of organisation do than to theories of organisation that foster illusions of instrumentalisation (Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Jack et al., 2013). At the same time the method seems equivalent to the method of science and in that sense trustworthy and operational.

Considering the proposed approach as part of the Contingency Model is not to debase it, even though it did not develop as part of debates concerning that model. The model's role is to provide a context: the approach does indicate not only that agency plays a role (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015) but more so that the richness of people's lived experiences and cognitive ability is directly linked to the richness of the experiences that contribute to one's agency to bring about effective change. This suggests paying attention to agency as proposed by Todnem By (2005) and Smith and Lewis (2011) even though this often proves difficult – as per the approach that is proposed. Restricting oneself to a search for resources and to leaving their use to anyone's whim or their agency does not also seem the best one can do (Barney, 2001; Morley et al., 2015). Therefore, to add to agency, the notion of becoming an expert is introduced so as to enhance the capacity of those responsible for bringing out more effective adaptation.

Although the proposed approach seems to promise a lot, it has to be realised that the research reported included quite a limited sample of four companies in two regions in the UK. This constraint may seem to imply a criticism or a caution. It also supports the idea that employees' lived experiences of change, although apparently under-reported in SME studies on change, can provide some basis to push the growth of knowledge – and expertise – in developing emergent approaches to deal with volatile and competitive changing market environments.

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