EDITORIAL

OR and managed change

In a turbulent and competitive environment, change is a fact of organisational life. Increasingly, management is coming to terms with the necessity to embrace change in a planned way to improve performance, or even just to survive. This means an increasing emphasis on appreciating both the environment and organisational capabilities in order to identify appropriate strategies, coupled with a growing recognition of the need to consciously manage implementation of those strategies.

In the past, a good deal of the management literature was concerned with identifying desirable strategies in respect of corporate strategy, administration and operating procedures. In recent years, concern with the effective implementation and evolution of such strategies has become more prominent in the literature. A recognition that change is endemic and significant in most organisations has stimulated the search for general principles in the effective management of change. Furthermore, there is now increasing interest in ways of enhancing general organisational ability to cope with environmental uncertainty and change. Building flexibility has become almost an obsession for some. This should be welcome news for OR practitioners since the application of OR usually involves recommending changes to existing organisational practices. In future, management might be even more receptive to OR. At the same time it is important for practitioners to maintain a familiarity with the general principles of change management, whatever these might be.

Central to the issue of effective application of OR is the need to understand and manage implementation. Over the years implementation research has identified a large number of factors which contribute to effective implementation. For example, a survey by Ginzberg in 1975 identified 140 different factors. Typically such factors have been presented as unstructured lists which have included factors implicitly related to context, content (often related to model construction and presentation) and process. When Powell (1976) surveyed the OR implementation literature, he categorised factors in terms of context, organisation, OR group organisation, project, client and researcher characteristics, and client researcher relations. Often such factor studies have identified a number of potential problem areas affecting implementation and then proposed corresponding solutions to each problem. Others have identified factors contributing to success as well as failure. Factor studies have provided useful knowledge, but this approach has a number of shortcomings. An obvious limitation is that lists of factors may be incomplete. Factors listed, such as user involvement, or

top management commitment may not be sufficient for successful implementation. Another problem is that factors may be described or combined together in different and sometimes ill-defined ways. Also the relative importance of factors is usually unclear. Finally, a major weakness is failure to consider interactions between factors and contingency effects - implementation is essentially situation dependent.

Recognition of these shortcomings of the factor approach has focused attention more on implementation as a process, and more specifically, a process of planned organisational change. Thus some writers have drawn parallels between OR and organisation development, particularly where projects rely heavily on the motivation of stakeholders and utilisation of human resources. This process is somewhat different from, and parallel to, the 'OR process' which typically sets out the analytical steps in an OR intervention.

Recently, Walsham (1992) suggested a framework drawn from the work of Pettigrew and others at the University of Warwick which views organisational change as a jointly analytical, educational and political process where important interacting dimensions are the context, content, and process of the change. Significant aspects of context include: stakeholders' perspectives and relationships between those affected by a particular project, the history of existing procedures and systems, informal networks and procedures, and infra-structure needs (eg skills and resources required). The process of change involves the dynamics of interaction between participants in a project and others who are affected by it or who can affect it. Significant aspects of process include power politics and organisational culture.

Other writers have related the implementation process to Lewin's (1947) model of planned change which involves three phases: unfreezing - changing - refreezing. Each phase is concerned with changes in the balance of (psychological) forces in the organisation and the degree to which they restrain or drive change. Unfreezing involves disturbing the equilibrium of the status quo by increasing the balance of driving forces over restraining forces, decreasing restraining forces, or a combination of these. Effective unfreezing generally involves increasing driving forces while managing a reduction in restraining forces; that is, reducing resistance to change. Refreezing involves the systematic replacement of the temporary change-inducing forces with more permanent forces which can maintain the new status quo. Lewin's basic model has been elaborated into a more operational form

by a number of writers, breaking the three phases into more detailed 'steps', and relating issues identified in factor studies to each phase of the change process. Even so, much more work of this kind needs to be done. Lewin's 'force field' model and derivatives can provide a useful framework for considering implementation issues and can prompt important questions. For example, the idea of 'unfreezing' prompts questions about determining the need for change - to what extent is there a consensus about this?, do different stakeholders have different views?, what scale of change should be attempted? Relating items from factor studies to phases in the change process prompts questions about how and why identified factors influence the change process and restraining or driving forces. These mechanisms need to be more fully explored. Elsewhere, (Ward, 1989), I have examined how factors related to model construction can contribute to successful implementation. Simplicity in the form and level of detail in models should take into account contextual factors such as managerial motivation, the time available to consider a problem, the need to involve third parties (in the 'unfreezing phase'), and can help directly with learning (in all three phases). It would be useful to extend this work to other factors identified in factor studies of implementation.

For many years, it has been recognised that among other possible roles, management scientists frequently operate as 'change agents', with the prime purpose of instituting change in order to improve organisational performance. This implies a willingness and capability to assist clients in all aspects of implementation, including managing a reduction in resistance to change. However, practitioners may often not reach the status of change agent, because their work supports a local change agent, the client manager. Practitioner roles are increasingly reduced to that of facilitators or providers of decision support systems. For an external consultant, it can be difficult or even inappropriate to take on the role of change agent, given the implications for compromising the status of local management. Now, given the endemic nature of organisational change, it could be argued that the manager's job, at a given level in the organisation, is increasingly to instigate and manage major changes rather than routinely manage minor operating problems. Under these circumstances, OR practitioners are less obviously a primary source of change management expertise, particularly if their range of projects is specialised. For some practitioners this may be convenient, releasing them from the need for extensive routine post-recommendation implementation support work. For others, it can allow specialisation in the 'front end' of strategic problems, providing assistance in problem diagnosis, issue identification and strategy formulation. Nevertheless, OR practitioners may still be expected to contribute to the change management process where managers have limited time, pilot studies are involved, or where detailed design follows previously accepted broad recommendations.

OR interventions are always at least part of a process of organisational change. If OR is to continue making a useful contribution to the improvement of organisational performance, this should not be forgotten.

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For the interested reader:

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