Abraham B.(Rami) Shani, Richard W. Woodman, William A. Pasmore (eds)

*Research in Organizational Change and Development (Volume 19)*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011. 296pp. Price: £67.95. ISBN: 978-1-7052-022-3

**Reviewed by:** Dr Todd Bridgman, School of Management, Victoria Business School, Victoria University of Wellington.

This is the 19th volume in a long-running and successful series which has showcased the best of research in organizational development (OD). OD originates from the applied behavioural sciences and is a system-level approach to organizational change underpinned by humanistic values which see employees as human beings to be nurtured, rather than resources to be exploited. This presents a much-needed challenge to the dominant form of organizational change practice, manifest in a proliferation of technical ‘solutions’ based on a mechanistic view of organizations, seeing them as a series of interchangeable parts which can ‘reengineered’ and ‘restructured’ in the pursuit of greater efficiency. Each of the contributions to *Research in Organizational Change and Development* reminds us that while organizations are machine-like in many respects, they only function through the coordination of human beings with emotions, thoughts and aspirations. From this perspective, respect for people is not just compatible with high performance, but a precondition.

This volume comprises 10 chapters, each longer than a typical journal article, prefaced by a short introduction from the editors. The editors highlight the diversity of the contributors, although as someone located at the margin (New Zealand), I felt the group was rather homogenous on the geographic dimension, with 11 of the 14 having an affiliation with a US institution (the others were from Israel and Belgium), reflecting OD’s origins. In terms of academic experience there was more diversity, with a good mix of established and emerging scholars. Michael Beer starts the volume by looking back over 20 years of Strategic Fitness Process (SFP), an action-research programme which aims to improve the effectiveness of strategy implementation and the ability of organizations to adapt to change. SFP is based on Beer’s observation that leaders often have incomplete information because low level employees are scared to tell their bosses about problems in the organization, fearing repercussions for their careers. Beer identifies six ‘silent killers’, including a top-down or laissez faire leadership style, poor communication and unclear strategy and values. The SFP intervention fosters “honest, collective and public conversation” (p.2) and enables “truth to speak to power” (p.7). SFP is classic OD – an exercise in social engineering which involves consultants assisting organizations to develop their own capability, rather than prescribing a “magic bullet” solution (p.31). Beer provides empirical evidence to support his assertion that SFP creates a high-trust environment conducive to knowledge sharing.

Later in the volume, Tobias Fredberg, Flemming Norrgren and Rami Shani continue the SFP theme, drawing on a 5 year longitudinal study of a SFP intervention at Ericsson. The authors are critical of stage models for organizational change, which assign leaders the role of creating an awareness of the need for change, implementing it and stabilising the organization’s new, desired state. These models, they argue, fail to acknowledge that in today’s “hypercompetitive” (p.145) world, organizations need to continuously transform themselves. Rather than focus on a series of stages and procedures, organizations need to develop a range of learning mechanisms to make them sufficiently agile. According to Fredberg et al, an organization that has “learned how to learn” eschews a “telling, hierarchical approach”, in favour of one “where there is more of an egalitarian and communicative approach where nonleaders can join in the strategic dialogue” (p.149).

An illustration of the novel thinking that OD has contributed to the organizational change literature is Ethan Bernstein & Frank Barrett’s call for leaders to develop a “jazz mindset” (p.55). They note that successful firms often fail to adapt when faced with exogenous shocks, with strengths and capabilities responsible for past successes creating a “competency trap” (p.57) of rigidities which prevents future adaptation. Bernstein and Barrett argue that jazz bands share strong parallels with today’s postindustrial, postbureaucratic organizations, through their flat hierarchies, dispersed decision-making and fast processing of information. Business leaders, therefore, could learn from jazz players the art of improvisation, which requires a sustainable balance between the drive for novelty and the preservation of much-needed routines.

One of the recurring problems with researching, teaching and practising organizational change is ambiguity around the concept of ‘change’. It can carry so many diverse meanings, the danger it becomes meaningless, reducing the field to a series of simplistic slogans. As Guido Maes and Geert Van Hootegem note in their chapter, change can take many forms, from adaptive to transformative, participative to coercive, and emergent to planned, to mention just a few. Their contribution is to create order out of this chaos by identifying eight dimensions of change: control, scope, frequency, stride, time, tempo, goal and style. Each dimension exists on a continuum, enabling any organizational change to be categorised in detail. This is a valuable contribution, assisting practitioners, researchers and teachers to deepen their analysis.

While I appreciate the humanistic orientation of *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, it is disappointing that a ‘pro-change bias’ (Sturdy & Grey, 2003) that pervades almost all writing on organizational change goes unchallenged. The view that change is good and more is better is either explicit in implied in each of the chapters. It is often supported by the assertion that the world is changing more rapidly than ever before and only those organizations which change with it will survive. In the final chapter, William Pasmore asks why the majority of change efforts fail. Amongst the many reasons he cites are leaders underestimating the need for change, failure to engage employees in authentic participation and inadequate consultant experience or expertise. While all seem valid, the possibility that change interventions might be the cause of organizational problems rather than their solution is a blindspot. Amongst the recipients of change there is evidence of growing cynicism, together with feelings of being overwhelmed by constant change (Abrahamson, 2004; Reichers et al, 1997). Worryingly, this means that any future change initiative, no matter how well designed and implemented is likely to fail, thereby reinforcing these negative attitudes. This raises an uncomfortable challenge to the field of OD, which has been closely tied to the consulting profession since its birth. Organizations might be better off if they changed less, but selling the status quo rather than change is a tough consulting model.

The *Research in Organizational Change and Development* series has, in the past, broken new ground in the OD field, including the first article on appreciative inquiry. Whether anything in Volume 19 will have such an impact remains to be seen, but clearly the series remains able to attract high quality contributors. Its target audience is practically-minded scholars and scholarly-minded practitioners, though I found the chapters rather uneven in style. In addition, the editors made no attempt to draw connections between the chapters. Overall, I felt it would benefit from a stronger editorial hand, both in addressing questions of style and in stronger connections between contributions by way of an expanded introductory chapter.

As someone with an interest in OD, but viewing it from a different political location (critical management studies), I believe the field would benefit from a deeper reflection on its underlying assumptions, especially around the desirability of change. I acknowledge, however, that to a mainstream audience of change researchers and practitioners, OD’s promotion of humanistic values might itself present as a radical challenge to the dominant rationalist, managerialist approach to change. This book will reaffirm the faith of those who put people first in thinking about organizational change. I also recommend it to those who believe that organizational change is best done when it is imposed on recipients from the top-down.

**References:**

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