



Understanding employees' experience of organisational transformation in an academic institution

Leonora Craffert

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Department of Psychology

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Professor J.S. Uys

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	I
SUMMARY	III
OPSOMMING	V
 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT	
1 INTRODUCTION.	1
2 MANAGING CHANGE OR TRANSFORMATION	2
3 CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES	3
4 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY	6
5 ACADEMIC CONTEXT FOR THE EMPIRICAL STUDY	6
6 BACKGROUND TO THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA.	7
7 PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY	8
 CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHOD	
1 INTRODUCTION.	10
2 EPISTEMOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH	10
2.1 Qualitative approach	10
2.2 Epistemological framework.	11
3 RESEARCH STRATEGY	12
3.1 Unit of analysis	13
3.2 Sampling	14
3.3 Data gathering	15
3.4 Process of data coding, analysis and interpretation.	16
4 GENERALISATION, VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY	18
4.1 Reliability	19
4.2 Validity	19
4.3 Generalisation	20
5 CONCLUSION	20
 CHAPTER 3: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION	
1 INTRODUCTION	22
2 SAMPLE REALISATION	22

3	THE FRAMEWORK APPLIED IN THE ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION	22
3.1	Comments on the nature of a transformation process and the management of the process	24
3.2	Clarification of terminology	24
4	SYMPTOMATIC ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION	25
4.1	Participant 1: Drohan (fictitious name)	25
4.2	Participant 2: Stephan (fictitious name)	34
4.3	Participant 3: Soonja (fictitious name)	43
4.4	Participant 4: Anja (fictitious name)	54
4.5	Participant 5: Ute (fictitious name)	64
4.6	Participant 6: Heike (fictitious name)	70
4.7	Participant 7: Leslie (fictitious name)	82
4.8	Participant 8: Delianne (fictitious name)	86
4.9	Participant 9: William (fictitious name)	97
4.10	Participant 10: Pedro (fictitious name)	106
4.11	Participant 11: Robert (fictitious name)	116
5	CONCLUSION	125
 CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA IN AND BETWEEN CATEGORIES		
1	INTRODUCTION	126
2	PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF IDENTIFIED THEMES OR CATEGORIES	126
2.1	Phase 1: The pre-transformation period	127
2.2	Phase 3 : The post-transformation period	137
2.3	Phase 2: The process of transformation	146
2.4	Participation in the process: collaboration and resistance	171
3	CONCLUSION	176
 CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT BASED ON EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES		
1	INTRODUCTION	177
2	TRANSFORMATION AS A PROCESS OF IDENTIFIABLE STAGES AND DIMENSIONS	177
2.1	Stages of a transformation process	177
3	DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROPOSED TRANSFORMATION	182
3.1	Influence of organisation-employee relationship on the development of an understanding of change	182
3.2	The influence of individual histories and characteristics on the development of an understanding of the proposed transformation	183
3.3	Open membership of employees as contributing factor to the development of an understanding of the proposed change	184
3.4	The role of collegial relationships in the development of an understanding of the proposed transformation	185
4	MULTIPLE CONCEPTS OF CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF A WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS	186
4.1	Bridging the gap between the organisational concept of transformation and the various individually held concepts of transformation	188



4.2	The context.	189
5	EXPERIENCES OF THE POST-TRANSFORMATION PERIOD (INCLUDING THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE TRANSFORMATION)	192
5.1	Congruence between the end-state of a transformation and an employee's concept of transformation	193
5.2	Impact of the completed process (desired end-state of the organisation) on employees' personal situation	193
5.3	The role of personal characteristics in facilitating experiences of transformation	194
5.4	Individual constituents, circumstances, conditions and relations that can determine experiences of transformation under specific conditions.	195
6	A MODEL FOR DESCRIBING AND UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES OF A TRANSFORMATION PROCESS	196
6.1	Level of employee participation in the organisation — the vertical axis	196
6.2	Underlying psychological needs — the horizontal axis.	197
6.3	The contextual dimension	202
6.4	Model entailing a context, level of organisational involvement and psychological needs	204
6.5	Conditions for the unlearning of old and relearning of new behaviour	206
6.6	Mitigating factors	208
7	REVISITING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	213
8	THE NATURE OF RESISTANCE	214
9	CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY AND TOPICS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	216
10	CONCLUSION	217
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	218



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Various views on the meaning of transformation 134

Figure 4.2 Communicating the meaning of transformation to employees 135

Figure 4.3 A shared understanding of transformation. 136

Figure 5.1 Stages and dimensions of a transformation process 181

Figure 5.2 Development of individual concepts of transformation 187

Figure 5.3 Context in which transformation is implemented 191

Figure 5.4 Two axes model 203

Figure 5.5 Proposed model for understanding employee experiences of transformation 205

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Demographic information of participants 22

Table 3.2 Framework applied in the analysis of the data 23

Table 4.1 Themes identified by participants as significant issues of the process 127

Table 4.2 Areas in the organisation in need of change identified by participants 129

Table 4.3 Perceptions of the need for change and the decision to change 132

Table 4.4 General experiences of the process and experiences of the nature and extent of the process 139

Table 4.5 Experiences of the current work situation 143

Table 4.6 Experiences of the interpersonal dynamics and the interpersonal relationships 148

Table 4.7 New ideas and new opportunities as a result of the process 154

Table 4.8 Perceptions and experiences of the management of the transformation process. 159

Table 4.9 Introduction of uncertainties 162

Table 4.10 Opportunity for re-assessing personal, product and organisational relevance 164

Table 4.11 Perceptions about the workload 164

Table 4.12 Changing the way of doing things 167

Table 4.13 Perceived outcomes of the process 170

Table 4.14 Increased diversity in the staff and committee profiles 170

Table 4.15 Motivation for participation in the process 173



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SUMMARY

The environment in which organisations operate has become increasingly complex and uncertain due to various factors, such as technological innovations, economic and social restructuring, the changing nature of the workforce and the ecological dilemma. The nature and extent of these environmental changes require organisations to respond by instituting large-scale, fundamental or transformational change. For organisations to maintain the competitive edge in the changing environment, managing change needs to be a core competency in which managers are skilled. However, it seems that the success rate of effective large-scale change is rather moderate. The management perspective dominates the literature on organisational transformation. Given the increasing awareness of people as the most important resource of an organisation and the increased involvement of employees in decisions affecting their work lives, it seems important to explore organisational transformation not only from the managerial perspective but also from an employee perspective. The objective of this study was therefore to explore organisational transformation from the perspective of employees in view of developing a conceptual framework for understanding these experiences.

A qualitative approach with due reference to the role of the context in which human actions, experiences and meanings are situated (contextualism), was applied in exploring the retrospective experiences of employees of an academic institution who had recently gone through transformation. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 voluntary participants from the various departments and ranks. The transcriptions were analysed for each participant individually according to identified themes. This was followed by a comparison of data in and between themes to explore similarities and differences in experiences.

Experienced transformation is multifaceted, consisting of various stages, dimensions and practical outcomes. An employee may agree with the change in paradigm but disagree with the way in which it is done. To understand and deal with the impact of transformation on employees, it is thus critical to differentiate which stage or dimension of the process or decision elicited a particular response as it might require quite different strategies. When transformation is introduced, it happens in the context of a web of existing relationships between employees and the organisation and employees mutually and against a background of histories of experiences involving perceptions of trust, support, honesty and integrity. These relationships and experiences are mitigating factors in employees' experiences and opinions regarding transformation. Employees do not enter a transformation process as clean pages but develop their own meanings of transformation based on their individual histories and characteristics, the nature of their relationships with the organisation and with colleagues and their interaction with the external environment. When a transformation process is started many diverse concepts or meanings of transformation are active. It is thus postulated that employees' experiences and opinions of such a process are influenced by the extent to which their individual concepts of transformation are congruent with the organisation's concept of transformation. A conceptual tool is proposed that explains employees' experience of transformation as depending amongst other things on the way their psychological well-being is affected during the process. This is based on the extent of contextual support experienced for the psychological needs of feeling



competent (self- efficacy), related (being connected to others) and autonomous (having a voice or control). Individual employees do not necessarily experience a particular process and organisational context as equally supportive. Experiences of a process are mitigated by the extent to which employees participate in the process, obtain trustworthy information on the process and their emotions and feelings regarding the process are acknowledged and discussed. Finally, employee experiences of transformation depend also on the impact of the process on them personally and the degree of discrepancy between their expectations of the outcome of the process and the actual outcome of the process.

Keywords

Experience of transformation
Large-scale change
Diverse meanings of transformation
Shared understanding of transformation
Psychological well-being
Competence
Connectedness to others
Perceived control
Prosocial behaviour
Qualitative research

OPSOMMING

Organisasies funksioneer in 'n omgewing wat toenemend kompleks en onseker word as gevolg van tegnologiese innovasie, ekonomiese en sosiale herstrukturering, demografiese verandering van werknemers en die ekologiese dilemma. Ten einde tred te hou met die aard en die omvang van die omgewingsveranderinge moet organisasies grootskaalse of transformasionele verandering aanbring. Om kompetend te bly binne 'n snelveranderende omgewing behoort die bestuur van verandering 'n kritiese vaardigheid van organisasies te wees waarin alle bestuurders gespesialiseer is. Gegewe die toenemende bewuswording dat werknemers die belangrikste bate van 'n organisasie is asook die toenemende betrokkenheid van werknemers in besluite wat hulle persoonlike raak, is dit van belang om transformasie ook vanuit die werknemersperspektief te bestudeer. Die doel van hierdie studie was om ondersoek in te stel na werknemers se belewenis van organisasie transformasie met die oog op die ontwikkeling van 'n konseptuele model om hierdie belewenisse te verstaan.

'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering, waar aandag gegee is aan die konteks waarbinne menslike handelinge, ervarings en betekenis gesitueer is, is aangewend om werknemers van 'n akademiese instelling se retrospektiewe belewenis van 'n onlangs afgelope transformasieproses te bestudeer. Semi-gestruktureerde, in-diepte onderhoude is met 11 werknemers van verskillende departemente en range gevoer. Transkripsies van die onderhoude is eerstens individueel aan die hand van bepaalde geïdentifiseerde temas ontleed. Daarna is die data binne temas en tussen verskillende temas met mekaar vergelyk ten einde ooreenkomste en verskille in ervaringe te bepaal.

Transformasie word beleef as bestaande uit verskillende fases, dimensies en praktiese uitkomst. 'n Werknemer mag met die paradigmaskuif saamstem maar met die wyse waarop dit gedoen of geïmplementeer word, verskil. Dit is gevolglik nodig om die fase of dimensie van die proses te identifiseer wat tot 'n bepaalde reaksie aanleiding gee aangesien dit verskillende hanteringsmeganismes mag verg. Transformasie word in 'n organisasie geïmplementeer binne die konteks van 'n delikate web van bestaande verhoudings tussen werknemers en die organisasie en tussen werknemers onderling. Dit geskied ook teen die agtergrond van 'n geskiedenis van vorige ervarings wat persepsies ten opsigte van vertroue, ondersteuning, eerlikheid en integriteit insluit. Hierdie bestaande verhoudings en ervarings het 'n invloed op werknemers se ervarings en persepsies van transformasie. Wanneer werknemers met transformasie in die werkomgewing gekonfronteer word, ontwikkel hulle 'n eie, unieke begrip of persepsie van wat die voorgestelde transformasie behels op grond van hulle persoonlike geskiedenis en eienskappe, die aard van hulle verhoudings met die organisasie en kollegas en van hulle interaksie met die eksterne omgewing. Die gevolg is dat met die aanvang van sodanige proses, daar verskeie, unieke persepsies van die wat, hoe en hoekom van die voorgestelde transformasie in die organisasie aanwesig is. Die ervarings en opinies van werknemers word dus beïnvloed deur die mate waartoe die individu se persepsie van transformasie met die organisasie se persepsie ooreenstem. 'n Konseptuele raamwerk word voorgestel waarin werknemers se ervarings verduidelik word aan die hand van die mate waartoe hulle psigologiese welsyn deur die proses ondersteun word. Dit is gebaseer op die



mate waarin werknemers ervaar dat die organisasiekonteks aan hulle psigologiese behoeftes aan "self-effektiwiteit", "verbondenheid aan andere" en "waargenome kontrole", ondersteuning verskaf. 'n Organisasiekonteks word nie noodwendig deur alle werknemers as ewe ondersteunend beleef nie. Ervaringe van die proses word verder beïnvloed (of verlig) deur die mate van deelname van werknemers aan die proses, die beskikbaarheid van betroubare inligting en die mate waartoe hulle emosies en gevoelens oor die proses erken en bespreek word. In die laaste instansie kan ervaringe van 'n transformasieproses beïnvloed word deur die mate waarin die werknemers se verwagtinge van die uitkoms van die proses met die werklike uitkoms ooreenstem.

Sleutel terme

Ervaringe van transformasie
Grootskaalse verandering
Uiteenlopende persepsies van transformasie
Gedeelde persepsies van transformasie
Psigologiese welsyn
Self-effektiwiteit
Verbondenheid aan ander
Waargenome kontrole
Pro-sosiale gedrag
Kwalitatiewe navorsing