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An Introduction to the Special Issue of Journal of Enterprise Transformation: Enterprise Change and Continuity

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE OF *JOURNAL OF ENTERPRISE TRANSFORMATION*: ENTERPRISE CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Stan Rifkin, Guest Editor

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Enterprise transformation is usually construed as large-scale change. Is change the opposite of continuity? Is continuity the same as stability? These are important questions, particularly to those seeking to implement enterprise transformation, because they stake out the intellectual territory and inform the questions and challenges that the enterprise must address. Are change and continuity seen as forces that compete for energy and mind-share during transformative processes? Is there a view that change and continuity are required, that they do not really compete, especially if they alternate? These are some of the questions we address in this special issue.

Change and continuity have been at the center of the study of organizations almost since inquiry began. One of the existential questions about organizations is whether their purpose is to help perpetuate stability in the form of static homeostasis or to shake things up in the form of transformation and revolution (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Eisenhardt (2000), in an introduction to a special issue of *Academy of Management Review* on change and pluralism, noted:

Paradox is the simultaneous existence of two inconsistent states, such as between innovation and efficiency, collaboration and competition, or new and old. Rather than compromising between the two in some sort of Goldilocks fantasy, vibrant organizations, groups, and individuals change by simultaneously holding the two states. This duality of coexisting tensions creates an edge of chaos, not a bland [static] halfway point between one extreme and the other. The management of this duality hinges on exploring the tension in a creative way that captures both extremes . . . (p. 703).

On a more prosaic level, the question becomes how to balance the needs of daily operations with the needs for change and transformation. Typically,

three alternatives mark the trajectory along the advice spectrum (e.g., see Weick and Quinn, 1999, which introduces a few of the following terms):

1. Do a little change every day everywhere, intermixed with daily operations (continuous change)
2. Create separate, parallel units, one focused on enterprise change and the other on continuing existing practices; perfect the change process and then apply it more and more (parallel change)
3. Change, stop, stabilize, change, stop, stabilize . . . (episodic change)

Additional evidence for the forces of continuity and change on a theoretical level can be attributed to the best-known American sociologist of the 20th century, Talcott Parsons, and his theory of action. He postulated a Newtonian relation between the forces for change and the forces for continuity (e.g., see Barber and Inkeles, 1971). To survive and thrive, according to Parsons an organization had to import energy in the form of new ideas, set goals for the new state, allocate resources to sponsor the change, and then integrate the new ideas into daily work in accordance with the new resources and rewards. In all of this there is a counterforce he called *latent pattern maintenance* that acts like the analog to the equally and opposite physical force of Newton's third law. In other words, organizations have built-in forces both for and against change. He went on to say that organizations seek a possibly-dynamic equilibrium between these forces.

Van de Ven and Poole (1995), in their comprehensive review of development and change in organizations, describe the tension between change and continuity in greatest detail in terms of dialectical theory. They write, "... the organizational entity exists in a pluralistic world of colliding events, forces, or contradictory values that compete with each other for domination and control" (p. 517).

The state of the organization at any one time, then, is a function of the state of the competition among those forces and can change abruptly and in an unplanned way. We might think about what the recent revolutions in the Middle East say about enterprise transformation and about what looks like stability at all costs meeting an unplanned counterforce for change. The first article in this special issue, "Planned Radical Change in Organizations: Unintended Consequences on Roles and Continuity," by Toms, Kovacs, and Immordino, is a case study using the parallel change method and is about a U.S. state government organization that aimed to transform itself. Two of the three authors were observer-participants in the change and give us an inside view of the planning, execution, replanning, and so forth. They also share their thoughts on looking back afterward to make sense of what they saw and experienced.

The second article, "Sustaining Lean Transformation Through Growth and Positive Organizational Change," by Roth also assumes the parallel

change model and introduces us to a novel, hybrid method of situating enterprise transformation. It is thoughtful combination of (a) positive organizational change methods (e.g., appreciative inquiry) that build on the existing strengths of an organization along with its goal of growth with (b) typical deficit-oriented improvement that uses a conventional feedback loop, such as Plan-Do-Check-Act.

The third article, “Total Interpretive Structural Modeling of Continuity and Change Forces in e-Government,” by Nasim makes no assumption *per se* on the method of change, but rather offers a survey and analysis tool for identifying “change levers” early in the life cycle of transformation. The constructs are divided into those that imply continuity and those that imply change, and the particular taxonomy of continuity and change is taken from Sushil’s (2005) flowing stream model. In principle, the fruits of the use of this tool will help focus the planners of transformation with some fidelity on what is really important according to the particular people surveyed. The tool is demonstrated using a real case study of e-government.

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