Participant Perceptions of Positive and Negative Influences on Large-Scale Change

TERESA JOYCE COVIN
Kennesaw State College

RALPH H. KILMANN
University of Pittsburgh

Individuals who have participated in large-scale change programs were asked to identify issues that have a highly positive impact or a highly negative impact on the change process. Managers, researchers, internal consultants, and external consultants listed over 900 issues that they believe have an impact on the ultimate success of large-scale change programs. Content analysis was utilized to group responses into meaningful categories. These categories of issues as well as differences in the responses of the four groups of individuals surveyed are discussed. The research provides an overview of key issues for consideration in the management of large-scale change efforts.

The past several years have witnessed an increasing number of organizations attempting to deal with the problems and opportunities associated with large-scale organizational change. Increasing competition, technological advancement, and human resource concerns are some of the forces that have focused attention on the need for major organizational change. Scarce resources, time constraints, resistance to change, and limited information regarding practical considerations in the implementation of planned change efforts are but a few of the challenges making the process so difficult to manage.

Several researchers have designed studies to investigate key issues in the planned change process. For example, Burke, Clarke, and Koopman (1984) surveyed internal and external consultants to learn why some organization development efforts succeed and others fail. Kellogg (1984) studied characteristics that distinguish successful and unsuccessful consulting relationships. Porras and Hoffer (1986) sought to identify common behavior changes

in organization development efforts by interviewing leaders in the field of organizational change. Others have analyzed case studies in order to identify issues or characteristics associated with program success (see, for example, Buchanan, 1971; Greiner, 1967).

Although these studies provide critical insights regarding the types of issues that seem to have an impact on the success of planned change efforts, the current literature in this area is limited in some respects. First, studies have typically focused on one type of participant in the change process (e.g., external consultants or researchers) and have ignored the thoughts and perceptions of other key change agents (e.g., managers and internal consultants). This is particularly critical given the likelihood that the perception of change-process issues may be influenced by one's general experience or specific role in a change program.

The potential impact of one's frame of reference on perceptions of organizational issues has been noted by several researchers. For example, Duncan (1974) and Mathias (1983) have identified differences in the attitudes of managers and researchers toward various aspects of management research. Beer (1976) and Bianco (1985) note differences between internal and external consultants in terms of their impact on planned change processes. Blackler and Brown (1980) point to the practical implications of different frames of reference when they suggest that the divergent interests of managers, internal consultants, and researchers contributed to the failure of a major change effort. These writings would suggest that research focusing on only one type of participant in the change process provides a narrow perspective on the types of issues that may or may not have an impact on program success.

Second, research in the area of organization development has focused primarily on change at the individual and small group level. Few attempts have been made to investigate issues that may be associated with the success or failure of large-scale change efforts. Although there is no widely accepted definition of large-scale change, Nadler (1988, p. 67) suggests that such efforts "require changes that encompass the entire organization, have occurred over a number of years, and involve fundamental modifications in ways of thinking about the business, the organization, and how the organization is managed." This description is similar to those offered by Barzak, Smith, and Wilemon (1987) and Ledford, Mohrman, Mohrman, and Lawler (1989) emphasizing major, systemwide changes in organizational subsystems. Consistent with these viewpoints, for the purposes of this research a large-scale change effort was defined as a planned effort designed to improve the long-term performance of an entire organization.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goal of this study was to identify the types of issues that are perceived by participants in planned change efforts to have a highly positive or highly negative impact on the ultimate success of large-scale change efforts. The research attempts to address some of the limitations of the current literature identified above by (a) surveying external consultants, internal consultants, managers, and researchers in order to gain a broad overview of different perspectives and (b) focusing specifically on the types of issues associated with large-scale change efforts. Specifically, the research questions addressed are the following:

1. What types of issues related to the process or content of large-scale change programs are felt by individuals with expertise in this area to have a highly positive or a highly negative impact on the success of such programs?
2. Do the four groups of participants (i.e., external consultants, internal consultants, managers, and researchers) differ in their perceptions of the impact of the particular change-related issues on the success of large-scale change programs?

RESEARCH SAMPLE AND METHODS

The sample for this study was composed of external consultants, internal consultants, managers, and researchers who had attended or requested information about research conferences or seminars related to the topic of planned change from a large northeastern university. Many of the individuals surveyed had participated in research conferences on the topics of managing corporate culture and organizationwide change. Others had either attended or requested information concerning a series of workshops held at locations across the country focusing on various techniques for organizational change (e.g., culture change, team building, management development).

The conferences and workshops were held over a period of three years and brought together a diverse group of individuals, from different organizational and occupational backgrounds, who were interested in increasing the effectiveness of planned change efforts. Because the number of researchers involved in the conferences and workshops was limited (primarily individuals who had submitted papers to or had presented papers at one of the research conferences), recent books and journals related to the topic of

organizational change were examined in order to identify other researchers who might be involved in large-scale change efforts. As a result of this review, an additional 27 researchers were asked to participate in the study.

A multipart questionnaire was mailed to 1,005 individuals (approximately 560 managers, 185 internal consultants, 140 external consultants, and 120 researchers). Those not responding to the first questionnaire received an additional copy of the questionnaire one month after the first mailing. Of the questionnaires mailed, 67 were nondeliverable and 398 were completed and returned, for an overall response rate of 42.3%. Questionnaires were completed by 189 managers, 80 internal consultants, 58 external consultants, and 71 researchers/faculty. A total of 240 individuals (108 managers, 53 internal consultants, 40 external consultants, and 39 researchers/faculty) responded to an open-ended section of the questionnaire that is the focus of this article.

Of the respondents completing this section of the questionnaire, 94% indicated that they had been directly involved in one or more large-scale change programs. The remaining respondents indicated that they had knowledge of but had not been directly involved in such an effort. Of the managers responding, 46 held positions as senior-level managers (positions at a vice-president level or above). The average number of years respondents had spent in their respective occupations was 11, with a range of 35 years. Over 70% of the respondents had attained a master's or doctoral degree. These respondent characteristics are not significantly different ($p < .1$) from those of the larger sample from which this subsample was drawn.

In order to ensure that the programs in which participants had been involved could be considered "large-scale," individuals also responded to a series of structured questions designed to offer a profile of a particular program. All of the cases included in the final analysis described programs that (a) took place in organizations with at least 100 employees, (b) had multiple goals and utilized multiple methods for achieving these goals, and (c) involved an implementation time frame of at least six months (95% of the respondents described programs that had an implementation time frame of over one year). The most common reasons cited for beginning the programs described were anticipated changes in the business environment and increased competition.

Participants responded to two open-ended questions: (a) What issues or actions do you believe have an extremely positive impact on the ultimate success of most large-scale improvement program? and (b) What issues or actions do you believe have an extremely negative impact on the ultimate success of most large-scale improvement programs? In response to these questions, the 240 individuals in the sample listed 482 "positive-impact"

issues and 433 "negative-impact" issues. Individual issues were transcribed verbatim to index cards that were then independently sorted and coded by two researchers with expertise in the area of organization development and change. An initial interrater reliability of .78 was obtained. Those issues over which there was disagreement or uncertainty regarding categorization were jointly discussed by the researchers and sorted accordingly. Chi-square tests were then conducted in order to determine if the participant's primary occupation (i.e., researcher, internal consultant, external consultant, or manager) was related to the likelihood of providing a response in a particular category.

RESULTS

The categories discussed below are those that contained at least 5% of the total responses in either the positive or negative issue categories. In all, 65% (314 issues) of the positive responses are included in the 6 positive categories, and 53% (234) are represented in the 8 negative categories. Example of issues for each of the 14 categories are listed in Appendix A.

POSITIVE-IMPACT ISSUES

Visible management support and commitment. This category is composed of responses that focus on the importance of managerial leadership, commitment, and visible support for the change program. Respondents noted the importance of having responsible, credible leaders to act as role models for other participants. Eighteen percent of the positive responses focused on these issues, suggesting that the respondents felt that top management support and commitment was the most important positive-influence issue.

Preparing for a successful change. This category is concerned with preparing the organization for change through a careful assessment of organizational needs, consideration of the organization's readiness for change, and thoughtful planning based on these issues. A key theme in this category was the importance of creating a shared vision of the future organization. Fifteen percent of the responses were focused on stage-setting issues.

Encouraging employee participation. Eleven percent of the total responses dealt with the issue of employee participation in the change process. Respondents noted the importance of including employees from across the organization in all phases of the planned change process. Study participants suggested many different ways of encouraging participation, including al-

lowing employees greater influence over their work, sharing the ownership and benefits of the program, and using task forces composed of different types of employees.

A high degree of communication. Ten percent of the responses address the issue of communication. Respondents indicated that constant, broad-based communication had a very positive impact on large-scale change programs. Although this category of issues is clearly related to the issue of participation, issues in this category stress the importance of oral and written messages (primarily top-down) in coordinating program goals and activities.

Recognition of a strong business-related need for change. Another type of positive issue identified by respondents was the extent to which employees perceived a definite need for change. The more the program was directly tied to clear and well-understood business needs, the better. Ten percent of the responses noted the importance of this issue.

A reward system that supports necessary changes. Five percent of the responses were concerned with rewarding employees for participating in program activities and achieving program goals. Ensuring that the reward system reflected the new goals of the organization and rewarding employees in a consistent and timely manner were key themes among the responses.

NEGATIVE-IMPACT ISSUES

A lack of management support. Just as respondents noted the positive impact of top management support, many responses focused on the negative ramifications of lack of managerial support. Ten percent of the negative responses focused on the futility of trying to implement planned change without the visible support of managers throughout the organization.

Top managers forcing change. Although managers need to show support for the program, responses suggest that upper-level managers should not try to force changes on an unwilling organization. For example, study participants noted the negative impact of "imposing changes without a stated rationale" and "forcing the program down people's throats." In all, 7% of the negative responses warned against dictating changes without employee input.

Inconsistent actions by key managers. Related to the issue of management support is the degree to which managerial actions are consistent with the new vision of the organization. Responses suggest that managers who have a philosophy of "do as I say, not as I do" have a strong negative impact on the program. Seven percent of the responses categorized were concerned with this theme.

Unrealistic expectations. The responses also reflected a concern about unrealistic assessments of resource needs. Related to the stage-setting category discussed above, 7% of the responses were concerned with the impact of underestimating the amount of time or money necessary to complete the effort successfully. Study participants noted that impatience and a short-term, quick-fix mentality can be devastating for program success.

A lack of meaningful participation. The responses clearly indicated the importance of participation, and the negative impact of indifference or inattention to employee opinions and ideas. Although this is related to the issue of forcing change, a theme evident in this category was the negative impact of abusing or misusing participation, either by using "pretend participatory mechanisms" or by completely ignoring certain organizational groups or levels. Six percent of respondents identified issues in this category.

Poor communication. Six percent of the responses focused on the impact of poor organizational communication. Failure to share information or to inform people adequately of what changes are necessary and why they are necessary were viewed as having a highly negative impact. Secrecy, dishonesty, and the failure to assess dysfunctional rumors were also issues of concern for respondents.

The purpose of the program is not clear. Five percent of the negative responses noted that programs that do not have a clear purpose are likely to fail. Responses in this category focused on the importance of a clear need for change as well as the negative impact of implementing a "canned" program not specifically tailored to the organization.

There is no placement or a misplacement of responsibility. Finally, 5% of the responses focused on the negative impact of not clearly identifying the individuals or groups ultimately responsible for the success of the program. Responses also indicated that responsibility should lie with line management — not with external consultancy resources or staff groups.

DIFFERENCES AMONG THE FOUR GROUPS OF RESPONDENTS

Table 1 shows respondent and response information for the 14 issue categories identified above. Chi-square tests and tests of proportions between observed and expected cell values revealed that the identification of particular issues was not independent of the type of respondent (i.e., managers, researchers, internal consultants, or external consultants) for both the positive and negative issue categories. In other words, certain types of respondents were more likely to identify particular issues as having a positive or negative

TABLE 1
Summary of Issue Categories and
Response Frequencies by Respondent Group

	Managers	Internal Consultants	External Consultants	Researchers	Total
Positive-Impact Issues					
Visible Management					
Support	42	21	16	7	86
Preparing for Change	26*	16	10	18*	70
Encourage Employee					
Participation	29	8	10	4	51
A High Degree of					
Communication	28	10	4*	7	49
Recognition of a Strong					
Business-Related					
Need for Change	14	8	10*	3	35
A Reward System that					
Supports Necessary					
Changes	12	6	5	0*	23
Total Responses	151	69	55	39	314
Total Respondents	108	48	39	37	232
Negative-Impact Issues					
A Lack of Management					
Support	27	8	7	3	45
Top Managers Forcing					
Change	14	6	8	5	33
Inconsistent					
Management Actions	12	11*	1*	6	30
Unrealistic Expectations	18	3	3	5	29
Lack of Meaningful					
Participation	11	6	8*	0*	25
Poor Communication	15	7	2	1	25
Purpose of Program Is					
Not Clear	6*	5	6	7*	24
No Placement or					
Misplacement					
of Responsibility	13	5	1	4	23
Total Responses	116	51	36	31	234
Total Respondents	106	46	32	27	211

*These observed values are significantly different (minimum $p < .1$) from the expected values as determined through the use of chi-square analyses and tests of proportions. Positive issue table chi-square = 26.68 ($df = 15$, $p < .05$); Negative issue table chi-square = 38.74 ($df = 21$, $p < .025$).

impact on large-scale change programs than were other respondents. These findings, as well as possible explanations for the findings, are summarized below.

First, researchers were generally more concerned with the negative impact of not establishing a clear purpose ($p < .05$) and more concerned with the positive impact of preparing for a successful change ($p < .001$). In addition, researchers were less concerned with implementing a reward system consistent with program goals than were other respondents ($p < .1$) and less likely to mention the negative impact of lack of participation on the change process ($p < .1$).

In general, then, researchers seemed to focus more on issues related to preparing the organization for change rather than on actual implementation issues. Carefully setting the stage through planning and establishing a need for some type of intervention is consistent with theoretical organization development models describing how the change process should occur, and one would expect researchers to rely more on such models. The issues concerning participation and reward systems are more difficult to interpret. One possible explanation is that researchers may take participation in the process as a given; that is, adequate preparation results in participation. Researchers may also be more likely to make the assumption that the intrinsic rewards that come with participation are sufficient to motivate employees to become involved in change efforts. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Lawler (1981) has observed that discussions regarding the issue of extrinsic reward systems in organization development efforts have been largely ignored by researchers.

Second, managers were less likely to identify issues related to the positive impact of stage setting ($p < .1$) and were less concerned with the negative impact of not establishing a clear purpose for the program ($p < .05$) than were the other respondents. These findings reflect the divergent concerns of managers and researchers in the sample and can be interpreted in many ways. One possible interpretation is that managers do not feel obligated to explain or demonstrate the rationale for programs they have already decided upon. Alternatively, the lack of concern might suggest that managers are more interested in implementing change than in planning for change. As Mathias (1983) suggests, implementation of a concept or program is critical to a manager's thinking, whereas researchers are often concerned with application of theories or fit with the literature. Either of these interpretations would suggest a blind spot that could affect program outcomes.

Third, the external consultants in the sample were less likely to mention the negative impact of inconsistent management actions ($p < .1$) and the

positive impact of communication ($p < .1$) on the change process and more likely to voice concerns about the negative impact of lack of participation ($p < .05$) and the positive impact of establishing a strong business-related need for change ($p < .1$) than were other respondents. External consultants, then, were quite concerned with employee participation and establishing that a need for change does exist. On the other hand, the external consultants appear to be less concerned with the impact of management role models and poor communication.

Although the findings regarding participation and communication intuitively appear at odds, it may be that the external consultants in the sample view actively involving people in the process as more important than simply keeping people informed. Again, this is consistent with normative models of change, and one would expect external consultants, in many cases, to have academic backgrounds similar to those of researchers. External consultants may also be more sensitive to the issue of participation and the issue of establishing that a need for change does exist because of their broader base of experience and exposure to resistance to change.

Fourth, internal consultants appeared to be more concerned with the negative impact of inconsistent management actions than were other respondents ($p < .05$). This is in direct conflict with the finding that external consultants in the sample were less likely to mention the negative impact of inconsistent management actions. Hunsaker (1985) notes that differences in the attitudes of internal and external consultants are to be expected, given that internal consultants often identify more with the organization's needs and aspirations. Because internal consultants typically have more day-to-day contact with employees and are more familiar with the culture of the organization, they may be more sensitive to and hear more about the types of management behaviors and actions that might detract from a successful effort. Another possible explanation for this finding is that internal consultants may simply have a poor working relationship with line management in many organizations. Bianco (1985) suggests that managers might be slow to recognize the expertise of internal consultants, making it difficult for internal consultants to be "prophets in their own land."

CONCLUSIONS

Participants in this study provided many insights regarding the types of issues that have a positive or negative impact on large-scale change. The importance of visible and consistent top management support, widespread

employee participation, communication regarding program goals and progress, and tying the program to business needs were the dominant issues mentioned by individuals in the sample. Respondents, in general, noted that the presence of these factors would have a highly positive impact, whereas the absence of these factors would have a highly negative impact. Other types of issues that study participants identified as critical to program success, but mentioned less frequently, include carefully preparing the organization for the change process, ensuring that the reward system is consistent with program goals, setting realistic expectations, allowing for voluntary as opposed to forced participation, and making it clear who is responsible for program outcomes.

The research presented here offers further support for other writings seeking to identify key issues in planned change efforts. For example, Beckhard (1988) lists several conditions necessary for change program success, including committed champions of change, a vision of the future, a commitment to maintaining information flows among all parts of the organization, and a conviction that change is necessary. Burke et al. (1984), Ackerman (1982), and Boss and McConkie (1974) note the importance of preparing the organization for change, having the support and involvement of the CEO, and creating realistic expectations. Substantial evidence also exists to support the importance of employee participation in the change process (Beer, 1976; French & Bell, 1984).

Although there is much agreement among the four groups of respondents, the results suggest that the perspective from which an individual views a change process may influence the types of issues he or she views as having an important impact. For example, the external consultants in the sample seemed less concerned with the impact of inconsistent management actions than did other subgroups, whereas the internal consultants were clearly more concerned with this issue than were other subgroups in the sample. In addition, managers in the sample were less concerned with the issue of establishing a clear need for the program than were other subgroups, whereas both researchers and external consultants appeared to be very concerned with this issue.

Given these and other differences, individuals responsible for implementing change should consider the frame of reference of different program participants. In situations in which different types of individuals may influence program decisions, an open discussion of assumptions regarding key issues may highlight individual biases and increase the likelihood of program success. In addition, change agents would be wise to seek advice actively

from individuals who have viewed planned change programs from a different perspective.

The findings presented here point to some interesting dilemmas and challenges for both research and practice. For example, how do top managers avoid the appearance of forcing change upon employees, particularly when time constraints limit the amount of planning and preparation that can take place prior to program initiation? Similarly, how can managers convincingly demonstrate the need for change as well as their commitment to the change — how does an effective role model behave? Finally, how can managers effectively reconcile the need for widespread participation with the fact that diverse groups frequently have different agendas for the organization? Questions such as these offer some interesting possibilities for future research on the topic of large-scale planned change.

APPENDIX A
Positive-Impact Issues

Visible Management Support and Commitment
- Requiring a long-term commitment from upper management.
- Senior management ownership and commitment.
- Middle-management responsible and accountable for results.
- Actions as well as words by upper management.
- Top management must model behaviors and insist others do too.
- Program leadership by top management team, not CEO alone and not staff.
- Having a credible, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable leader.
- Commitment, perseverance, conviction on the part of key players that change is needed.
- Line managers must be in charge, not human resources or consultants.

Preparing for a Successful Change
- Development of a shared vision.
- Developing realistic next steps and schedules.
- An adequate, comprehensive diagnosis before doing anything.
- Making sure adequate resources are available for implementation.
- Education and training of employees to make sure they understand the program.
- Make sure that top people feel the goals are worthwhile.
- Ensuring demands on time created are reasonable and that there is adequate time for implementation.
- Identification of clear and specific roles at all levels.

Encourage Employee Participation
- Early involvement of union and employee representatives.
- Involvement of those that will be affected by the changes.
- Full involvement of supervisors who are trained, motivated, and committed.
- Shared responsibility among all employees and managers for program success.
- Include as many employees as possible in developing the program.
- Promoting innovative input from within as the program evolves.

 — Involving organizational members in leadership roles whose experiences, training, and contacts span the areas to be changed.

A High Degree of Communication
 — Getting key middle managers talking to each other.
 — Communication of success stories from the change.
 — Communication of goals both to employees and customers.
 — Coordination of groups working on different aspects of the program.
 — Maintaining substantial communication with all levels of the organization involved in planning and implementation.
 — Clear objectives positively communicated to all organizational members.
 — Frequent meetings for evaluation of the program.

Recognition of a Strong Business-Related Need for Change
 — Visibly logical changes or activities.
 — Congruency of program with needs of organization and employees.
 — Program must be based on a defined business need.
 — Emphasis on strategic business needs as base of the program.
 — Tying the program directly to desired on-the-job behaviors and results.
 — Both managers and employees must feel there is a real need.
 — Making it a part of the company — not a program.
 — Keeping business issues at the front of the discussion agenda.

A Reward System That Supports Necessary Changes
 — Building a personnel review system to support the changes.
 — Recognition and rewards for participation.
 — Reinforcing employees when they are doing the right thing.
 — Continuous reinforcement of commitment to the process.
 — Rewarding top performers.
 — Employees must understand "what's in it for me."
 — Reward system congruent with the new organization.

Negative-Impact Issues

A Lack of Management Support
 — Lack of personal commitment of the CEO.
 — Lack of broad-based sincere senior-management commitment.
 — Managers who openly do not support the program.
 — Waning management commitment — subsiding visibility, popularity, and energy.
 — Lack of middle-management support and involvement.
 — Management at all levels not buying in.

Top Managers Forcing Change
 — Mandatory participation.
 — Top management goals and objectives.
 — Presenting the program as mandatory or required without selling merits or purpose of the program.
 — A unilateral administrative style by management.
 — Treating people paternalistically.
 — Dictating desired activities from above.
 — Telling behavior — "Do it or else."

Inconsistent Actions by Key Managers
— Management failure to see implications of the program for themselves.
— Lack of role models at the top.
— Failure to revise management systems to be consistent with new ways of operating.
— Promoting people contrary to desired leadership style.
— Top management "do as we say, not as we do" mentality.
— Asserting that something is very important, but then concentrating on other matters.
— Retaining a key top manager who is opposed to the change.
— Publicly stated management commitment and inadequate follow-through.

Unrealistic Expectations
— Giving up too quickly.
— Expect change to happen too fast.
— Looking for a quick fix.
— Underestimating the time and effort to implement well.
— Expecting results with too little time and money.
— Managers raising expectations and failing to follow through.
— Promising more than you can deliver.
— Unrealistic goals or schedules.

A Lack of Meaningful Participation
— Lack of employee understanding of why they are involved.
— Thinking that the CEO alone can transform.
— Lack of involvement of a broad spectrum of persons.
— Indifference to staff ideas and opinions.
— Inattention to employees and their role in making change happen.
— Ignoring lower-level employees.
— Lack of early participation of union/employee representatives.
— Participation and involvement for its own sake.
— Lack of ownership of the process by participants at all levels.

Poor Communication
— Failure to communicate reasons for change.
— Not being honest with all involved.
— Not disclosing information to managers who must implement.
— Lack of effective feedback mechanisms to let management know when behavior is inconsistent.
— Failure to create a climate for open dialogue.
— Too great a time period between meetings/communications.

Purpose of Program Is Not Clear
— Top-down directives in absence of clear need for change.
— Change just for the sake of change or just because a new leader wants things different.
— Applying canned programs without accounting for any uniqueness.
— Acting without a complete diagnosis.
— Working on issues that are nonessential to the success of the business.
— Unlinking of program objectives from business objectives.
— Conducting a revolving door of faddish programs.
— Not having a general acceptance of need.

There Is No Placement or a Misplacement of Responsibility
— Work is delegated to staff or consultants.
— Use of outside consultants when internal resources are available.
— Overrelying on outside consultants for leadership.
— Having no one person in charge of the program.
— Lack of a champion and someone other than executive to inspire.
— Waiting for others to "fix it."
— Someone with no credibility in charge of the program.

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Teresa Joyce Covin is an Assistant Professor of Management in the School of Business at Kennesaw State College in Marietta, Georgia. She received her Ph.D. from the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh in 1987.

Ralph H. Kilmann is a Professor of Business Administration and Director of the Program in Corporate Culture at the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh.