

## Management Focus

# Being Real or Really Being Someone Else? Change, Managers and Emotion Work

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Managers perform unseen yet significant emotion work as part of their role, particularly in a change context. The suppression or expression of emotion by managers is no accident, but influenced by the over-rational portrayal of change processes. Our study uses longitudinal data to explore the types of emotion work performed by managers within different stages of organisational change. We argue that managerial emotion work is characterised by four facets: it involves high strength relationships, is unsupported, unscripted, and unacknowledged. We argue that emotion work is an important part of managerial activity, and should be acknowledged and supported by the organisation.

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how managers perform unseen yet significant emotion work as part of their role, particularly in a change management context. The over-rational portrayal of both change management and managerial activity has obscured the emotional experience of the manager, which is explored here through rich empirical accounts. From the findings of our study we argue that the artificially

demarcated levels of ‘individual’ versus ‘organisational’ activity often used in change management literature are inadequate, particularly in relation to managers who essentially ‘bridge’ these two areas. Our findings have implications for change management as we believe that the success of any change activity depends as much on the management of the transition period as its strategic formulation. Consequently it is vital that the emotion work performed by managers is both acknowledged and supported by the organisation.

Our study forms part of the research carried out by the Change Management Consortium,<sup>1</sup> an academic-practitioner alliance which consists of a group of public and private sector organisations who commission academic research within their own organisations.

Change management is a topic that attracts a vast amount of literature and academic discussion, and its successful implementation is the source of a great deal of debate. However, it can be argued that change management is often represented as a series of processes and activities that need to be implemented in a linear and rational way:

“Business schools seldom teach the human side of change. The human side is not logical, rational or reasonable. It involves the feelings of employees...they are difficult to assess and manage...but it is crucial for them to understand” (Stuart, 1995, 84)

Our study challenges the over simplistic view that change management is a purely rational activity, and explores the ‘emotion work’ associated with managerial roles within a change context. Emotion work is “the act of attempting to change an emotion or feeling so it is appropriate for any given situation” (Bolton, 2005, 50), meaning that emotions are either suppressed or expressed for the benefit of others. We argue that emotion work is fundamentally important for managers, particularly during times of change, as conditions of organisational uncertainty may promote political activity and shifts in power which “can generate fear or anxiety... emotions that signal that their vested interests are being threatened in some way” (Fineman, 2000).

In times of change particularly, the neglect and marginalisation of emotion can have negative consequences for organisations, as illustrated by James and Arroba (1999, 71):

“most organizational change is based on sound rationale, and most managers hope this will be firm enough for people to make the transition. It rarely is. Dealing with change is an emotional process, with its own tasks and stages”

We present data from a case study which focuses primarily on managers, who we define as those who sit above the level of supervisors but below the ‘strategy making’ board level. This paper illustrates how emotion work is intrinsic to carrying out a managerial role at this level, and shows how the demands of performing emotion work are exacerbated and heightened during a period of change, yet still remain relatively invisible. We also show how emotion work is dynamic and varies depending on the wider structural context, and in particular the stage of the organisational change process.

Our data draws on a series of interviews with managers, carried out as part of an in-depth, longitudinal case study of an organisation undergoing major change and the data reflects the three stages of organisational change: mobilise, move and sustain. Research involving longitudinal data in the area of emotion at work is not common, and we argue that this aspect of our study is of great value.

## Change and Transition

Traditional models separate change management into three distinct states: future, present and transition stages (Beckhard and Harris, 1987). Much of the academic and practitioner literature on change focuses on defining the future state as different from the present and on *designing* the programmes which will deliver transition. These two activities are traditionally located at the strategic apex of the organisation. In contrast, this research is concerned with the day to day experiences of the managers who imple-

ment these programmes, whilst simultaneously living the painful process of personal change.

Transition management is arguably dominated by two enduring *organisational* models. One is Lewin’s famous model of the three stages of *organisational* transition: Unfreeze, Move and Refreeze (Lewin, 1958). A more contemporary way of describing these stages is Mobilise, Move and Sustain, thereby discarding the anachronistic notion of organisations ever being refrozen into a steady state of existence (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2003). Mobilising is about creating readiness for change within, Moving is concerned with the actual implementation of change initiatives, and Sustaining is concerned with embedding and integrating the change into everyday behaviour and routines.

The *individual* transition curve is a model which is based on the original research by Kubler-Ross (1997) but adapted and refined by many other management writers (Bridges, 2002; Stuart, 1995; Adams, Hayes and Hobson, 1976). Here the individual path of transition is summarised into three stages: Letting go of the Past; Adapting to Change; and Moving Forward. By definition this work focuses on the psychological process of transition.

However, in the thoughts, feelings, and activities of managers there is no neat separation of these two processes into organisational and personal experiences (see Figure 1). Instead they are intertwined. Managers at this level are held accountable for the delivery of organisational change programmes and performance outcomes whilst simultaneously being expected to take their teams through the psychological process of transitioning, and potentially experiencing the pain of personal change themselves. For example, during a period of redundancy managers are required to be task focussed in their implementation activities, whilst also being engaged in people orientated dilemmas, such as who to ‘let go’, as well as potentially being subjected to the same personal anxieties and insecurities as often their own role is also under review.

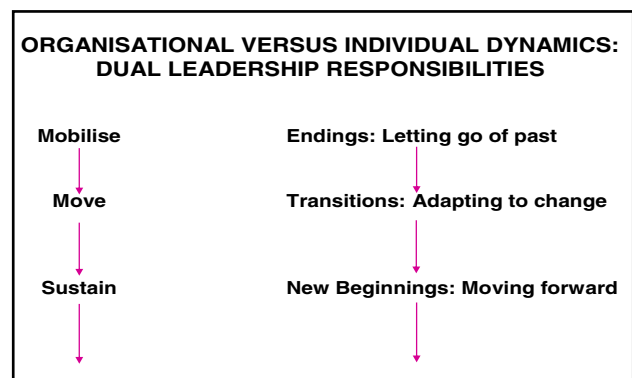


Figure 1 The Duality Experienced by Managers

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