THE CHANGE AGENT ROLES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE SYSTEMS ANALYST

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ABSTRACT

Systems Analysts also tend to operate as Change Agents as they inevitably act to change people's attitudes and win their cooperation. This paper reports on an empirical study of four different change agent roles in relation to two common forms of resistance to change. The study is based on the case of a computer-based project management system implemented within the Australian Development Aid Bureau. The outcome of this investigation should be useful to information systems administrators and to educators and scholars of information management. It also adds to the literature on change management with regard to change agents.

INTRODUCTION

Change is a constant in the contemporary business world. Apart from changes caused by natural disasters, planned change is brought about by people, either rapidly or slowly. Those who bring about change are known as *Change Agents.* Like other reformers, Systems Analysts are change agents by virtue of the net effect due to their effort which must necessarily instigate changes in a field where change is commonplace, and inevitably influences the way organizations operate and function, and, in the end, people's attitude. The main task the Systems Analyst undertakes is to plan and gain acceptance of organizational change which may "not only be incremental adjustments, but also fundamental shifts in the way problems are approached, analyzed and solved" [1, p. 132]. How do Systems Analysts handle this task? Should the Systems Analyst use a carrot? Or a stick? A bit of both? Or is it even that simple?

It is suggested that Systems Analysts might adopt any one, or a mixture, of *Traditional IS Change Agent Model*, *Facilitator Model* or *Advocate Model* [2]. They can also be facilitators, managers and leaders of change in resolving conflict and in taking political action [3]. From the practitioner's corner, the Systems Analysts may assume any one, or a combination, of the four roles: *persuader*, *catalyst*, *confronter* and *imposer* depending on the level of severity of, or resistance to, change [4]. However, while some of these change agent roles [2, 3] tend mostly to be in vague generic terms and provide no clear guide to the pragmatic Systems Analyst, the others [4] appear piece-meal and lacking plausibility.
Thus, it appears that there is a gap in the knowledge with regard to the practicality of the change agent roles. This was the prime motivation for this paper which reports on a case concerning Systems Analyst playing the four change agent roles presented in [4] to handle the social phenomena: *social inertia* and *counter-implementation* [5]. The outcome of this study should be useful to information systems professionals and others who are responsible for formulating information systems project management strategies.

Definition

The six key terms are defined as follows based on [4, 5]:

- Persuader is the role the Analyst attempts to persuade his/her clients to accept the change dictated by company policy and management directive. This is the mildest form of intervention for a system analyst, merely an attempt in helping people change their attitudes and adjust.
- Catalyst is taken by the Analyst in introducing new ideas to the change process, but allowing the clients to determine changes for themselves. The amount of intervention is greater here than in the persuader role, but still the Analyst is acting as a helper.
- Confronter is assumed by the Analyst in opposition to the clients because in the Analyst's best judgment the clients will not achieve satisfactory changes unless they are jolted into a completely different approach. This frequently generates conflict and should be used with care.
- Imposer is played as the Analyst, with authority given by company management, imposes his or her plan for change on the clients. Severe ill feeling and even job reassignments are common when this role is assumed.
- Social inertia is the form of resistance that tends to be taken when changes in an organization take place abruptly and in large steps, so much so that its members feel threatened and un-needed, whether such feelings are real or imaginary.
- Counter-implementation is the form of resistance that most likely occurs when members of an organization discover that outsiders bring in threatening new technologies. The introduction of a payroll system into the accounting office by the IT personnel is a classic example where the manual payroll team takes counter-implementation actions using common tactics such as delay and tokenism.

Outline of the case

The case study aims to highlight how social inertia and counter-implementation that were found to exist at various stages of the new software introduction were handled when the Systems Analyst assumes, at various stages of development, the roles of persuader, catalyst, confronter and imposer. It concerns the introduction of a software package, a computer-based project management system, into a foreign aid agency in the federal government of Australia, the Australian Development Aid Bureau. The Systems Analyst is seen to play a combination of the four roles in addressing the counter-implementation and social inertia that emerge.

HYPOTHESES

H1: In the Analyst's judgment, the change proposed by Management will work. The persuader role should be used; it will bring dissidents into line.

H2: In the Analyst's judgment, Management has difficulty in defining form of the change. The catalyst role should be used; it will help the organization define what it wishes to change.

H3: In the Analyst's judgment, the change proposed by Management is undesirable for the organization. The confronter role should be used; it will force Management to seek problem definitions beyond those already considered.

H4: In the Analyst's judgment, the change proposed by Management will require drastic change to the organization. The imposer role should be used; it will operate surgically on the organization to bring about the change.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Space restrictions do not allow for a full discussion of the results or the limitations of this study. However, the full paper will be provided upon request.

In summary, both social inertia and counter-implementation were found to exist; the Analyst evidently played the roles of persuader, catalyst, confronter and imposer in handling resistance; and the hypotheses were affirmed indicating that the Systems Analyst did play the four change agent roles at the various stages of implementing the project to manage the two forms of resistance to change in the case.

Prior to the Systems Analyst's arrival, the DOs considered introducing the new software package as abrupt, large stride and felt their territory "invaded"; the TOs felt inadequate to conduct the training course due to lack of sufficient guidance on the technical knowledge required; and the SO felt not properly appointed as Project Manager – a situation somewhat similar to Stacy's *closed change* or Ansoff and McDonnell's *environmental turbulence level 1* [3, pp. 27-28]. That the Analyst successfully plays the persuader role testifies H1. The Analyst secured the Assistant Secretary (Finance) as the fixer, a situation relating well to Stacy's *contained change* or Ansoff and McDonnell's *environmental turbulence levels 3 or 4* [3, pp. 27-28]. The catalyst role was obvious and H2 is acceptable. That the computerization exercise was given no budget nor timetable and demanded no accountability was a managerial blunder, a situation closer to Stacy's *contained change* than *open-ended change* and relating well to Ansoff and McDonnell's *environmental turbulence level 4* [3, pp. 27-28]. The Analyst assumes the confronter role, and H3 is affirmed. The Analyst played an imposer role in dealing with the ill-feeling towards the SO's intrusion (an outsider) and the perplexity of benefits over the costs of the project expressed by the Dos, a situation similar to Stacy's *open-ended change* or Ansoff and McDonnell's *environmental turbulence level 4* [3, pp. 27-28]. This confirms H4.

These findings urge Information Managers to attend to the 'soft issues' of systems management establishing that soft skills are just as essential as the hard (technical) skills in the total information management portfolio. This is an important lesson for information systems developers as well as educators. For the former, this lesson will aid in the selection of a good mix of expertise in formulating project teams, and in identifying risk and cost factors in estimating time and other resources. For the latter, this lesson is an impetus to attend to the soft issues that are typically left out of most undergraduate computer science or information systems curricula, or both.

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