

Changing Healthcare Organisations



by David Coghlan and Eilish McAuliffe
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In a national context, the effective management of health services and the delivery of quality systems in healthcare institutions have increased in significance in recent years. The recent Health Strategy (2001) points to the serious challenges facing staff and managers in the health system at present, including difficulties in retaining qualified staff, stressful working conditions, high turnover rates and poor morale. Patients are expecting more of healthcare providers and are demanding higher standards of care and service. Simultaneously, those paying for health services have become more concerned about rising health costs and possible inefficiencies. As a result there is widespread interest in understanding what makes for an effective health service and in unearthing better practices to improve existing approaches to healthcare management and delivery.

Changing Healthcare Organisations addresses the leadership and management of change within the healthcare sector. The book is divided into ten chapters around which key aspects of organisational change are explored. As the title suggests, the book provides an introduction to the core issues in organisation development and change management in healthcare systems and aims to stimulate greater dialogue between researchers, policy makers and healthcare professionals in the critical area of changing healthcare organisations.

Chapter 1 reviews the case for change within the healthcare sector and the challenges inherent in addressing the culture of “deference and inertia” within the current system. The authors emphasise the importance of dealing with both the formal and informal organisation or as they put it, the “two organisational lives” when addressing change in healthcare organisations. Within the chapter, organisation development is presented as an approach to change management with particular relevance to healthcare organisations. The OD approach, which emphasises collaboration and facilitation, helps individuals to “learn to solve their own problems and manage their own change so that they can learn to do so in the future” (2003: 7).

In Chapter 2 the authors define the notion of organisation development (OD), again emphasising the process-based approach where values, social systems, attitudes and feelings are key to understanding and managing the complexities of change. The characteristics of OD are outlined and the context for the emergence of OD is presented. The authors note the importance of “organisational language” and suggest that in most cases change takes place and

evolves out of conversation in firms. The emergence of OD in the Irish healthcare context is also addressed where more emphasis is now placed on participation and consultation in the change process. This has arisen, it is argued, because of the overall greater concern for employees in the system and increasing complexity created as a result of structural change.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of action research emphasising that it has developed to become a "family of approaches each with its own particular emphasis". Examples of such approaches, namely clinical inquiry, appreciative inquiry, reflective practice, action learning and co-operative inquiry, are defined and explained. The authors suggest that OD and action research are intertwined in that both approaches are participative and members engage as participants in soliciting ideas, planning, taking action, reviewing outcomes and learning. This contrasts with more prescriptive approaches, which set out pre-designed steps to achieving necessary changes.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute Part II of the text where frameworks for understanding organisational systems and change are presented. Chapter 4 examines the idea of organisations as systems and distinguishes the "positivist-oriented" approach to organisational change and improvement with that of systems thinking. The key difference it is contended is that the systems perspective ensures that the firm looks inwards as well as outwards in effecting necessary change. The authors usefully draw on the Burke-Litwin model as a systems framework to examine the factors that enable change in organisations. Chapter 5 considers organisational levels – individual, face-face team, interdepartmental and organisational – and the relationships between each level. The central message being organisational change is a multi-level activity given that systemic change requires behavioural change at all four levels.

The final part of the text (Part III) considers organisation development in action. Chapter 6 examines the application of multiple perspectives to data collection given the difficulties involved in researching the many aspects of organisational life. In particular, the authors address the use of data for OD purposes and how the many realities of organisational life need to be considered in OD exercises. The use of multiple methods is emphasised and the notion of evaluation as a form of learning is highlighted.

Chapter 7 addresses large system change and learning in organisations. The chapter opens with a discussion of failed transformation efforts and an examination of large-scale organisational and managerial change in the healthcare context. Drawing from a wide array of literature the authors propose a five-phase change process cycle as a means of enacting large system organisational change. In presenting their "change map", they further develop the earlier discussion of interlevel processes and dynamics, ensuring continuity between the various sections of the text.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine the notion of resistance to change and the leader's role in managing change. Resistance to change is considered at both the individual and group level. Drawing on their earlier discussion of interlevel dynamics, the authors suggest that the "moving of the organisation from the stage

of disconfirming information to a renewed state" comprises movements at the various levels to allow the firm to adapt to external markets. The barriers to change in healthcare are also addressed and the chapter concludes with a focus on resistance as something to be worked with as opposed to something that needs to be overcome. Developing the discussion further, Chapter 9 examines the leadership of change and warns of the dangers of focusing on the leader alone in change efforts propagating the notion of "leader as hero". The writers also allude to the changing images of leadership where traditional emphasis on command and control have given way to approaches based on empowerment, alignment and path-finding. Drawing on their framework for large system change, the authors highlight the leader's role in navigating change and in creating the momentum for learning both during and after the implementation phase.

The final chapter considers the role and function of organisational consultants. The authors consider different consultation models and distinguish between external and internal consultants. The issue of organisational politics is also addressed in this chapter. In particular, the authors emphasise the political nature of OD interventions, arguing the requirement for facilitators to become "political entrepreneurs" in carrying out their role. In their view, this involves both a public performance role of being active in the change process and a backstage role in influencing, negotiating and generally defeating any opposition to planned change.

In the current climate of change and uncertainty in the healthcare sector, there is a requirement for a greater understanding of the processes that give rise to effective large system change in organisations. This text, with its emphasis on organisation development as an approach to planned change, makes an important contribution in that regard. The focus on teams and learning in effecting change is highly relevant to healthcare organisations. Recent research, for example by Professor Mike West at Aston Business School, has revealed a link between good team working, appraisal and reduced patient mortality. In his research examining the link between patient care and people management practices in hospitals, he found that human resource management accounted for 33 per cent of hospital variance in mortality. Hence effective and innovative teams help to reduce patient mortality and increase productivity.

This book will be of value to those undertaking programmes of study in healthcare management and also to healthcare professionals involved in change initiatives. The accessible style and the use of case exhibits and examples also make the text appropriate for use by those engaged in training interventions within the healthcare sector. More generally, the book will appeal to students of change management who will value the innovative style and approach adopted as well as the vast amount of literature sourced to support key arguments presented.

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