No going back: A review of the literature on sustaining organizational change

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Why do some organizational changes persist, while others decay? The sustainability of change can be defined broadly as the process through which new working methods, performance goals and improvement trajectories are maintained for a period appropriate to a given context. However, sustainability has received limited attention, although the concept reflects Lewin's concern with 'refreezing' (Lewin. K. 1951. *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers by Kurt Lewin*, UK edition published 1952, ed. D. Cartwright, London: Tavistock). In an uncertain environment, working practices that fail to adapt are targets for change, and stability has been regarded not as a condition to be achieved, but as a symptom of inertia, a problem to be solved. This paper reviews the emerging literature, seeking to develop a provisional model of the processes influencing change sustainability and decay, as a platform for further research. This review suggests that sustainability is dependent on multiple factors, at different levels of analysis: substantial, individual, managerial, financial, leadership, organizational, cultural, political, processual, contextual and temporal. The relative significance of those factors cannot be determined a priori, raising questions concerning the properties of the sustainability process with regard to different types of change in different contexts.

What's the Problem?

Why do some changes to organization structures, working practices and culture appear to be irreversible, while others decay more or less rapidly? For many organizations, it is a strategic imperative to embed, to have 'stickability', to maintain changes and their contribution to performance. However, evidence suggests that 'initiative decay', where the gains from change are lost when new practices are abandoned, is widespread (Buchanan *et al*. 1999; Doyle *et al*. 2000). The National Health Service (NHS) Modernisation Agency

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(2002, 9) describes this phenomenon as the 'improvement evaporation effect'.

Sustainability implies that new working methods and performance levels persist for a period appropriate to the setting. This issue has attracted limited attention, for at least four reasons. The first concerns the nature and focus of change theories. Episodic change models posit phases of equilibrium, or relative stability, punctuated by periods of adaptation (Tushman and Romanelli 1985). Stability is explained either in terms of unproblematic 'fit' with environment or as 'inertia', the latter implying an absence of appropriate activity, a lack of capability, a failure to pay attention to signals, and thus as an impediment rather than a desired condition. The focus of theoretical attention thus lies predominantly with the next punctuation mark. In both episodic and continuous change perspectives, the 'ideal organization' is one that is capable of ongoing adaptation, where 'tendencies to normalization' are signs of inertia, not desirable outcomes and change agency is defined in terms of moving and redirecting, rather than stabilizing (Weick and Quinn 1999). Similarly, identifying generative mechanisms or 'motors' underpinning change processes, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) do not consider how to switch those motors off.

A second explanation for the relative lack of research in this area is that, while implementation may be studied over relatively brief periods, sustainability requires longitudinal study and resources to which many researchers do not have access. Third, researching change is more interesting than studying stability and, for most managers, the next initiative promises more career value than continuing with established routines. Fourth, in a turbulent external context, organization structures and working practices that remain static are regarded as legitimate targets for change. Sustainability has been widely regarded, therefore, not as a condition to be achieved, but as a problem to be solved.

This paper surveys an emerging literature on change sustainability. The aims are to advance theoretical understanding, and to develop a provisional model that meets three criteria. First, it should articulate the attributes and complexities of the process. Second, it should be capable of explaining a range of outcomes, including sustained change and decay. Third, it should inform further empirical research. The primary audience for this survey, therefore, is researchers concerned with change processes.

Defining Sustainability

A survey of the literature concerning an issue, phenomenon or concept must rely on an agreed definition, as a basis for selecting relevant sources. Recognizing the need for research in this area to guide practice, the NHS Modernisation Agency (2002, 12) defines sustainability as follows:

> Sustainability is when new ways of working and improved outcomes become the norm. Not only have the process and outcome changed, but the thinking and attitudes behind them are fundamentally altered and the systems surrounding them are transformed in support. In other words it has become an integrated or mainstream way of working rather than something 'added on'. As a result, when you look at the process or outcome one year from now or longer, you can see that at a minimum it has not reverted to the old way or old level of performance. Further, it has been able to withstand challenge and variation; it has evolved alongside other changes in the context, and perhaps has actually continued to improve over time.

The concept of sustainability is thus ambiguous. It may concern the stability of work methods, or the consistent achievement of performance goals independent of the methods deployed, and may also apply to the maintenance of a consistent trajectory of performance improvement. Maintaining methods and outcomes suggests a static view. The focus on an improvement trajectory implies a more dynamic perspective. The concept of sustainability may thus acquire different meanings in different contexts, and at different times.

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Determining whether or not changes have been sustained will thus depend on the profile of change under consideration, and involve a combination of observation, objective calculation and subjective judgement.

It may be damaging when change decays rapidly following heavy investment. However, while sustained change may appear to be more beneficial than that which is short lived, sustainability may also be damaging. Working practices and performance targets can be rendered obsolete by changes in the wider organizational or social context. The routinization of current practices may block other potentially more significant developments. A desire to sustain current methods may prevent staff from acquiring new skills and experience, thus reducing morale and damaging performance. It may thus be advantageous to allow some initiatives to decay. The central issue concerns sustainability for periods appropriate in a given context.

Discussion of sustainability must also consider change substance. Miller (1982) distinguishes evolutionary, revolutionary and quantum changes. Stace and Dunphy (1994) distinguish fine tuning, incremental adjustments, modular transformations and corporate transformations. Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) distinguish between shallow, deep and 'paradigm' change. While Pettigrew (1985, 471) notes that complex, long-term, large-scale and risky reorganizations may consolidate opposition, Dawson (1994, 29) argues that the resourcing of, and commitment to, change is dependent not on scale and complexity, but on perceived centrality to organizational performance. The sources reviewed here have focused either on strategic changes or on clusters of relatively minor changes (total quality management, best practice initiatives) which combine to generate systemic organizational change (Ichniowski *et al*. 1996).

Review Methods

The primary information source was a search of the following databases:

- BIDS Ingenta
- Business Source Premier (EBSCO host)
- Emerald
- Proquest
- Social Sciences Citation Index.

To focus this review, five search terms were used: sustainability, sustaining change, sustaining organizational change, sustainability of change and sustainability of organizational change. The literature on organizational change is large and fragmented (Weick and Quinn 1999), but pays limited attention to sustainability. For example, in their review of a decade of literature, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) identify four main themes: change substance, contextual issues, implementation processes and criterion issues or outcomes. Sustainability was not considered as a criterion issue. Components of this extensive literature are thus excluded, not because they are irrelevant, but because they do not focus specifically on sustainability, and their inclusion would render this review impractical with regard to scale. Research into diffusion of innovation, for example, concentrates on adoption processes without exploring subsequent sustainability, and that literature has been comprehensively reviewed (Greenhalgh *et al*. 2004; Leseure *et al*. 2004a,b). Work on receptive contexts (Pettigrew *et al*. 1992) and readiness for change (Armenakis 1993) similarly overlook longer-term sustainability and are not considered here. The search also omitted references to sustaining competitive advantage (e.g. Collins and Porras 1995; focusing on corporate strategy), to long-term change programmes (e.g. Ault *et al*. 1998; focusing on ongoing transformation), and sustainable development (e.g. Dunphy *et al*. 2002; Wilhelmson and Döös 2002; focusing on economic and environmental issues), as those sources do not directly inform issues of sustaining change. Sources mentioning sustainability casually, where no perspective on this theme was developed, were also excluded (e.g. Beer *et al*. 1990; Plant 1995), along with journalistic commentaries. Most accounts of

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sustainability rely on commercial experience, but recognition of this problem in the public sector in general, and healthcare in particular, may shift the balance (Appleby *et al*. 2003; Matrix MHA 2003; Neath 2004). One quasi-journalistic account has thus been included (Reisner 2002), drawn from a large public-sector organization, and developing insights consistent with other commentary. Advice from other researchers identified additional sources and indicated that this review had not omitted obviously relevant material.

Khan *et al*. (2001, 4) define a systematic review of the literature on a topic as, 'a review of the evidence on a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant primary research, and to extract and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review'. Tranfield *et al*. (2003) criticize the lack of rigour in 'narrative' reviews designed to inform management policy and practice, and advocate the systematic principles used in medical research. However, a review of the literature on sustainability cannot claim to be systematic, for at least three reasons.

First, sustainability is not 'a clearly formulated question'. The concept is ambiguous, multidimensional and contingent. Second, the selection of relevant sources is partly judgemental. There is no established research tradition in this area. Different researchers have used different approaches to generate different kinds of evidence. The sources included in this review, adopting similar notions of sustainability, do, however, share concern with the maintenance of major organizational changes. Third, the available commentary is limited, using different perspectives, drawing from different settings and levels of analysis, covering different timescales, and involving theoretical speculation, single qualitative case studies or relatively small samples. A further complication is that reported studies are typically based on changes that differ in nature or substance. Even where interventions carry the same label (such as total quality management), it is often unclear just what has changed in each setting, and it is difficult to infer causality with confidence (Øvretveit and Gustafson 2002).

The seven perspectives covered by this review display a variety of approaches, and are open to a range of criticism. Lewin's (1951) work was based on action research with small groups, which may not readily translate to an organizational level of analysis. Senge *et al*. (1999) rely on management consulting experience and published evidence, rather than on empirical data. Jacobs (2002) also develops a theoretical model, borrowing from an existing perspective, without empirical backing. Turning to recent empirical studies, Kotter (1995) relies on a wide range of case studies of around 100 American organizations, a substantial database which is used to generate a normative approach to change at the expense of theory development. The study by Rimmer *et al*. (1996) concerns the adoption of 'best practices' in 42 Australian manufacturing companies. Dale *et al*. (1997a,b, 1999) develop a sustainability audit tool from a study of total quality management programmes at six British manufacturing companies. The generalization of such narrowly focused studies, concerning in particular Australian manufacturing practices and British total quality programmes, to other cultures, sectors and changes may be questionable. In addition, those studies draw their data mainly from interviews with senior managers, who may offer biased accounts. As a senior manager himself, Reisner (2002) offers an anecdotal account of a stalled transformation in an American public sector organization, presumably relying on informal participant observation. In terms of quality of evidence, the most significant contribution reviewed is Pettigrew's (1985) longitudinal, multi-methods, qualitative case study of four divisions of a British chemicals company, a study which has also been criticized for its managerial bias and is limited to a single organization in one sector.

These studies are comparable only in so far as they share a concern with the sustainability of organizational changes. They are cumulative

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to the degree that they each offer partial perspectives which appear to be broadly consistent with each other. To approach a synthesis, the influences on sustainability which they each identify are categorized as substantial, individual, managerial, financial, leadership, organizational, cultural, political, processual, contextual and temporal, a classification scheme grounded in the contents of the sources reviewed. While the labels and boundaries of those categories may be open to dispute, reclassification is unlikely to alter the conclusion that the process of sustaining change is dependent on multiple factors interacting on different levels of analysis and timeframes.

This synthetic approach appears to confirm theoretical support for a *process* perspective on sustainability, and there seems also to be some consistency concerning the factors that potentially shape that process. Based on those seven perspectives, the resultant model of sustainability is nevertheless speculative.

The Dance of Change

Concern with sustainability dates from Lewin's (1951, 228–229) concept of freezing:

> A change toward a higher level of group performance is frequently short lived; after a 'shot in the arm', group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of a planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective. A successful change therefore includes three aspects: unfreezing (if necessary) the present level L^1, moving to the new level L^2, and freezing group life on the new level. Since any level is determined by a force field, permanency implies that the new force field is made relatively secure against change.

For Lewin, the primary freezing mechanism is 'group decision'. The examples with which he illustrated this include changing the habits of housewives to use fresh instead of evaporated milk, changing baby feeding practices to use more orange juice and cod liver oil, and changing the styles of 'recreational leaders' from autocratic to democratic. Other freezing methods concern the commitment of individuals to decisions in which they have taken part, and the desire to follow group norms, which serve 'to stabilize the individual conduct on the new group level'. Lewin (1951, 233) emphasizes that group decision alone will not guarantee the permanence of change, and that, 'in many cases other factors are probably more important'.

The durability of Lewin's thinking is displayed in the work of Senge *et al*. (1999, 10) who argue that:

> Sustaining any profound change process requires a fundamental shift in thinking. We need to understand the nature of growth processes and how to catalyse them. But we also need to understand the forces and challenges that impede progress, and to develop workable strategies for dealing with these challenges. We need to appreciate 'the dance of change', the inevitable interplay between growth processes and limiting processes.

This reworks Lewin's (1951, 204) concept of the 'force field', in which driving and resisting forces determine whether and to what extent change takes place. As Lewin recommended, Senge and colleagues emphasize a 'focus on understanding the limiting processes' (1999, 8), and identify four:

1. reaching the 'tough' or 'real' problems, having first addressed the 'easy' things, summed up by, 'we've picked all the low hanging fruit'
2. reaching the limit of management commitment, as change affects them
3. reaching the risky 'undiscussable' issues which might lead to conflict
4. lack of systemic thinking, tackling symptoms not problems.

Senge *et al*. (1999, 26–28) and Senge and Kaeufer (2000) thus identify the challenges of sustaining change, and suggest coping strategies. The three main challenges concern fear and anxiety (natural responses which can be

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used as learning opportunities), a concern with performance measurement (which means different things to different stakeholders), and the dangers of innovations acquiring cult status and becoming isolated from the organization. Sustainability is regarded as a stage in an extended and interlinked process which begins with implementation and diffusion, then follows with improvement.

This perspective highlights four categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Individual*: do those involved accept that fear is a natural response and a learning opportunity, and are they committed to group decisions and norms?
- *Managerial*: are managers prepared to tackle the 'difficult' or 'high risk' problems, to accept change to their own behaviour, and to address systematically the underlying causes of problems?
- *Cultural*: does change have 'mainstream' or 'cult' status, and is there a perceived need to go beyond measures and assess progress in meeting the needs of a range of stakeholders?
- *Processual*: is sustainability regarded as a discrete issue, or as one stage in an extended process of implementation, spread, and development?

Anchoring Change

Using case narratives, Kotter (1995) identifies why corporate transformations fail, and suggests why change may not be sustained. Step 7 in his model involves 'consolidating improvements and producing still more change'. Step 8 involves 'institutionalizing new approaches' (p. 61). Error 7 is 'declaring victory too soon' (p. 66). This happens, Kotter argues, when management celebrate 'the first clear performance improvement', an action which kills momentum. Changes must become part of the corporate culture, which he comments is, 'a process that can take five to ten years; new approaches are fragile and subject to regression' (p. 66). Momentum is also lost when, 'the urgency level is not intense enough, the guiding coalition is not powerful enough, and the vision is not clear enough' (p. 66).

Error 8 concerns the failure to 'anchor' cultural change: 'Until new behaviours are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed' (p. 67). Institutionalizing change has two dimensions. The first concerns a demonstration of the links between changes in behaviours and attitudes, and improvements in performance. Kotter argues that people rarely make these links, accurately, for themselves. The second dimension concerns management succession, ensuring that, 'the next generation of management really does personify the new approach' (p. 67). Successors need to continue to champion the changes of their predecessors, or the change effort degrades.

Kotter's perspective identifies five categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Managerial*: are new managers championing the initiatives of their predecessors, or introducing their own ideas?
- *Leadership*: is the vision clear?
- *Cultural*: is there a sense of urgency about change, are new behaviours rooted in social norms and values, and are the links to performance clear?
- *Political*: is the guiding coalition powerful enough to maintain momentum?
- *Temporal*: has time been allowed for change to become part of the culture?

Institutionalizing Change

Jacobs (2002) develops an approach to 'institutionalizing' change, based on a framework from Cummings and Worley (1997). Observing that most change efforts do not persist, and that change should ideally last until goals have been achieved, Jacobs (2002, 178) defines institutionalization as change that has 'relative endurance' and 'staying power over a length of time' or that 'has become part of the ongoing, everyday activities of the organization'.

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Again, sustainability is seen as one element in a complex process. The framework first identifies two sets of factors, concerning the characteristics of the organization and of the intervention. The former include 'congruence' of change with the organization, stability of the social context and trade union agreement. Intervention properties include goal specificity, control mechanisms, the level of the change target, internal support and change champions. These two sets of factors in turn affect institutionalization processes, which include training to establish competence and commitment, meeting reward expectations, the further spread of new ideas, and monitoring and control processes. These processes are interdependent. Training is a prerequisite for competence. Competence and rewards are prerequisites for commitment. Ability to meet role expectations reduces uncertainty and increases acceptance of change. Rewards are a prerequisite for diffusion.

To the extent that institutionalization is effective, the desired outcomes are more likely to be achieved. The framework suggests that failure to sustain arises from inadequate attention to any combination of the organization characteristics, intervention characteristics or institutionalization processes. Thus, to ensure long-term success, institutionalization processes require as much attention as the other parts of the framework, if not more so.

Jacobs' perspective identifies five categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Substantial*: are the changes consistent with and 'fit' the organization?
- *Individual*: are competence, commitment to change and rewards adequate?
- *Leadership*: are goals clear, consistent, stable and challenging?
- *Processual*: does the change have champions, internal support, and monitoring and control mechanisms, and diffusion beyond first implementation?
- *Contextual*: is there social stability and trade union agreement?

Sustaining Best Practice

Rimmer *et al*. (1996) studied 42 Australian firms to establish through management interviews why some organizations adopt and sustain 'best practice', while others do not. 'Best practice' concerned the integration of strategy, flatter team-based structures, new technology, process improvement, measurement and control, people management, external linkages, change leadership and empowerment (p. 191). They conclude that conditions favouring the adoption of best practice include 'the cultural and political climate of the enterprise' (p. 34). They also identify three aspects of 'organizational readiness': fit with competitive strategy, managerial values and internal power distribution, and the values and power of key stakeholders.

Rimmer and colleagues observe that, in a search for catalysts of change, 'the one most commonly singled out was the support of the Chief Executive Officer' (p. 43). However, change was also dependent on, 'a more complex and pluralistic political process involving different stakeholders in the decision to seek best practice' (p. 43). They conclude, therefore, that 'there is scope for many permutations among the political inputs and personal values which interact to stimulate the adoption of best practice. A good balance, however, is not always easy to find' (p. 43). In one case, the CEO provided vision and support, middle managers operationalized plans, external consultants helped where internal expertise was lacking, and union leaders 'opened the doors to workforce involvement and the development of trust' (p. 43). Rimmer and colleagues also note the importance of business networks and employer associations in 'augmenting these political groupings' (p. 44).

They conclude that sustainability is influenced by social convention, observing that, 'Given the importance of its cultural ingredients, we have to rate the chances of success for any particular experiment largely in terms of whether it is swimming with or against the tide of popular opinion within corporate elites

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and society more generally' (p. 216). Similarly, Shortell *et al*. (1998) found that late adopters of quality improvement in healthcare were concerned with external image and credibility, because it was 'the right thing to do'. From a study of two American banks, Fox-Wolfgramm and Boal (1998) conclude that organizational identity and image are stronger forces for sustaining changes than their success.

Rimmer's model identifies four environmental factors influencing sustainability.

- *Capital markets*: long-term investments in human resources tend to be undervalued relative to initiatives with visible impact on costs and profitability. Management is unlikely to sustain any investment not affecting share prices.
- *Corporate governance*: dominant stakeholders can exclude professional management and employees from decision-making, and take the organization culture in other directions.
- *Government policy*: labour relations and legislation can encourage or discourage management–employee partnerships.
- *Institutional infrastructure*: where the provision for public goods such as training is weak, 'free-riding' by competitors is encouraged, and such investment is discouraged.

The balance of costs and benefits is also significant. If costs outweigh benefits, change is likely to be discontinued. Best practice is difficult to value, but costs arise in several areas: consultants, benchmarking travel, equipment, installation downtime, training, customer and competitor surveys, redundancies and management time. There are 'twin peaks' in the typical revenue curve. The first comes during the first two years, from cost reductions from obvious economies, and the 'novelty effect'. However, after 'the easy gains of the first peak', the rate of performance improvement can slow down. 'Recovery to the second peak begins only when several core elements of best practice are implemented effectively' (p. 218). Rimmer *et al*. (1996, 219) conclude that, 'The critical problem for sustainability is winning the time, especially during periods when it is perceived that costs exceed benefits – a period of uncertain duration, when best practice may be discontinued as not cost-effective'.

This perspective identifies seven categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Substantial*: is the change consistent with competitive strategy?
- *Managerial*: is the focus on long-term goals, considering a range of benefits?
- *Cultural*: is the climate receptive, and are changes consistent with management values?
- *Financial*: is the change contributing to key performance measures, and are the perceived benefits over time greater than perceived costs?
- *Political*: does change have the support of dominant stakeholders who involve others in decisions, and are powerful coalitions supported by external networks?
- *Contextual*: is change consistent with social norms and popular opinion, does legislation encourage management–employee partnership, and is there good public training provision?
- *Temporal*: has enough time been allowed to demonstrate benefits beyond initial easy gains?

Sustaining TQM

Dale and colleagues studied factors affecting the sustainability of Total Quality Management (TQM) in manufacturing (Dale *et al*. 1997a,b, 1999; Kemp *et al*. 1997). Sustainability is defined as 'maintaining a process of quality improvement' (Dale *et al*. 1997a, 395). TQM combines several elements: commitment and leadership of the chief executive, planning and organization, quality improvement techniques, education and training, employee involvement, teamwork, performance measurement and feedback, and culture change (Dale *et al*. 1999, 370). This research is based

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on case studies of 12 manufacturing sites across six organizations. The methodology is unclear, as the focus is on the development of an audit tool which, tested at seven sites, identifies five categories of factors affecting the sustainability of TQM.

External and Internal Environment

External factors can be destabilizing, including the behaviour of competitors, and problems in recruiting, developing and retaining skilled employees. Three internal factors are significant, including meeting customer requirements, willingness to invest in new equipment, education and training, and addressing 'the fear factor' or uncertainty about the future, which leads to reactive, short-term decision-making.

Management Style

The first factor in this category is industrial relations; managers and staff must share the same objectives. The transition to 'shared goals' can be problematic, particularly where there is strong unionization and adversarial collective bargaining. The second factor here is management–worker relationships. TQM should lead to high trust, high discretion relationships through empowerment and teamwork, and participation in decision-making. A traditional autocratic management style tends to reinforce a low trust–low discretion climate which is damaging to the project of sustaining TQM.

Policies

These factors concern the extent to which the organization's policies conflict with, or overlap, TQM goals. Human resource policies can encourage individualistic practices, undermining teamwork, for example, through the rewards system. The complexity and transparency of salaries can contribute to perceived discrimination in relation to effort and reward, stifling initiative and commitment. Inconsistency in appraisal systems can have a similar effect, as can discrimination between staff levels on issues such as sickness and leave of absence. Financial policies that encourage short-term decision-making inhibit the pursuit of longer-term goals. Maintenance policies focused on cost reduction, rather than planned maintenance, eventually affect equipment performance. Manufacturing policies which focus on output, rather than on quality and customer satisfaction, can also damage TQM sustainability, having a detrimental effect on training, which comes to be seen as a waste of time, as are improvement team meetings in similar circumstances.

Organization Structure

There are five factors in this category. First, the role of the function responsible for change should be clear. Second, the barriers placed between departments, functions and shifts can be obstacles to teamwork and cross-functional co-operation. These barriers are often a legacy of established hierarchies, which lead to empire building, and a lack of understanding of other sections. Third, communications are significant, particularly methods by which achievements are recognized. Fourth, a high level of dependence on key people in specialized functions can put changes at risk if they leave, so degrees of job flexibility and cover are important. In addition, numerical and task flexibility are important in responding to changing demand and circumstances. Without that flexibility, a system under strain may abandon recent initiatives. Fifth, TQM involves reorganization using a team leader type supervisory structure, recognizing the limitations of a traditional autocratic supervisory role.

Process of Change

This category includes seven dimensions. First is adequacy of the improvement infrastructure in terms of steering committee, facilitators, problem-solving procedures, and confidence in management support; second,

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training in relation to individual and organizational needs; third, effective teams, teamwork and support mechanisms; fourth, procedures 'to counteract problems and abnormalities'; ability of staff to understand procedures; willingness of management to respond to suggestions for improvement; fifth, effectiveness of the quality management system and the need to ensure that the quality manual and procedure owners seek continuous improvements; sixth, a planned approach to applying tools and techniques and to integrate them with routine operations; and finally, the degree of confidence in top management. Confidence is damaged by a lack of success, by an inability to complete projects, by inconsistency between promises and actions, by changes in management, and by conflicting priorities which suggest that improvement is no longer important.

Dale *et al*. (1999, 369) conclude that 8–10 years may be required to embed TQM principles, practices, systems, attitudes, values and culture, reinforcing the view that sustaining organizational change of this complexity can be as problematic as initial implementation, if not more so.

This perspective identifies seven categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Individual*: is fear and uncertainty about the future absent, and are attitudes towards innovation and change welcoming?
- *Managerial*: does management style encourage high-trust, high-discretion relationships, is there team leader style supervision, are managers open to suggestions, and are improvement tools and techniques used in a planned and integrated way?
- *Leadership*: do senior figures enjoy staff confidence owing to their success, consistency and durable priorities?
- *Organizational*: do human resource policies encourage teamwork and commitment, are reward systems transparent and consistent, do staff display high skill, flexibility and responsiveness, does training address individual and organizational needs, do finance policies encourage pursuit of long-term goals, do maintenance policies encourage prevention, do operational policies encourage quality and customer satisfaction, is there an absence of barriers to cross-functional collaboration, are there mechanisms for communicating and recognizing achievements, and are there procedures for monitoring problems?
- *Cultural*: do employees share goals, is continuous improvement a priority, and is teamworking encouraged?
- *Processual*: are responsibilities for change implementation clear, and is there strong improvement infrastructure with steering committee, facilitators, problem solving?
- *Contextual*: is change an appropriate competitive response, meeting customer requirements, and does the market allow recruitment and retention of skilled staff?

Momentum Busters

Reisner (2002) examines the US Postal Service which, during the 1990s, 'transformed itself from the butt of sitcom jokes into a profitable and efficient enterprise' (p. 45). By 2001, however, morale and performance were low, and losses were predicted. Why was the transformation not sustained? Reisner (vice president for strategic planning) blames three 'momentum busters': the indifference of senior managers, who regarded some aspects of strategy as a 'distraction'; resistance from trade unions, whose role and voice had been marginalized; inability to steer funding through a budget process which favoured traditional initiatives over innovations.

Innovation was also stifled by governance constraints. What one competitor, UPS, achieved, the Postal Service could not have initiated without a prior hearing process before the Postal Rate Commission, and major structural changes would have required Congressional sanction. The situation was exacerbated by a weak economy, problems with e-commerce, and terrorist assaults on the American postal service.

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Reisner's (2002, 52) conclusion is optimistic: 'Despite the limits to any transformation effort, accomplishing meaningful change in even the largest, most complex, and tradition-bound of organizations is achievable'. This account is atheoretical, and is not based on systematic data collection. This anecdotal evidence is included here as it meets the criterion of focus, is produced by a senior manager with 'inside knowledge' of a large and complex organization, rather than external academic researchers, and because it reinforces the significance of the contextual, organizational and leadership issues identified by other commentators.

This perspective identifies three categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Leadership*: is there top management commitment and support for change?
- *Organizational*: do budget approval processes welcome innovation, and are decision processes rapid and flexible?
- *Contextual*: is there trade union support, and no external threats or distractions?

Process of Sustainability in Context

The sources reviewed so far appear consistently to advocate processual views of sustainability. Lewin (1951) describes a process of unfreezing, moving and freezing. Senge *et al*. (1999) discuss growth and limiting processes, treating sustainability as a stage in a process of diffusion, implementation and development. Kotter (1995) observes that anchoring change involves a protracted process. Jacobs (2002) regards the institutionalization process as one element in a complex causal chain. Rimmer *et al*. (1996) conclude that sustainability depends on 'swimming with the tide', on 'winning the time' and on a complex pluralistic political process. Dale et al. (1997a,b, 1999) discuss the maintenance of a long-term process of quality improvement, identifying the change process itself as a factor contributing to sustainability. Reisner (2002) argues for the need to maintain momentum over time, in the face of economic, commercial, legislative and political pressures arising in the wider external context.

Processual–contextual perspectives on change derive mainly from the work of Pettigrew (1973, 1985, 1987, 1988), who cautions against looking for single causes and simple explanations. He points to the many related factors, individual, group, organizational, social and political, which influence the nature and outcomes of change. Change is a complex and 'untidy cocktail' of rational decisions, mixed with competing perceptions, stimulated by visionary leadership, spiced with 'power plays' and attempts to recruit support and build coalitions behind ideas. Pettigrew argues that the focus of analysis should lie with the substance and process of change in context, highlighting two related issues. First, this involves paying attention to the flow of events, and not considering change as static or neatly time bound. Second, this involves paying attention to both the local and the wider context of change, and not thinking narrowly in terms of one particular location.

The process of sustaining change in context may thus be a useful focus for analysis. Pettigrew's context has three dimensions. The internal context includes the organization structure and culture which influence patterns of behaviour and attitudes toward change. Those attitudes may be more or less receptive to change, and to sustaining change (Pettigrew *et al*. 1992). The external context includes customer demands, competitor behaviour and economic conditions, which create opportunities and threats to be exploited or addressed. Past and current events and experiences condition current and future thinking. Past history is critical, for two reasons. First, it is easy to forget how previous events have shaped current perceptions and responses, when the focus is on current organizational changes. Second, it is easy to forget continuities, to ignore aspects of the past which have not changed and which are still with us, and which again condition current thinking.

Pettigrew's (1985) seminal study of the chemicals company ICI, exploring change and

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continuity, established the processual perspective in organization studies. In this account, Pettigrew proposes a four-stage model of strategic change. The first two stages involve problem-sensing and developing concern with the status quo, followed by acknowledgement of the problems that need to be tackled. The two final stages concern planning and acting, and 'stabilization'. These stages can be lengthy and iterative and do not necessarily follow that sequence. Pettigrew's evidence suggests that the main triggers of strategic change include a combination of external events and trends, 'insubordinate minorities' who identify problems and mobilize an energetic 'caucus of concern', and senior managerial leadership.

This model relies on the concept of legitimacy for what are variously described as 'dominating ideas', 'frameworks of thought', 'definitions of core issues', 'concepts of reality', 'new rationalities and ideas' and 'strategic frames'. The management task, therefore, concerns 'the way you tell it' or, more accurately, 'the way you *sell* it' to other organization members, to legitimize change proposals in the face of competing ideas, and to gain consent and compliance. Management must 'anchor', or establish legitimacy for, particular interpretations and courses of action, while delegitimizing the views of opponents. It is the persistence of those dominating ideas that ensures the stability of organizational changes. Pettigrew concludes that the management of change is thus equated with 'the management of meaning', with symbolic attempts to establish the credibility of particular definitions of problems and solutions.

Pettigrew observes that, in ICI, continuity was more evident than change. ICI experienced high levels of change activity, from 1960 to 1964, from 1970 to 1972, and from 1980 to 1984. The relatively calm periods in between are described (Pettigrew 1985, 447) as 'occasions for implementing and stabilizing changes'. There appear to be two main threats to sustainability. The first concerns external events prompting another 'insubordinate minority' (often senior management) to challenge existing thinking. The second concerns loss of continuity of leadership. Pettigrew describes how the Agricultural and Petrochemicals Divisions at ICI demonstrated 'regression from change' with the departure of senior managers. These cases, Pettigrew (1995, 454) concludes, 'indicate the importance in managerial terms of strong, persistent, and continuing leadership to create strategic change'. As such threats to sustainability are potentially unavoidable, a more realistic goal is 'periodic stabilization'.

The processual–contextual perspective has been developed by Dawson (1994, 1996, 2003a). His approach 'is based on the assumption that companies continuously move in and out of many different states, often concurrently, during the history of one or a number of organizational change initiatives' (Dawson 2003b, 41). He also argues that, to understand this process, we need to consider the past, present and future context in which the organization functions, external and internal factors, the substance of the change, the tasks, activities, decisions, timing and sequencing of the transition process, political activity within and external to the organization, and the interactions between these sets of issues. A processual perspective thus appears to offer a useful lens through which to examine sustainability, focusing on the flow of events in a wider spatial, temporal and political context.

Considering Pettigrew's (1985) and Dawson's (1994) observations on the significance of change scale and substance, this perspective identifies seven categories of influence on sustainability:

- *Substantial*: will the scale of change consolidate opposition, and is the change perceived central to organizational performance?
- *Managerial*: are management plans and ideas seen as credible and legitimate?
- *Leadership*: is leadership strong and persistent?
- *Political*: have challenges to management been defeated as lacking credibility?

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Table 1. Factors affecting sustainability

Category	Outline definition
Substantial	Perceived centrality, scale, fit with organization
Individual	Commitment, competencies, emotions, expectations
Managerial	Style, approach, preferences, behaviours
Financial	Contribution, balance of costs and benefits
Leadership	Setting vision, values, purpose, goals, challenges
Organizational	Policies, mechanisms, procedures, systems, structures
Cultural	Shared beliefs, perceptions, norms, values, priorities
Political	Stakeholder and coalition power and influence
Processual	Implementation methods, project management structures
Contextual	External conditions, stability, threats, wider social norms
Temporal	Timing, pacing, flow of events

- *Processual*: has a period of relative calm allowed management to stabilize change?
- *Contextual*: does external stability mean no challenges to the status quo?
- *Temporal*: do the timing, sequencing and history of the change process contribute to sustainability?

One Model, Three Criteria

The aim of this review is to develop a tentative model that meets three criteria. First, it should capture the attributes and complexities of the sustainability process. In combination, this review has identified 11 sets of factors affecting sustainability, summarized in Table 1. As indicated previously, while those labels are open to dispute, and those categories may be regarded as overlapping, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the process of sustaining change is dependent on the interplay of multiple factors on different levels of analysis and timeframes.

The second criterion is that the model should explain a range of outcomes, from sustained change to decay. This may be expressed in terms of the presence or absence of the factors identified. Is change consistent with organizational goals? Are individuals committed and competent? Are management ideas and style, respectively, credible and open? Has senior leadership established a clear and consistent vision? And so on; a high 'yes' count predicting sustained change, and a high 'no' count implying decay. Considering the factors in Table 1 at face value, a process dependent on the presence of such a range of issues appears to be highly vulnerable, leading to the conclusion that sustainability is fragile, that decay is more likely (Kotter 1995, 66). However, that tabulation reveals nothing of the relative weightings of those factors. Do policies, mechanisms, procedures, systems and structures have more impact than individual commitment and competencies? Do the shared beliefs, norms and values of the organization culture outweigh stakeholder and coalition power? Or do the visions, goals and challenges set by leadership sweep other obstacles aside? From a processual perspective, the answer is, 'it depends', with the impact of issues determined by the context, internal and external, past and present. While a rapid and politically acrimonious series of top team changes may be critical for one organization, a combination of organizational and individual issues may be of more relevance to sustainability in a setting which lacks that experience. With different organization histories, a management style that elicits

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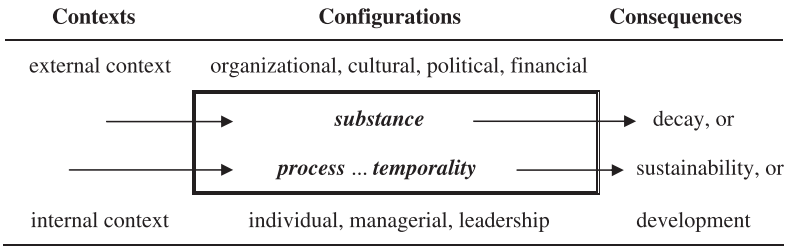

Figure 1. The process of sustainability in context.

enthusiastic commitment in one context could trigger cynicism and resentment in another. The change substance can threaten to upset the balance of power between stakeholders, triggering political behaviour to shift that balance in favour of particular groups. Interactive effects make it more difficult to establish the relative importance of these factors.

The third criterion is that the model should inform empirical research, and a tabulation of factors is but a useful first step in that regard. However, is it possible to speculate on how those factors might relate to sustainability and decay? Figure 1 offers a tentative model, suggesting that outcomes are influenced by configurations of influencing factors in interaction with contextual properties.

Adopting a processual stance, focusing on the substance and process of change in context, this model suggests that three issues are of particular significance: the substance of change, the implementation process, and the temporal dimensions (timing, sequencing, pacing) of that process. With regard to substance, some changes may be central to organizational performance and acceptable to key stakeholders, while others may be regarded as peripheral, or as threatening to vested interests. The implementation process may also contribute to whether change is welcomed and sustained. The timing, sequencing and pacing of events can also be fateful for sustainability. The periods of incremental development between more or less radical transformations may be labelled as periods of 'sustained change' or 'periodic stabilization'. Change which is delayed may not deliver benefits. Change which is rushed may not allow time to adapt, and create initiative fatigue, encouraging decay.

The other factors identified in this review – organizational, cultural, political, individual, managerial, financial and leadership – can be configured and interact in different ways. Some may encourage sustainability and further development (supportive policies, receptive culture, backing of powerbrokers). Others may encourage decay (lack of appropriate skills, autocratic management, absence of goal clarity, perceived costs). It may be assumed that the nature and relative significance of those factors will again depend on attributes of the organizational setting.

The substance, process and timing of change can be influenced by events and developments in the organization's external context, a key dimension of which, in relation to sustainability, concerns degree of turbulence and uncertainty. An unstable external context may jeopardize attempts to stabilize internal arrangements (Ansoff 1997). Change is also affected by the internal context, by past events and by anticipated futures. One key dimension of internal context concerns receptiveness to change, which may be enhanced by a history of success (Pettigrew *et al.* 1992). However, rather than treat context as a stage on which the principal characters play their roles, Fitzgerald *et al.* (2002, 1447) observe that 'context is an actor' in a continuing drama involving multiple and multilayered mutual interactions between external context and internal attributes, evolving over time, the product of joint action, not simply determined by structures and static factor configurations.

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Change sustainability has not been studied from this perspective.

With regard to informing research, this model (a) identifies the range of potential influences, at different levels of analysis, on sustainability and decay, (b) highlights the need to consider the weighting and interaction effects among those factors, (c) emphasizes the significance of contextual and temporal factors, and (d) potentially explains a range of positive and negative outcomes. Clearly, further work is required to refine this model and, in particular, to establish the evolution of configurations of factors and contexts necessary and sufficient to ensure decay, to encourage sustainability or to maintain the continuing development of a change programme. No simple prescription for managing sustainability emerges from this review. However, it seems appropriate to recommend strategies sensitive to context, complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, competing stakeholders and to the range of potential interlocking influences. It is also evident that sustainability depends on a number of externalities, beyond direct management control and manipulation.

Note

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