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Women in management as change agents

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Ariane Berthoin Antal

WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT AS CHANGE AGENTS

1. Why do companies need change agents?

The environment of organizations is characterized by turbulence: social, political, economic, and technological changes are both rapid and significant (DRUCKER 1989; GERKEN 1989). The slogans of „Europe 1992“ and the „opening of the East“ capture but a few of these major changes. Companies have to develop policies and strategies in an interdependent world and in response to multiple stakeholders (FREEMAN 1984; WOOD 1990). Companies need new ideas and new ways of doing things (DAVIS 1987; HANDY 1989; KANTER 1989; NAISBITT & ABURDENE 1985).

2. What are the roles of change agents? Organs of perception, sponsors, champions.

Organizations need to keep in touch with developments in their environment, filter the multiple signals from society, and determine which changes need to be responded to. It is in their interest to identify issues early in their development in order to maximize the leeway for formulating an appropriate response (ACKERMAN & BAUER, 1976). The key sources of information usually drawn on in a more or less organized fashion are the media, politicians, academics, business organizations, and professional associations. Some companies have also installed formal „environmental scanning units“ (BUCHHOLZ, EVANS & WAGLEY 1989; FLEMING 1981).

In contrast to these formal sources and structured approaches, my internationally comparative research on over 60 companies in Britain and Germany showed that the ability of companies to perceive and respond to changes in their environment depends largely on the personal commitment of individual employees at various levels in the organization (BERTHOIN ANTAL, 1991). Besides being „employees“ they are also members of the community, active in local schools, church or environmental groups, shoppers and consumers of the physical environment. As such, they are in a very good position to reflect the changing environmental challenges to business. In practice, however, the employees are one of the most important but underutilized „organs of perception“ for companies.

The next step after identifying an issue in society as relevant for the needs of the company is to develop an appropriate response and obtain organizational support for its implementation. Two kinds of change processes and agents emerged from my research: sponsors and champions. The sponsors are in top management, they bring general themes into the organization and then get people lower in the organization to come up with a concrete response. Champions can be found at a variety of levels in the organizations, they are the ones who develop a specific project and really see it through. An essential finding of the study is that every successful change process needs both sponsors and champions: the examples I found of projects without some form of top management support died for lack of institutional legitimacy, and those themes introduced by top managers but not successfully handed over to operational champions remained at the level of rhetoric. The point of departure depends largely on the scope of change involved. The top-down change process launched by sponsors is essential for major changes, while incremental changes—which are much more

common—can be initiated and carried through primarily by the champions, with varying degrees of support from sponsors higher up in the organization.

Organizations that want to learn need many change agents—many sponsors and many champions. There is yet another, rarer, type of change agent that I found in the most innovative companies in my sample. To my surprise, in these companies the managers I spoke to described themselves as „crazy“. My analysis of their behavior showed, however, that they pursued rational and carefully planned strategies. What they had in common was that they seemed to be working in organizations that valued „crazy ideas“ and created space for them. I will discuss the features of organizational culture that are relevant for learning from change agents below.

3. Why women in management as change agents?

Women are starting to explore their role as potential change agents for several interrelated reasons. First, women are perceived to be different from men. For a number of years, women were encouraged to join the ranks of management and „be one of the boys“, „not rock the boat“ (HENNIG & JARDIM 1976). To the extent that differences between them and their male colleagues in terms of dealing with people, tasks, power, and structures in traditional business organizations were recognized, they were taught to hide or forget them. They were given tips and courses on how to fit in. With time, however, it became recognized that this strategy could not work. No matter how hard they try to imitate men, women are still seen to be different.

Secondly, and probably more importantly, women *are* different. The way women and men are socialized from earliest childhood in society and the different roles traditionally assigned to them in daily life outside of organizations significantly influences them and the way they behave in organizations. Psychological studies show, for example, that whereas men tend to define themselves in terms of separation and distinction from others and their environment, women tend to emphasize connection and interdependence (GILLIGAN 1982). Similarly, the focus on „rights“ in male discourse is mirrored by a logic of „responsibility“ in female discourse. These findings have significant implications for the definition of the role of management, both as it applies to dealing with other employees and with the society within which business operates (MARSHALL 1984). The concepts of „connectedness“ and „responsibility“ developed early in girls and young women are further strengthened in later life by the roles women exercise in society such as caretaking, organizing family life, community involvement. Women therefore represent extremely fine-tuned „organs of perception“ for what is going on in the environment of organizations—if organizations are able to listen.

After years of stifling the concept of „difference“, women in management are starting to become aware of these differences as a positive factor (LODEN 1985). They are experiencing a mismatch between their goals, values, needs and life-styles and those embedded in the culture of most organizations (ASPLUND 1988). They are concerned about the state of the societies in which they live and want their organizations not only to do well, but also to do good (FOSSAN 1989). One phenomenon that is being attributed to the mismatch between dominant organizational cultures and women’s aspirations at work is the significant number of women leaving corporations—often to set up their own businesses. Since the option of entrepreneurship is not to everyone’s taste, however, women are beginning to explore their potential as change agents. Furthermore, both managers and their advisors are doing the same, highlighting the parallels between the management skills needed and the skills often ascribed to women (KANTER 1983, NAISBITT & ABURDENE 1985).

4. Strategies and enabling cultures for women as change agents

In order to understand the strategies women can use as change agents, we need to look at the concepts of „sponsors“ and „champions“ again, and at the cultural factors that promote or hinder organizational learning.

The reality of organizational power structures today is that few women can play the role of „sponsor“ for major organizational change, since there are so few women at the top of organizations. Therefore, until this distribution changes, women need to look at the variety of ways to play the role of „champions“ for the ideas they believe in. The example of the successful innovation processes I observed in organizations are well-suited to women's approaches to exerting influence. Rather than attempting to wield power in the status-based and competitive way women are said to feel uncomfortable with (MILLER 1976; BERNADONI & WERNER 1985), the champions I found emphasized the importance of sharing information and ideas. They were „inclusive“ and „empowering“ in their way of generating commitment to their idea for change. They listened to others and sought to understand how their idea could help solve the other person's problem. They generated support for their idea by „selling“ it up, down, and across the organization. They „planned for success“ (rather than learning from failures) by preparing the details of the projects extremely carefully and thinking through counterarguments and possible problems in advance. While they were clearly willing to shoulder the responsibility for the project and to see it through, they emphasized the importance of „sharing ownership“ of the project for its successful implementation.

The ability of organizations to perceive organizational changes and develop responses is significantly influenced by their culture i.e., the shared values, world views, and norms that shape the behavior considered desirable in the company (BERTHOIN ANTAL 1985; DIERKES 1988; GAGLIARDI 1986). No matter how committed individual change agents are, they cannot be effective in organizational cultures that are not receptive to learning through their members. The preconditions for companies to benefit from this resource need to be embedded in the organizational culture. First, the world view of the organization must include an appreciation of the concept of „permeable boundaries“ between business and society. Companies that promote a world view likening themselves to an island or a fortress in a society risk not perceiving changes in society until there is very little room left to design an appropriate response (DYLLICK 1989). Second, in the innovative companies I studied a shared behavioral norm was the support of networking. Participation in external networks was seen as a way of hearing about emerging issues, sharing experiences with other organizations about how to deal with them, and possibly developing cooperative responses. In such cultures, limiting contacts and restricting job definitions was considered detrimental to organizational learning. Third, cultures that foster an ability to listen to employees and the willingness to give them the scope („Freiraum“) to introduce ideas they consider important are in a better position to adapt incrementally to changes in society. Organizations whose cultures define thinking and decision making as the exclusive prerogative of top management and assume that other members of the organization are capable of little more than receiving and executing orders may be able to function in a stable environment, but are too rigid and „deaf“ to be able to respond to the changes underway around them.

To summarize: women can be effective change agents in organizational cultures that are already innovation-prone. There are unfortunately many companies that are too set in their ways to learn and are therefore condemned to sharing the fate of dinosaurs: die out. How quickly and often this occurs is documented by statistics: A third of the companies listed among the Fortune 500 in 1970 no longer

existed in 1983, a mere 13 years later. Until women have enough power in top management positions to achieve revolutionary changes in organizations whose cultures are not innovative, I do not recommend that they waste their energies in such companies. Instead, they should go to organizations that have already shown signs of ability to learn, or even a love of learning. Incidentally, such cultures are likely to be open to attracting women into management in the first place. Furthermore, the behavioral norms and values central to organizational cultures that have learned how to learn tend to be compatible with the features characteristic of women's socialization in western industrialized societies. There is plenty for women to do as change agents in such organizations, in every department. For finance just as much as personnel, and marketing as much as training need sensitive organs of perception and active champions. Even the most innovative companies in our societies have a long way to go before they can really achieve the dual goals of „doing good“ while „doing well“.

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