

This is a draft chapter taken from my 2021 Notebook

Did I really claim that organizational change tends to fail?

2. A chronology of organizational change failure framing

Introduction

Writing the first two notebooks informs this third and final notebook, as well as, my other publications and my organizational change workshop experiences. It was interesting to revisit the first two notebooks written eighteen months ago to see how my thinking evolved. It was interesting to review my 2011 paper to check my sanity as much as anything. However, my ambition was always to interest others. The thesis which unifies these three notebooks is that change management had to fail if belief in change leadership was to succeed.

I fear that despite my wealth of sources, frustratingly, I failed to convey my unifying thesis to others convincingly. We do need competing narratives of organizational change failure if knowledge is truly going to advance (please see the opening sentence of the previous chapter). The convergent consensus of the natural sciences is less appropriate for the social sciences. The divergent dissensus of competing narratives and diverse voices should be permissible. We certainly need a counter-narrative to organizational change tends to fail generalizations featured in the *Human Relations Special Issue* (please see *Chapters Three and Four*).

Over the past decade, my scholarship has focussed on organizational change failure, as well as change leadership. I am mindful that I may be conflating two independent debates; most of my peers do engage with these debates independently. More traditional academics might seek research evidence about organizational change failure or change leadership. The idea that they are part of the same frame is innovative, yet probably difficult for most readers to embrace. My odd quest, grounded in intellectual curiosity, has been driven by questions such as:

1. Where did organizational change tends to fail framing originate?
2. Why was organizational change depicted as tending to fail?
3. Why was there a shift from change management to change leadership?
4. Was the shift from change management to change leadership evidence-based/research-informed?

These are the type of intellectual curiosity questions which engaged me over the past decade. In the first notebook, I noted my answers to the first two questions. In the second notebook, I noted my answers to the third and fourth questions.

I had been answering specific questions through conference papers and journal submissions. However, answers in isolation to the questions which captivated me, often probably appeared nonsensical to others. It is why I have moved to the slightly pretentious sounding 'unifying thesis' for these notebooks and the rather pathetic act of notebook self-publication. The

interconnection of answers to all four questions was my small epiphany. My unifying thesis has increasingly become my mental model, the lens through which I view these debates. It is how I now consider all aspects of these debates, even if these debates appear very independent to almost everyone else.

In writing these notebooks, I have finally managed to satisfy my intellectual curiosity. That result was the good news, and the bad news was that I have not been able to convince anyone else. I knew that I needed to recap some of the coverage in the first two notebooks as it informs later chapters in this notebook. I wanted this recap to be creative, rather than a summary of what I had already said.

I had a realization that my thinking in answering the four questions had been chronological stretching from 1977 to 2021. These 44 years covered a considerable time horizon, over half of my life, though thankfully I have only focussed on these debates for about a quarter of that time. This time horizon offers a very different perspective on the organizational change failure debate. The *Human Relations Special Issue* Guest Editors claimed in their editorial to be interested in the dynamic character of the emergence of organizational change failure. If you go back to the origins of organizational change tending to fail framing, everything becomes much clearer (or at least it did for me).

Many would argue that the exclusively research-informed and evidence-based coverage featured in the *Special Issue* is very up to date and very trustworthy. I would agree, but I would say, history and importantly, writing history plays a role in any forward-looking debate. A function that for this reader, the *Special Issue* fails to acknowledge. The organizational change tends to fail narrative emerged over time, hence the Guest Editors initially attributing organizational change as tending to fail, in their 2018 *Call for Papers*, to a 2000 book. This chronological aspect becomes undeniable for anyone interested in the organizational change failure debate. However, the motivations embedded in this chronology and the implications for understanding organizational change failure understanding are currently absent from this debate. In this chapter, I will attempt to persuade you that acknowledging a critical chronology of organizational change failure framing is one of the integral yet missing dimensions of the current organizational change tends to fail frame favoured by so many academics.

Chronology sources

As acknowledged in the introduction, writing this notebook draws upon multiple organizational change workshop experiences, as well as, academic reading and writing over the lifespan of a career. In these notebooks, I am now looking to close down these debates for myself, whilst hopefully opening up these debates for others to explore. Many of the insights arose out of the process of literature reviewing for *The Leadership of Organizational Change*. The book was intentionally scholarly for inclusion in an academic series entitled *Understanding Organizational Change* published by Routledge. I was interested primarily, in why a shift from change management to change leadership had taken place, but also the motivations and drivers behind this shift. These awkward critical questions would be difficult to address or even ask through a more formal systematic review. However, most academics and academic gatekeepers (Editors and reviewers) would choose a systematic review as the most legitimate/publishable path.

Probably the easiest way to convey the path which I chose is by an academic exemplar of precisely the opposite approach to my path. In reviewing the Special Issue contributions (please see *Chapter Three*) I was alerted to a paper *Leaders' impact on organizational change: Bridging theoretical*

and methodological chasms. Shaul Oreg and Yair Berson authored this paper, published in the *Academy of Management Annals* in 2019. They were interested in very similar subject matter to me. They had their paper published, and they have been very successful in gaining publications. I have not been successful. I am not selling this very well, but notions of neutral/objective academic studies have been problematic for myself. I am reticent to unpack all of this here, in the *Appendix* I share a conference paper in which I argue for assumption testing, rather than gap filling. I am in the minority, although thankfully the Scandinavians lead calls for assumption challenging, so I am in with the ‘cool’ academics, in every sense of the word.

Oreg and Berson, in their introduction, acknowledge practical accounts of leading organizational change, but they then follow the academic best practice of primarily reviewing empirical literature. They can fill a gap, which they openly acknowledge, in what we know about leaders influence on organizational change. They code their literature in a very systematic manner, they develop a thoughtful model, and they suggest the need for further research. If any early career researcher ever reads this, PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE follow the Oreg and Berson path. If you rigorously follow the academic best practices exemplified by them you may end up being happy and successful, you certainly will not end your career writing self-published notebooks.

I followed the opposite path, because despite Oreg and Berson’s empirical insights, in looking exclusively at the empirical literature, they miss the practitioner orientated framing of change leadership and organizational change failure. These are debates focussed on change practices. Over decades ideal types, such as let’s lead organizational change, have come to be perceived as empirical realities. Systematic reviewers then invest vast amounts of time and energy, searching for evidence to confirm such ‘empirical realities’ and avoiding challenging the practitioner orientated assumption that leaders have an impact on organizational change. If you focus exclusively on the empirical literature, you inevitably miss the practitioner orientated framing of these debates. The *Special Issue* featured in this notebook was subtitled *Framing the process of failing*. I have been fascinated by the framing of the process of failing in recent years. However, quantifying and coding research findings in prestigious academic journals, would not and could not address, framing in practitioner magazines such as *Harvard Business Review* which took place decades ago.

The following critical chronology is informed by my reading when writing *The Leadership of Organizational Change*. In the second chapter of that book, I extensively reviewed the empirical literature, but today it is the chronology featured in the next section that I favour. It features publications which would be outside the scope of a systematic review. It is essential to acknowledge that you could develop a very different chronology based upon empirical papers, such as those, highlighted by Oreg and Berson. However, narrative approaches to the literature are favoured more by critical scholars than systematic scholars. Multiple histories can be written and should be acknowledged, even if systematic reviewers and evidence-based academics are openly hostile to competing accounts of history.

Writing these notes forces me to reflect on the choices that I made and the paths that I took over the course of a career. Many of my life choices and ways followed with the benefit of hindsight would have been very different. It sounds sentimental, but the path I took studying this framing of organizational change failure was the most meaningful and satisfactory, even with the benefit of the hindsight I have today. I want to share my favoured chronology because it speaks to *Framing the process of failing*. It is a very different narrative to empirically driven stories most academics embrace, you can and will draw your conclusions from what follows.

Thinking chronologically about organizational change failure framing

My original intention was not to weigh down these notebooks with literature references. However, in this instance, literature references are integral to explaining why and how they framed organizational change failure in a particular way. I have corralled relevant references into four tables and included the full references in the table, rather than including them as endnote references.

I was intrigued by reading *The Transformational Leader* as it was organized into acts similar to a play. I have used this device in this chronology to depict four acts informing the framing of organizational change failure. It seems to work in conveying moments in time, but the boundaries between acts are inevitably artificial. I set myself the goal of being succinct in this chronology as a whole notebook could be organized around this chronology (please see the previous notebooks for a fuller discussion of some of the references). I concede that there are limitations in striving for succinctness. Also, I acknowledge that this account of history is exceptionally selective (for a fuller discussion of historiography and organizational change, please see my Routledge textbook).

Year	Author/s	Title	Publication Details
1977	Zaleznik, A.	Managers and leaders: Are they different?	<i>Harvard Business Review</i> 15(3): 67- 84.
1980	Hayes, R.H. and Abernathy, W.J.	Managing our way to economic decline	<i>Harvard Business Review</i> 58(4): 67-77.
1985	Bennis, W. and Nanus, B.	<i>Leadership: The Strategies for Taking Charge</i>	New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
1986	Tichy, N.M. and Devanna, M.A.	<i>The Transformational Leader</i>	New York: Wiley.
1988	Kotter, J.P.	<i>The Leadership Factor</i>	New York: Free Press.
1990	Kotter, J.P.	<i>A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management</i>	New York: Free Press.
Act One - Problematizing management and celebrating leadership			

Act One begins with management problematized and organizational leadership celebrated. The shift from managing to leading is integral to fully understand the framing of organizational change as tending to fail in Acts Two and Four. A newspaper advertisement (reproduced by Bennis and Nanus, 1985) helped in understanding the framing of organizational change failure. The advertisement appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* in the late 1970s and early 1980s proclaiming very publicly 'let's get rid of management'. Harry Gray (CEO of United Technologies) authored and funded this proclamation. He was not alone in making such proclamations speaking for many American corporate leaders who vocally wanted to get rid of management.

The dilemma at a time when management was so deeply embedded, was how do you corrode the authority of management and construct the authority of leadership? In 1977, a *Harvard Business Review* practitioner magazine article asked an innocent question - *Managers and leaders: Are they different?* This article which explicitly privileged leadership over management, was neither based on a literature review nor empirical work. The author even admitted it was a working paper

written for a leadership conference. The American billionaire J.D. Rockefeller was openly acknowledged in the article as requesting the shift from management to leadership.

In the late seventies and early eighties, the decline of American businesses was genuine and very troubling. Another *Harvard Business Review* article in 1980 entitled *Managing our way to economic decline*, provocatively asked - what exactly have American managers been doing wrong? In this historical context, the search for an organizational failure explanation was understandable. *The Transformational Leader* is not integral to Act One. However, it is a rare instance of the application of this label to leading organizational change and transformation. Transformational leadership is concerned with the transformation of subordinates but is often erroneously referred to in leading organizational change and transformation debates (please see *Chapter Five* in *Notebook Two*). The beginning of *The Transformational Leader* refers to the gathering storm, which evocatively captures the anxieties American businesses were experiencing.

Towards the end of the eighties, a *Harvard Business School* professor gave considerable impetus to leadership through his books *The Leadership Factor* and *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management*. *The Leadership Factor* commences with an American billionaire H.R. Perot explicitly requesting a shift from management to leadership. An ideal type need for organizational leadership was perceived as an empirical reality (please see Spector, 2016). Academics more recently have retrospectively tried to identify empirical evidence in support of change leadership without acknowledging they are studying an ideal type. Still, this debate is for another day, as the curtain closes on Act One.

Year	Author/s	Title	Publication Details
1990	Beer, M, Eisenstat, R.A. and Spector, B.	<i>Why change programs don't produce change.</i>	<i>Harvard Business Review</i> 68 (6):159-166
1995	Kotter, J.P.	<i>Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail</i>	<i>Harvard Business Review</i> 73 (2): 259-67.
1996	Kotter, J. P.	<i>Leading Change</i>	Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
2000	Beer, M. and Nohria, N.	<i>Cracking the code of change</i>	<i>Harvard Business Review</i> 78(3): 133-141.
2000	Beer, M. and Nohria, N.	<i>Breaking the Code of Change</i>	Boston: Harvard Business Press.
Act Two - Organizational change as a code which has to be broken			

Act One closed with an ideal type requirement for leadership, perceived as an empirical reality. Management became the favoured explanation for America's economic decline; perceived as an impediment to leadership. I hope that you followed Act One because it has implications for the framing of a tendency for organizational change to fail, which makes its first appearance in Act Two.

In Act Two, the stage set shifts from the big picture of an American economy in decline to the practicalities of organizational change and transformation. Again, there is an emphasis on problematizing current organizational practices. In *Harvard Business Review*, rhetorical questions asked *Why change programs don't produce change* and *Why transformation efforts fail?*

Yes, on a surface level programmes were not producing change and transformation efforts were failing. Still, it wasn't that organizational change was tending to fail. It was managers as agents of change they depicted as failing (please see Act One). These articles suggested managing change as the problem and leading change as the solution. The solution is invariably absent from organizational change failure frames. Notably, the implication was that a shift to leading change would result in organizational change tending to succeed. If anyone is unconvinced ask why at this time did we witness a change from managing change to leading change if organizational change did tend to fail?

In Act Two, organizational change becomes a code which has to be broken/cracked. There is explicit and implicit encouragement to regard organizational change as requiring an organizational solution. Look to famous accounts of organizational change failure, such as *Cracking the code of change*. Management was depicted as failing and leading change as the solution to stop transformation efforts failing (please see *Notebook One* for further discussion). The framing of change management as failing and change leadership as succeeding has been influential for the past two decades. Although there is very little empirical evidence to support current belief in change leadership, this was the framing American corporations had requested in Act One.

Even though the organizational change tends to fail framing surfaced in Act Two, this was not the objective of this frame. Organizational change tending to fail would have undermined belief in leading change which was the goal of shifting from managing change to leading change. *Harvard Business School* was instrumental in the framing reported here, organizational change and transformation interventions were a lucrative income stream for Harvard and other business schools. Framing organizational change as tending to fail would not have made good business sense. Managing change was framed as failing. They were offering the world leading change, which made perfect business sense and created a new income stream.

Academics became understandably suspicious of practitioner orientated literature. In parallel, they rightly trusted the validity and reliability of their empirical literature. However, the downside of this privileging was to miss the subtle and practical nature of the organizational change failure frame. Unfortunately, the repetition of organizational change tends to fail increasingly embedded this frame in business schools. Potential insights from studying practitioner orientated literature were bracketed as outside this frame even though they were integral to understanding this frame. Eventually, the frame encouraged a *Special Issue* of a prestigious journal, but that will have to wait until Act Four.

Year	Author/s	Title	Publication Details
2011	Hughes, M.	Do 70 per cent of all organizational change initiatives really fail?	<i>Journal of Change Management</i> , 11(4): 451-464.
2016	Hughes, M.	Leading changes: Why transformation explanations fail	<i>Leadership</i> , 12(4): 449-469.
Act Three – The emperor has no clothes			

In Act Three a single unexceptional academic, shuffles onto the stage, blinking in the bright beam of a spotlight. He lacks the status and the expensive suits of the actors in Act Two. There are shouts from the audience to get off the stage. One audience member even refers to this grubby little man as a 'Taliban Scholar'. For a time, it gets quite nasty as Mr unexceptional

disrespectfully claims that the emperor has no clothes. Respected academics shout ‘get off our stage’!

I did not have the frame featured in Act Two in mind when I wrote these two papers, and it was never my intention to become the stalker of *Harvard Business School* professors. It was far more straightforward, to myself, the emperor had no clothes. It was blindingly obvious, but why could nobody else see this? Why were some of our brightest professors oblivious to the organizational change tends to fail nonsense and seduced by notions of successfully leading change through following eight steps? If you want me to add evidence to this part of the narrative, have a look at the respected professors referencing these *Harvard Business School* professors and still referencing them. It is not my job to name and shame them, though very tempting.

In both instances, I became suspicious of what most business schools were teaching and still sadly teach. I began to wonder if 70% of organizational change initiatives really failed. Remember Spector’s (2016) notion of an ideal type becoming an empirical reality. I suspected this was what was happening here. I searched for evidence looking at five of the most famous instances and found a complete absence of evidence in support of claims that organizational change tended to fail. In the second half of my paper, I tried my best to explain how challenging it was going to be to evaluate organizational change. In many ways, *Leading changes: Why transformation explanations fail*, mirrored the earlier paper, I had just become more shouty! I devote a chapter to the 2011 paper in *Notebook One* and a chapter in *Notebook Two* to the 2016 paper. I will desist from further self-referencing here as the light of the spotlight is beginning to play havoc with my make-up.

Today, my *Harvard Business School* targets seem like soft targets, but at the time of writing, I was challenging a very powerful and influential orthodoxy. *Harvard Business School* has considerable status, and I have minimal status, but I do have tenacity. I had hoped to be cast in some walk-on part in Act Four, perhaps as a tree or a friendly woodchopper. This appearance would then be my swansong, before I signed off, from this academic pantomime.

They did not cast me, and I did not even do an audition (please see *Notebook One*). However, there was to be an unexpected twist in Act Four. The *Harvard Business School* professors, cast to play a starring role in the final act, because of my critique could no longer be referenced in support of organizational change tending to fail. Consequently, and belatedly, I was cast to stand-in for the Harvard professors although without their status and salary.

Now, to my complete surprise, I was asked to play the role of a pantomime villain and introduced to the audience as the authority claiming that organizational change tended to fail. *Special Issue* contributors then threw bread rolls at me bemoaning the ‘ubiquity of change failure’, but more of that in *Chapter Three*.

Year	Author/s	Title	Publication Details
2017	Storey, J., Hartley, J., Denis, J.L., t Hart, P. and Ulrich, D.	<i>Conclusions: Looking to the future of leadership.</i>	The Routledge companion to leadership (pp. 595-601). New York: Routledge.
2018	Schwarz, G.M., Bouckenooghe, D. and Vakola, M.	<i>Organizational change failure: Framing the process of failing</i>	Call for papers appears with a submission deadline of 1 st December 2018.
2021	Schwarz, G.M., Bouckenooghe, D. and Vakola, M.	<i>Organizational change failure: Framing the process of failing</i>	<i>Human Relations</i> 74(2):159-179
Act Four - Organizational change successfully framed as tending to fail			

Act Four, the final act, brings us up to date. The Storey and colleagues, reference is not integral to Act Four, but I suspect it prefaces a debate that will grow in the next decade. These international leadership experts questioned belief in leadership as instigating change (Storey et al., 2017). My unifying thesis is that change management had to fail if belief in change leadership was to succeed. If I am correct, more academics will ask where is the evidence/theory in support of belief in change leadership? Close readers of this chapter could now reasonably offer Oreg and Berson (2019), and I would encourage you to read their paper more closely.

In 2018, a *Call for Papers* appeared with the title *Organizational change failure: Framing the process of failing*. The extract below is taken verbatim from the *Call for Papers*.

... it is equally well-acknowledged that large scale organizational changes tend to fail (often invoking Beer and Nohria, 2000 in doing so).

At this moment, the Director of the play takes us back to the stage set from Act Two, from almost two decades earlier. Act Three never happened if judged by the references in the *Call for Papers* and I suspect Act One was too far back to matter to ambitious, forward-looking academics. I have a suspicion that ‘...organizational changes tend to fail...’ was the favoured frame of the Guest Editors, and nothing was going to disrupt their belief in this frame.

At the beginning of 2021, the editorial to the *Special Issue* prefacing the five successful contributions appeared. Many references from the *Call for Papers* now appeared in the editorial, a standard academic convention. In the editorial, the Beer and Nohria reference, from Act Two was no longer included in support of a tendency for organizational change to fail. Instead, it was attributed to a claim that many types of failure ensue from organizational change.

Hughes (2011) from Act Three was now included. The absence of a reference to support the guest editors favoured frame that ‘...organizational change tends to fail...’ was problematic. It was too late in the day to hold auditions. They appear to have decided to use Hughes who had been looking at the stage enviously from the wings, as a stand-in for Beer and Nohria as the new supporting reference for their favoured frame (please see *Chapter Four* for further discussion).

I would have bet every penny I had, that some of the successful contributions would have questioned the organizational change tends to fail frame, in an academically balanced *Special Issue* on organizational change failure. However, there was a convincing consistency in all five

contributions supporting the espoused frame that organizational change tends to fail. I would never have bet a penny on being cast as the proponent of the belief that organizational change tends to fail.

Notebook Three has been challenging to write (as I will repeatedly acknowledge). It is difficult to question a frame supported by leading academic minds in a leading academic journal. In years to come, when a naïve academic, questions the organizational change tends to fail frame, they will be referred back to this *Special Issue* and by coincidence my apparent endorsement of the frame. The ambition of this *Special Issue* was never disguised, framing the process of failing. As a critical scholar, I have to unreservedly acknowledge how successful they were in framing the process of failing, the curtain closes.