LOOKING AT THE EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IMPLEMENTATION FROM THE CHANGE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE[1]

Maria Rasouli is an independent scholar and the founder of Visible Talent, a diversity and HR management consulting firm. She has a PhD in Organizational Psychology and has completed a post-doctoral fellowship at the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University, Ottawa.

ABSTRACT

Evidence indicates that Employment Equity (EE) has had a moderate success in achieving its goals. The lack of practical and promising models for implementing EE seems to be one of the reasons for this moderate success over time. I propose EE is a change management issue because it requires major changes in employees' values, attitudes and behaviour. Using the most promising theories and concepts in the change management literature, I propose a practical model for implementing EE. The model highlights the critical role of leadership, organizational learning culture, effective communication, education, and employee participation in successfully achieving EE related policies. This paper highlights that paying attention to policy implementation is as important as policy development.

INTRODUCTION

The Employment Equity Act (EEA) aims to achieve equality in the workplace by increasing the representation of four groups that have been historically disadvantaged in employment. These groups include women, aboriginals, visible minorities and persons with disabilities. Passed in 1986, the original EEA was aimed at federally regulated employers in the private sector and was broadened a decade later to include the federal public service. The EEA required employers to take special measures to ensure fair hiring and promotion processes in regards to the four designated groups. Using a system of compliance audits, the Human Right Commission is responsible for auditing employers.

The Commission data (2010) indicate that the gap between representation and availability among the four designated groups was reduced from 8.6% in 1992 to 4.2% in 2008 in the Federally Regulated sector. The Commission attributes this improvement to the positive effect of Employment Equity (EE). However, while evidence shows that EE has contributed to the increased representation of the four designated groups, disparities in access to employment for some of the designated groups and disparities in wage and types of positions for all four groups remain.

In addition, attitudes toward EE are less than positive. A number of early studies suggest a low level of support for EE among Canadians (Fletcher and Chalmers 1991; Sillars 1994). In a recent study, Ng and McGowan (2010) found that EE was problematic and not well-understood among 757 employees at a mid-sized Canadian organization having to comply with EE. It has been suggested that changing attitudes toward EE is an important factor contributing to its success (Falkenberg and Boland 1997; Ng and McGowan 2010).

I propose that changing attitudes toward EE should be viewed within the broader framework of the EE implementation process. The moderate success of EE and the continuous negative or ambivalent attitudes toward it could be related to how EE efforts are designed and implemented within organizations. Indeed, there seems to be a major gap between the current literature and available resources related to the EEA on how to effectively implement EE. I aim to address this gap by proposing a practical and theoretically-driven model of EE implementation.

Given that EE requires a significant amount of change in organizations' and employees' values, norms and practices, I propose that EE implementation should be viewed as a change management issue. In the following pages, I first provide a very brief overview of the change management literature and then propose an EE change implementation model informed by the most promising theories, concepts and practices in the change literature.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHANGE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Change process is defined as the actions undertaken during the implementation of change and how change actually occurs. Change process is generally viewed either from a strategic management perspective or Organizational Development (OD) perspective (Choi and Ruona 2011). In the former, key decision-makers implement change as a corporate strategy while in the latter one change is an intentional effort to enhance individual development and improve organizational performance. Given that the goal of EE is more akin to the OD perspective, I will focus on the change management literature from this perspective. This literature will be reviewed in two categories: theory-based studies and attitude-based studies.

THEORY-BASED STUDIES

Process theories and models of change can be categorized based on their primary focus on the change process within an organization or an individual (Choi and Ruona 2011). Lewin and Kotter's theories are at the organizational level, whereas the classic learning theory, self-efficacy theory, and the theory of planned behaviour are at the individual level.

The commonality among *organizational-level* theories is that organizations are seen as the target for change processes. The majority of theorists assume that change in organizations will result in change in its people. Some of those theorists propose strategies to create an environment that is conducive to change. Kurt Lewin's (1951) classic theory of change suggests that a successful change process in any organization should follow three main steps: (i) unfreezing old behaviours, habits and the status quo, (ii) moving to a new state (actual change), and (iii) refreezing the new change to make it sustainable. Building on Lewin's model, John Kotter (1996) developed a number of practical guidelines for implementing change. Overall, Lewin and Kotter's theories are useful in providing a simple and heuristic framework for thinking about the complex phenomenon of organizational change.

Built on adult learning theory and psychological development theory, *individual-level theories* of change view organizations as the context for change, not the target of change (Henderson, 2002). Individual-level theories of change focus on the change in people's behaviours and transformative learning, which occurs as a result of examining, questioning, validating, and re-visiting one's perceptions of the world (Henderson 2002). Accordingly, learning and change must begin with individuals and then the change can spread to the organizational level. According to classic learning theories, organizations need to identify the behaviours desired and establish reward systems to directly benefit those who change their behaviours to the desired ones (Burke 2008). The self-efficacy theory (Bandura 1982) proposes that for behaviours to change, a person must believe in her or his capability to perform a new proposed behaviour. Evidence indicates that the self-efficacy theory provides a useful concept to explain why and how individuals accept or reject change (Herold et al. 2007; Wanberg and Banasa 2000). According to the theory of planned behaviour, the key determinant of behaviour is the intention to perform that behaviour (Ajzen 1991). In essence, it proposes that to make any change in behaviour, one has to change beliefs and attitudes in regards to that behaviour.

A number of *integrated theories* which look at change at both individual and organization levels have also been proposed by scholars. Those theories (e.g., Argyris 1999) suggest that change begins when individuals identify a problem and act to resolve it and this in turn results in change at the organizational level.

Each of the theories mentioned above provides novel insights into the change process and a number of key elements from each group of theories will be incorporated into the proposed model of the EE change implementation.

ATTITUDE-BASED STUDIES

Regardless of the type of theory being applied, one of the consistent themes in process-focused studies of change is employees' reactions to change during the change implementation phase. The attitudes formed in response to change are the most common reactions to change that have been studied (Herold et al. 2007). In a review of 58 articles related to change attitudes, Bouckenooghe (2010) reported that 92% of the articles focused on two constructs: resistance to change and readiness for change.

Resistance to change is one of the most widely discussed topics in the study of individual and organizational change (Langton et al. 2010). Coetsee (1999) views resistance along a continuum that ranges from passive or indifferent to active and destructive. Five main sources of resistance to change include: perceived threat to self-interests, misunderstanding, different assessment of change, low tolerance for change, and cynicism or loss of faith and trust in change leaders (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Some scholars have argued that individuals are not normally resistant to change. Rather, they tend to resist the way change is introduced and implemented (Choi and Ruona 2011). Therefore, it is possible to minimize resistance to change through using appropriate strategies such as education, communication, participation, support, negotiation, cooperation and even coercion (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008).

To shift the overwhelming negative view of change, a number of scholars have proposed the positive concept of *readiness for change* (Choi and Ruona 2011; Holt et al. 2007) which refers to individuals' beliefs in their change-specific efficacies, subjective appropriateness of change and interpretation of personal benefit from change. The main factors contributing to readiness for change include providing change information and effectively communicating the purpose of change (Choi and Ruona 2011; Jimmieson et al. 2004), especially through the use of normative-reeducative strategies. Such strategies go beyond mere exchange of technical information about change and re-examine the more subtle aspects of change—including attitudes, values, and organizational norms—by actively involving organization members (participation) in the change process (Chin and Benne 1985).

CONTEXT OF CHANGE

Leadership and the organizational learning culture are two main contextual factors contributing to effective change implementation. A positive relationship between leaders and employees (Nystrom 1990); employees' trust in leadership (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1999; Sackmann et al. 2009); and visionary leaders who authentically communicate with employees, empower employees and tend to their needs are more likely to increase readiness for change in employees (e.g., Herold et al. 2008). What is more, individuals are more likely to be open to change if they perceive their organization as cultivating a learning culture (Bouckenooghe 2010; Choi and Ruona 2011). In a learning culture, individuals are regularly encouraged to modify their behaviours and organizational practices and also to propose new practices (e.g., Latta 2009; Watkins and Marsick 1993).

Overall, the above overview shows that a number of useful theories, concepts and strategies have been developed in the change management literature. Lewin's theory of phases of change provides a useful framework within which strategies to decrease resistance to change and increase readiness for change can be applied. Committed leaders and organizational learning culture also provide the necessary context for successful implementation of change. The application of these theories and concepts to EE implementation will be discussed in the next section.

A PROPOSED MODEL OF EE CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, a practical model of EE change implementation is proposed that integrates key theories, concepts and strategies highlighted in the previous section. This model focuses on the strategies for change implementation at the individual level, while taking into account a number of key organizational level factors (leadership and organizational culture). The proposed model (See Figure 1) comprises several components, including i) context of change; ii) phases of change; iii) targets of change; iv) strategies for implementing change; and v) process of change. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

1. Context of change

Senior management and the leaders of organizations need to demonstrate public and authentic commitments to EE efforts. Implementing EE is often viewed as the responsibility of organizations' human resources departments, overlooking the fact that if not supported by senior management such efforts will not be taken seriously by employees.

EE efforts require change in values, attitudes and behaviours. Thus, organizations that embrace a learning culture and constantly encourage their employees to reflect and give suggestions to improve organizational processes provide an ideal context for successful implementation of EE efforts. Organizations that have rigid structures and inflexible processes are likely to implement EE as a result of an external force (e.g., law) or for fear of punishment, which results in superficial compliance rather than a true commitment

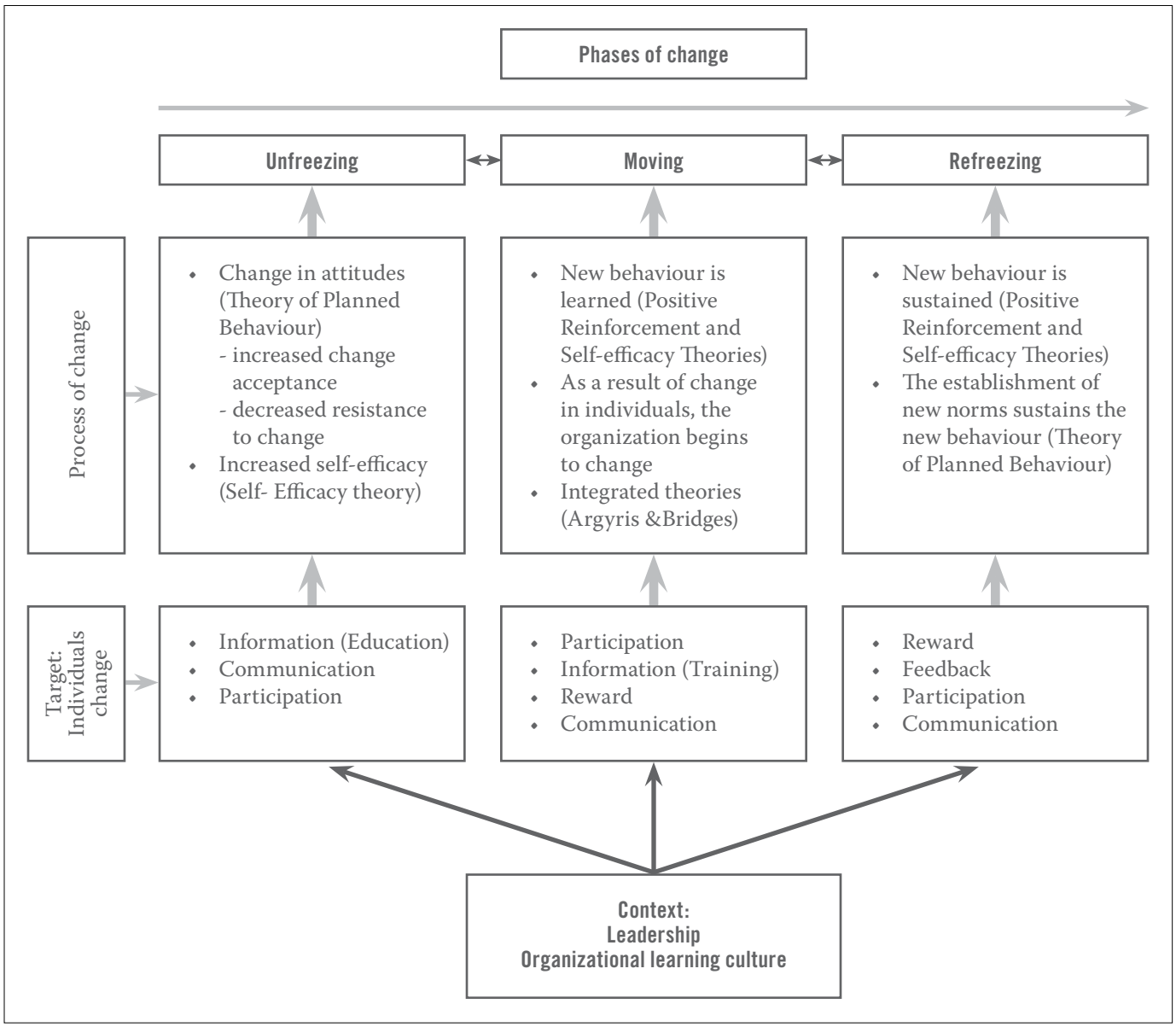
2. Phases of change

Consistent with the dominant view in the change literature, the model proposes that change occurs in three phases of unfreezing, moving and refreezing (Lewin 1951). The unfreezing phase entails collecting self-identification data and developing a plan for addressing the under-representation of the four designated groups. During this phase, organizations communicate the purpose and necessity of EE to employees and encourage their participation in the self-identification survey. Analyzing and reflecting on the self-identification data and with the participation and input of employees, organizations then design a step by step plan to increase the presence of the under-represented groups within their workplace. The moving phase entails implementing the plan, and the refreezing phase entails reinforcing the newly implemented change by rewarding those who do change their behaviour. The unfreezing, moving, and refreezing phases are iterative processes that can be repeated during the implementation of each step of the EE plan.

3. Target of change

Given that EE is directed toward human resources within an organization, the target of all recommended strategies in the proposed model includes employees.

Figure 1: A proposed model of EE Change implementation



4 and 5. Strategies for implementing change and the process of change

Key change strategies recommended include information, communication, participation, reward, and feedback. In addition, the classic learning theory, self-efficacy theory, the theory of planned behaviour, and Argyris integrated theory provide insight on how and why each strategy is useful (the process of change). While most of the strategies suggested for the three phases are similar, the emphasis that should be placed on each strategy differs slightly for each phase.

UNFREEZING PHASE

Providing sufficient information in this phase about the purpose of EE is likely to change employees' attitudes toward EE efforts and this, in turn, will facilitate the necessary behavioural changes. This is consistent with the premise of the theory of planned behaviour, which proposes that change in attitudes is a pre-requisite for change in behaviour. This is also consistent with the proposition of self-efficacy theory which suggests that gaining knowledge about change is likely to influence employees' belief in their ability to implement the change.

To gain employees' support, organizations need to communicate clearly that EE is consistent with the principles of fairness and equality and aims to promote rewarding people on the basis of merit rather than unrelated criteria. Providing information about EE can educate employees who perceive it as a quota system or reverse discrimination and address the concerns of employees who are afraid that they hold positions because they belong to one of the four designated groups and not because of their competencies.

To encourage employees to support EE and respond to the self-identification survey (participation), organizations need to provide information on why self-identification data are collected and how they will be used to bring positive change to the workplace.

MOVING PHASE

By providing information and clear communication regarding the purpose of EE in the unfreezing phase, organizations facilitate employees' *engagement and participation* in the moving phase. The participation strategy is consistent with Argyris's (1999) adult learning theory, which proposes that employees learn new behaviours through active participation in the change process. In addition, by changing their behaviours, employees alter the organization as a whole. Therefore, change is a bottom-up learning process that begins with changes in individual employees' behaviours.

By providing training on how to implement the proposed changes, organizations can increase employees' change-related efficacy. For example, providing training to hiring managers to conduct unbiased job interviews will increase their efficacy in meaningfully contributing to the objectives of EE.

Offering appropriate rewards is critical for motivating employees to change and also sustain their changed behaviours. This is consistent with the premise of the classic learning theory, which proposes that individuals change their behaviour and sustain the change only if they are rewarded for doing so. In the example above, if hiring managers' efforts to conduct unbiased job interviews are not acknowledged or rewarded or their lack of contributions to EE efforts does not entail any consequences, they are more likely to ignore EE efforts and continue their old behaviours and processes.

REFREEZING PHASE

Reflection, feedback and modification of plans are essential components of active learning and change. In an organization with a strong learning culture, employees actively participate in the reflection process and provide feedback to change leaders on whether the new change implementation process is effective or if it needs further modifications. Again, this is consistent with the Argyris (1999) adult learning theory (double-loop learning) which proposes both organizations and their members can learn from and change each other through the mutual reflection and feedback process. In addition, continuous communication, encouraging participation and maintaining rewards is critical for the sustainability of the changed behaviour at this phase.

Taken together, committed leaders in organizations with a learning culture can gain employees' support for EE change efforts through providing sufficient information and training, clear communication, establishing a reward system for those who do change their behaviours, and providing meaningful opportunities for employees to participate in planning, implementation and modification of EE efforts.

CONCLUSION

Promising models of EE implementation seem to be missing in the existing EE literature and available resources. To respond to this gap, I suggest a model of EE implementation informed by the most promising concepts in the change management literature. The proposed model is a practical model rather than a theoretical one, which can be applied for the purpose of building an inclusive workplace. The use of the model by practitioners can help to identify its effectiveness and areas for further improvement. This paper highlights that paying attention to policy implementation is as important as designing strong policies to begin with.

NOTES

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