UNDERSTANDING CHANGE AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT PROCESSES: A CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this case study is to advance knowledge regarding employees' understanding of change and change management within a public sector organisation, namely, the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC). This organisation, like other public sector organisations in Australia, has undergone and is currently undergoing a series of significant organisational changes, mainly due to mandates brought about by public sector reform policy. Present trends in change and change management in Australia, both at the federal and state level, reflect a sense of urgency on the part of governments to revitalise a Public Service that is able to sustain continuity and change. This is based on the premise that it is only through reform that the Australian Public Service will be able to address the challenges of a rapidly-changing world. However, this means that public sector employees are now called upon to adjust their thinking and practices to respond to the changing needs and expectations demanded of them by governments.

In view of the above, this case study sought to understand and represent employees' understandings regarding what influences effective change processes and how these have impacted upon them. This is not to imply that this study has engaged in critical policy analysis but rather it has analysed trends, both nationally and internationally, in order to ascertain the manner in which public sector organisations, more so those in South Australia, are embracing contemporary practices in the arena of change and change management and if so, at whose and what expense?

The study, conducted at grassroots level, spanned approximately six years and sought to give voice to those least often heard or asked, that is, public sector employees. The questions asked of participants in both the informal and formal interviews – as part of the data collecting process – were related to changes that the organisation was undergoing, how these changes were being implemented, and the influence that these changes were having on them. Insights about public sector reform were gained by questioning organisational change processes and practices, and for viewing and describing the meanings that employees created around their roles, professions, and organisation.

Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the research questions focused on seeking a deeper understanding of the complex issue of change and change management from the employees' viewpoints and was guided mainly by the following questions:

- How did employees within the SATC view change processes and practices within the current work dynamics of their organisation?
- What were employees understanding of the definitions of change and change management within the SATC?
- What were employees' experiences of change and change management within the SATC?
- What were employees' understanding of the term 'resistance to change' and the reasons as to whether employees resisted change initiatives in the SATC or not?
- What role did 'communication' play in the introduction and implementation of change and change management within the SATC?
- What role did managers/change initiators play in the change process within the SATC?
- How did employees view change and change management from a critical—bureaucratic or non-bureaucratic—perspective?

The secondary questions that informed the main research questions were:

- What were employees' expected roles in the change process with regard to the change initiatives being implemented in the SATC?
- To what extent were SATC employees afforded opportunities to contribute their expectations prior to, during and after the change process?
- What were the contributing factors to public sector reform and organisational and managerial change initiatives within the SATC?

During times of change, employees' understandings of change and change management are more readily apparent as they respond to the pressures of those changes. These understandings help to explain how individual employees construct meanings about their organisation, the changes affecting the organisation and themselves as members of the organisation.

Thus, through the data collected, the case study provided insights into understanding, identifying and describing how employees within the SATC perceived and constructed their organisation and managed their work lives, especially in times of change. Concerns surfaced during both the informal and formal interviews about the role of the employee, the needs of the organisation, the purposes of change and change management and related issues pertaining to public sector reform. At the same time, holding the organisational culture together were certain underlying values, characteristics, and expectations; mainly a commitment to the organisation and the best interests of the clients and customers.

The above concerns were evident in the findings from the informal interviews whereby employees' understanding of change and change management processes and practices differed to varying degrees. With regard to the findings from the formal interviews, the views echoed by employees provided a useful insight into what employees believed to be happening within the SATC with regard to change and change management. These views must be taken into consideration in order to create effective organizational change within the SATC.

Thus, understanding the dynamics between the existence of organisational change and the people who work in the organisation is important to policy makers. Also, whilst there is much literature on change and change management, little effort has been made to address and rectify the fears, concerns and expectations of these changes upon public sector employees. There is also limited evidence in the literature of the positive or negative aspects of change and change management from the employees' point of view – as recipients of change, because successful change and change management is dependent upon 'employee buy-in'.

In essence, this study demonstrates the need for public sector employees to have a 'voice' in change and change management processes and practices that affect them both on a personal and professional capacity.

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