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Management Learning

# Book review:
# Changing Change Management: Strategy, Power and Resistance (2020)
# By Darren McCabe

**1st Edition, New York: Routledge**
**DOI https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429029981**
**eBook ISBN9780429029981**
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Lindsay Hamilton

University of York, UK

For Peer Review

All organisations change as their members move, innovate, group and re—group within organisational practices that are driven by, and sometimes against, strategic decision—making, planning and control. While strategies may have singular points of origin, or moments of emergence, they coalesce, morph, or sometimes wither entirely along diverse courses of activity. The only constant is that such activity is decisively conditioned by human behaviour. That *change management* has become a ruling principle of management theory and practise needs no demonstration, therefore, and it has been a perennial staple of most business school curricula for decades. Yet McCabe's (2020) book rightly points to the problematic nature of studying it, something which brings the topic firmly up to date.

The key paradox that McCabe seeks to unriddle in this book is that while much of the extant literature on this subject works from the basis that management *possesses the power to achieve change*, the lived experience of day—to—day planning and management in organisations actually points out the propensity for change management interventions to fail. These apparent inconsistencies exist in tension and the book does a thorough and painstaking job of explaining why. McCabe builds the case persistently towards a demonstration of the elements of organisation life that make innovation, transformation and change strategies difficult to implement.

McCabe's very first line states that 'This book is motivated by dissatisfaction with the way in which power is generally understood and represented in the literature on Change Management as something that is possessed largely by management.' It is this *dissatisfaction* with the status quo that makes this approach so timely. No easy solutions are presented here, instead the reader is reminded that consent and cohesion are not simply the bi products of 'effective' management tools but are elusive and sometimes entirely unattainable. Resistance, McCabe argues, plays a much larger role than is often credited in management theory of change. Overlooked by mainstream and some critical organisation scholarship, McCabe sees the understanding of power and resistance as core to developing realistic concepts of change.

This book adopts a critical 'relational' approach to change management and foregrounds resistance 'as much a part of change as the strategies of those that seek to enact it'. Chapter one provides an overview of the key concepts discussed in the subsequent chapters and introduces the case of

Copperdale City Council in the UK, the (anonymised) empirical mainstay of the book. Chapter two then sets out two perspectives on change management—the *rational-technical* and the *processual*. These are used to extend the author's exploration of the relational approach. Chapter three elucidates this further to help readers to make sense of the subsequent empirical chapters that begin with Chapter five and end at Chapter nine. These empirical chapters explore Copperdale City Council firstly by describing, then by exploring the experience of working there and the specific changes it introduced. Chapter 4 is a summary of the qualitative research methods.

As the first of the empirical sections, Chapter five focuses on the role of *metaphor* during the strategic introduction of a change programme. Analysing key texts from Copperdale and drawing on the metaphoric concept of 'walls' and 'journeys', McCabe shows how those seeking to manage change draw on the materials around them (documents, particularly) to present changes to the work being done as a positive departure from tradition. The chapter also shows how metaphors come up against the culture, extant identities and established patterns of work at Copperdale. Here, the book makes use of a new term, 'counter-metaphor', to explain how resistance is organised and discussed. This chapter makes a compelling case, using this field data, to show that all exercises of power need to be understood simultaneously in terms of how resistance unfolds in relation to control.

This analysis is extended in Chapter six where the book questions the assumption that managers unquestioningly enact and support change strategies. McCabe argues here that such a view is over—simplistic because 'not all managers are instigators or agents of change' and surveys the tools that such individuals may themselves use to resist it. Turning simple notions of bureaucracy on their head, McCabe shows in this chapter how bureaucratic tools can be a medium and means of resistance. This is compelling evidence that resistance is far more complex than is often supposed and exceeds simple tensions between 'boss' and 'worker'.

Chapter seven explores the concepts of location and space by charting what happened when Copperdale relocated 1,500 staff to a new open—plan, flexible hot—desk building and how this became a site for struggle. This chapter is novel because it focuses upon both employee and management resistance to change and gives the reader a deeper understanding of the contradictions and intricacies of resistance in a three—dimensional space. Chapter eight explores this theme further by elucidating how staff and managers at Copperdale resisted through cynical pragmatism especially in relation to the box—ticking culture. From the empirical material, it becomes apparent that while these public sector employees may be cynical about change programmes and managerialism, it is a complex form of cynicism. Employees distance themselves from managerialism, certainly, but continue to identify with their work, the public and each other.

The final empirical chapter, nine, takes a closer look at organisational politics in relation to organisational change—micro, meso and macro. Drawing on a weight of canonical literature in this field (for example, Knights and Murray, 1994), McCabe tracks the relationships between the organisation and the structures beyond. This is a weighty theoretical chapter that provides an important linkage between the case material and the overarching concepts of social power and order. Chapter ten concludes the book by arguing that a 'relational' approach towards change management is necessary. Resistance is as much a feature of organisational life as the strategies needed to enact change and McCabe persuasively makes the case for the importance of understanding its presence, both from the perspective of a practitioner seeking to manage change better or from the perspective of social justice and inclusion.

This book provides a timely counterpoint to traditional management models (and aspirations) of 'good change management'. It chimes with our current state of affairs because, as current unsettled

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circumstances show, the power to oversee and control change usually lies firmly beyond the grasp of individual actors. There is no question that the upheaval of this year's Covid crisis has fundamentally changed these lineaments as a whole. It has altered fundamental aspects of the whole formation of work in its various forms. It is no exaggeration to describe the effects of the pandemic lockdown as a global, epochal restructuration of economic activity and it is not yet known whether and how organisations will return to business as usual.

This unsettling experience alone is enough to ensure that most will never again take for granted the presentation of packaged management knowledge that purports to lead to successful strategies for managing innovation, enterprise and change. The enduring message from this book, then, is that change is not something managers 'own' but a process that is fraught, indeterminate and shot through with uncertainty and risk. After all, social life is constituted by the co—productive activities, principles, meanings and hopes that all actors engage in, be they managers or otherwise.

Perhaps as scholars we can hope only to develop what Blumer (1954) 'sensitising concepts' about the social world, approximate conceptions which are rough and always provisional guides to a changing and complex reality. Management ideas about change have to be fluid, not least because the subject matter in which they deal is comprised of the views and thoughts of social agents themselves each forming their own 'sensitising concepts'. Individual organisation members are always trying to understand and mould for themselves the tasks, processes and objectives that make up the world in which they have to operate (Willis, 2000). There are continual negotiations, some tacit and some explicit that work to condition the course of strategic plans. As McCabe states, 'both power and resistance are part of the living fabric of everyday organisational life' (p.3). That some negotiations provoke and sustain heated resistance is perhaps an uncomfortable reality that many management theorists would perhaps prefer to disavow, particularly as a great deal of mainstream management (and management teaching) is built upon the ruling principle that management can be effective *if it is done right*.

In this important book, McCabe reminds us that each of us holds an internal model for our world, made real through interaction, collaboration, conflict and evident in the multifarious processes and routines that make up our reality. Change is always brokered through some relation, some experience and responsive — in some way — to the material world about us. It is evident in the clothing we wear for our next 'Zoom' meeting online, for example, or the objects we curate to form our desk or office space. The explanatory power of these phenomena, contoured by the systems and structuring forces of the organisational and social world, is what McCabe presents so finely in this book. Here we see the enduring and reinforcing effect of managerial power on both practical and cultural experiences as well as the possibilities for human action and creativity developed in successive moments, reducible to no one static pattern or model. This is a positive, if complex, message for it means that

> 'Once this is understood then we cannot go back to a situation where resistance is ignored or marginalised because this simply misrepresents both change and everyday life. It does great damage because it renders silent the voices of those who may suffer due to Change Management and helps to erect walls whereby we do not hear those voices because we are under the illusion that they either do not exist or are unimportant.' (p5).

The implication is clear: management must learn to relinquish the anachronistic myth of change as a form whose destiny depends upon and lies entirely within their hands. Perhaps as McCabe suggests, there is a danger in such thinking for 'it would mean that claims could no longer be made regarding what strategies, technologies, structures or cultures should be adopted to effect change and thereby deliver the often mute goals of control, growth, productivity and profitability.' In the current climate,

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this argument has profound resonance and seems fitting as we create new templates for post—lockdown management which will necessitate radical change for us all.

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