

Change Management Theories: A Study on COMAIR, South Africa

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Change could be conceptualized and categorized into two ways. The first is the rational and strategic process approach in which organizations identify the need for change and design an action plan to implement change. The second is the evolutionary selection in which the organizations chose to resist the change happening around them. COMAIR Ltd., a leading airlines company based in South Africa has initiated largescale changes in structure, process and operations during the 1980s, which continued in 1990s and early 2000. The initiatives have been found to be evolutionary in nature. The present article has attempted to analyze the change process at COMAIR from the viewpoint of popular change management models.

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Introduction

Change is an act or process through which operations of organizations are evolved. Initially, change was conceptualized and categorized into two basic ways. The first is the rational and strategic process approach in which organizations identify the need for change and design an action plan to implement change. The second is the evolutionary selection in which the organizations chose to resist the change happening around them (Flood & Fennell, 1995). In today's fast time of globalization and evolving technologies, it has become extremely vital for organizations to compete and revise strategy for their survival. Organizations should follow a proactive approach to make the required changes in their business to keep up with technology, economics, demographics, governments, consumer preferences and competition. If they resist change or are unable to undergo a strategic and successful change, they suffer loss and eventually cease to exist. Hence for the successful implementation of change, it is vital that the change process is managed properly. According to Moran and Brightman (2000), change management is the

process of renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers. There are a number of models that can be used to manage change. In this case study of Commercial Air Services, force field analysis, Kurt's 3 stage model, change management perspectives, and Kotter's 8 step model have been used.

The airline industry plays a vital role in globalization as it breaks the barrier of time and distance making it easier and faster for people to travel and transport goods across nations and connecting buyers and sellers. COMAIR Limited is a South Africa based aviation company formed in 1946 providing charter services to remote places in Africa. Comair has been known for its innovative and creative culture and which is evident from its expansion and awards received for creative excellence. Comair started expansion in 1992 by offering flights to domestic routes using Boeing 737-200 and Fokker aircraft. In 1996, Comair made an agreement and became a British Airways franchise and became known as the "British Airway Comair". In 2001, Comair started a low-cost carrier kulula.com which helped revolutionize South Africa's air travel making it accessible and convenient to the public. Moreover, Comair has its own training center (Comair Training Center, CTC) which provides operations training to local and international cabin crew, flight operations personnel and flight deck aircrew. Comair also developed The SLOW Lounges, which offer high-end airport lounge experience. To maintain high standards, in

2012, Comair launched its own catering unit "The Food Directions" and Comair Travel which now offers the largest and broadest digital travel distribution network in South Africa.

The Change Eventualities at COMAIR

In 2010, the senior leadership team identified the need to streamline their operations which seemed to have been "cobbled together" due to the spontaneous growth especially due to kulula.com. The leadership team decided to implement the Sabre Airline Solutions, leading providers of airline technology. The company entered into a long-term agreement with Sabre Solutions to provide integrated products and systems specific to Comair's need. The leadership team decided to target commercial and operational systems to efficiently manage revenue with far greater control and flexibility, increase efficiencies and distribution capabilities, and to access Sabre's global community that is developing new products constantly.

The key to a successful implementation of change is clear communication of the vision and the desired changes.

Change is not always welcomed by individuals as it is disruptive in nature. The first reaction to change is a rejection and the need for information which is followed by a number of emotions like anger, loss of feelings, depression, etc. When they reach acceptance, they may

require support to adjust to the change. The key to a successful implementation of change is clear communication of the vision and the desired changes. Kurt Lewin's (1951) theory of force field states that there are two types of forces associated with change, driving forces and resisting forces. Driving forces are any tangible or intangible factors that initiate and facilitate change whereas resisting forces are any tangible or intangible factors that hinder or decrease change. In order to achieve the desired state and to manage change successfully, driving forces should outweigh resisting forces. It is essential that before implementing change, a manager's aim is to achieve equilibrium among both the forces, which can be done by analyzing the resisting and driving forces. The manager then plans ways to suppressing the restraining forces and amplifying the driving forces so that change can take place (Baulcomb, 2003).

Force field analysis is an important tool as it can help stakeholders to create a timeline and a list of resources required. It can also identify the skills that need to be developed through training. It is vital for a manager to identify the people who are against and in support of the change. They can be used to strengthen driving forces and minimize resisting forces and create a less stressful work environment. When an organization is planning to undergo change, the communication within an organization needs to be clear. The force field diagram can reduce the communication barrier by providing visual aid (Toves et. al., 2016).

Comair had a large number of long-serving staff who were loyal and committed towards the organization's goal. They had seen the expansion and development of Comair and were familiar with the current system and processes. The operational change planned was supposed to impact the reservations, booking, staffing, and operational control system, which is an adverse change for the long-serving aging staff who are habitual of constantly working according to the old system. The success of the change within an organization depends on employees as they are the ones who implement it (Shah et al., 2016). Employees at Comair can be categorized as driving force as they were loyal and committed to working at Comair and if the information about the change is communicated properly and employees would feel that the initiative is happening with them, but rather to them. The transition at Comair required employees to learn new skills and remain productive. If the information about change was not delivered clearly, employees can tend to act as resisting force because they will start having doubts regarding the organization's performance and financial condition. Hence it is vital for employees to inspire to work for change rather than against it (Hoover & Harder, 2015). The main driving forces at Comair limited was the need to create an integrated operating system to make the operations streamlined and to have more control over the cost and revenue. The other driving force identified from the case study was to turn a family business to a professionally run organization with Sabre Airline Solutions, which will enable it to compete with other global airlines.

Leaders at the top management play an important role in the transition of the change. As discussed earlier, force field analysis eases up the change process as it enables the leader at the top management to increase forces that drive change, decrease forces that hinder change, create a timeline, and list the resources required, but at the same time, the theory is criticized on being leader focused. In order for the change to be successful, organizations must focus on finding a competent and trained leader who has the right skill set and leadership style to carry out the process of transforming the organization. In Comair's case, it was vital for a leader to make sure that technical issues were not overlooked and every employee was properly trained to adapt and implement the Sabre platform, but at the same time reduce stress and maintain motivation to learn.

Leaders of organizational change impact the ability of individuals to accept change making the process of implementation smoother. In the change management literature, leadership styles are often discussed and two styles are highly popular: the transactional leadership style and the transformational leadership style. Transactional leaders are keen on accomplishing the tasks assigned using a systematic and disciplinary road map of action and use rewards and recognitions to encourage employees to accept change meeting the quality benchmarks. According to Trice and Beyer (1993), transactional leaders can effectively integrate change in the organization. Whereas Transformational leaders are focused more on team building and empowerment

of employees which promotes both personal and organizational changes (Jung, 2001). They actively engage people's personal attention and encourage them to challenge their values, traditions and beliefs (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). The low employee turnover rate at Comair even after the rapid expansion in the past few years, shows that employees have high dedication towards the organization. To facilitate the employees feel more connected, Comair's leadership team appointed a Program Delivery Executive and a change and communications manager from within the company.

Furthermore, Comair used a mix of both transformational and transactional leadership, which is evident from the case study as Comair engaged employees and followed a holistic approach navigating the change. The communication was continuous and was made effective by directly involving the top management team and conducting short staff surveys on a regular basis, which eventually became ineffective as the surveys became too frequent.

The modern approach is that change is continuous, and employees, stakeholders, customers, all might have different reactions and perspectives.

The conventional change approach shows that change is controllable and managed through rigorous planning. It starts with the identification of a business problem by change representatives and coming up with pre-existing static

change solutions. Organizations assume that the outcomes of change are predictable and change is easy to initiate if it is planned and managed properly. This was the old and traditional approach to change. The modern approach is that change is continuous, and employees, stakeholders, customers, all might have different reactions and perspectives.

Change Perspectives

There are 10 change management perspectives: the biological perspective, the rational perspective, the institutional perspective, the resource perspective, the contingency perspective, the psychological perspective, the political perspective, the cultural perspective, the systems perspective, and the post-modern perspective. For the purpose of this case study, we will discuss the psychological perspective, cultural perspective, and the systems perspective (Graetz, et al., 2011). The psychological perspective is focused on the human side of the change. It is assumed that people and employees are the most important and effected aspect during the change. The change process puts employees into situations that create psychological trauma, emotional pressure, anxiety, etc. Hence according to Gabriel & Antonacopoulou (2001), it is vital to understand the feelings of the employees and constantly evaluating and minimizing their fears, anxiety, and trauma, until the changes can be or are being accepted. Psychological perspective is also supported by Lewis et. al. (2007) as the primary aim of the change is to improve the operations by improving the effectiveness of the employees

which can be increased by making employees more involved throughout the change process using participative, group and team based programs of change (Burnes, 2004).

Bridge's transition model states that there are 3 phases an individual goes through during a change. The first phase is the ending phase in which an individual feels frustrated and denies any change due to fear of loss, etc. The second phase is the neutral phase where an individual is confused and uncertain about the change and shows anxiety and skepticism. It is the most important phase as it acts out as a bridge between denial to acceptance of the change. The final phase is the new beginnings, where an individual accepts the change and is willing to make adjustments and learn new skills with high levels of energy. All these phases are concerned with the feelings of an individual and can be mitigated by good communication (William Bridges Associates, 2019).

The cultural perspective is based on the common behaviors of individuals in a group. The main objective is to understand why a group of individuals chose to behave in a similar manner (Amagoh, 2008). The organization's culture influences the values and attitudes of the employees. However, it is a difficult task to study group behavior which makes it a slow and difficult process, but if the change strategies are designed keeping in mind the cultural perspectives and how the different groups will respond, the transition of change can be less complex.

The systems perspective is based on the fact that change has multiple and ongoing effects, even if a small change is introduced to a small division in the organization, it will impact multiple divisions in the organization. Complexity theory states that change is messy and non-linear, and organizations need to look for innovative strategies to overcome conflicts between departments that are created. This perspective is complex and chaotic as the leaders need to maintain a balance between different divisions and analyzing the situations and magnitude of change carefully (Graetz et al., 2011).

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Comair has taken into consideration both psychological and cultural perspectives. The leadership at Comair understood that the employees need to feel comfortable and confident about the change, hence both psychological and cultural perspectives were taken into consideration. Both perspectives have similarities as they are both employee-focused. Comair used a mix of both perspectives as they planned to apply a broad change and commonly used models of change were considered limiting by the top management, and they wanted to create a framework that aligned with the company's culture of catering and developing the "wisdom within the organization" (Graetz, et al., 2011)

Operation Crossover

Comair prepared the employees for the transition towards the change by developing multiple initiatives and platforms for training, delivery information and receiving feedback. "Operation Crossover" was initiated, which acted as a bridge between working with old types of equipment and method to working better and smarter with new equipment and methods, which addressed the psychological perspective and the cultural perspective. The foundation of these perspectives was based on clear communication. The CEO, Erik Venter, and senior leadership team, by creating a visual representation of the strategy which showed how the organization would benefit and compete in the global airline industry focusing on how each individual will be impacted by this change. The change process was further streamlined by creating a change management team consisting of the Go-To team, responsible for answering the questions of the employees and operation Crossover ambassadors responsible for understanding the mood and acceptance or rejection towards a change. The change management team at Comair also created an online self-service repository "Operation crossover- branded website" which enabled employees to get information and answers regarding the change. They also included the "games booklet" on the website which had games to serve as a stress management tool to ease the stress caused by the change initiatives. Even though the top management and change management team along with the consulting firm tried to answer all the questions of the employees and give them

a clear view, there were still some unanswered questions

Lewin proposed a three-step model that helps organizations to process change that involves unfreezing, moving on and refreezing. Lewin believed human behavior was based on a “complex field of driving and restraining forces”. The first stage is the unfreezing stage which involves destabilizing the equilibrium of the restraining and driving forces, preparing people to move away from our current comfort zone. This can be done by creating unfreezing strategies to communicate the importance of change emphasizing dissatisfaction and differences between the current and desired states; and providing on-time training, resources, support, incentives, and awards. The moving stage begins when people try to discover new ways and resolve confusion to move towards the desired state. This can be done by creating strategies that decrease negative attitudes and increase positive perceptions among the employees, for example, job training, workshop, seminars, etc. The refreezing stage focuses on reinforcing desired outcomes and establishing stability (Ji-Tsung & Markus, 2006).

ADKAR

ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement) is a popular change management model developed by PROSCI. This model has five phases awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement, which are considered vital for the success of change (Al-Alawi, et al., 2019).

Awareness refers to the employees understanding the necessity and nature of change and the risks associated if the change does not take place. Desire refers to the personal decision of an employee to be a part of the change, which can only happen once full awareness of the change is developed. Knowledge refers to the formal step-by-step instructions and training to the employees on how to implement change during the transition and new systems, techniques, skills, etc. needed once the change is implemented. Ability refers to the implementation of the change on a daily basis, In this stage, leaders check the employee’s ability to carry a task out their job and provide training if needed. Reinforcement is the last and most important phase, which refers to sustain the change and making sure individuals do not revert to old ways (Boca, 2013). ADKAR model is similar to Lewin’s 3 stage model. Awareness and desire are similar to the unfreezing stage, knowledge, and ability and similar to the moving stage and reinforcement is similar to the freezing stage (Dyck & Neubert, 2010)

The Case Study

For the case study of Comair Airlines, the ADKAR and 3 stage model seems to apply as they resemble what the management at Comair Limited has adapted. The first step of unfreezing (awareness) about the change was delivered with extreme care creating a “drumbeat” of a strategic message to customers and employees to avoid confusion a provide a holistic point of view, relying on internal leaders, task forces, and a dedicated in-

ternal Change Management Team. As mentioned earlier, the CEO and other top leadership teams became closely involved in this process and delivered the information about the change by visiting different sites to explain the change in detail and using visual representations to familiarize employees with why the change was required and its impact, importance, and potential risks. In addition to this to create further clarity, regular texts and emails were sent through the “Operation Crossover Platform” discussing what Sabre Airline solutions offer and the new opportunities that will be discovered by using their services (Kotter, 2012).

The desire to accept change, among the Comair employees, was created by the change management team which acted as the change agent during the process. As discussed earlier, the go-to team’s role was to answer the questions of employees, whereas the Operation crossover Ambassadors determined the mood and acceptance and rejection towards the change. The online platform was also created to reduce stress and answer questions. This aided employees to feel part of the change.

In the second stage of moving (knowledge and ability), the knowledge was supported by providing training. The change agents and the leadership team were taught the basics of change management. The other 1172 staff was trained to cut over to the Sabre Systems in 10 weeks. The learning and development team took care of this task through “Train the trainer team”, in which employees were to teach, prac-

tice and process the information required to use the Sabre platform. The ability to use the knowledge to perform tasks was tested by on the job refresher training programs by running airport dry runs and a debriefing was done after each trial to identify gaps and provide more training.

The change was implemented, but the change management team collected feedback from employees during the change transition process.

The refreezing stage (reinforcement), was planned to be done by optimizing the strengths and talents of the individuals who have emerged. However, there was no feedback collected after the change was implemented, but the change management team collected feedback from employees during the change transition process by letting them fill regular surveys. These could be used to review any issues that were not addressed or answered during the transition process to make sure the change implemented will not be sustainable.

Kotter’s Steps

Kotter (2008) developed a model consisting of 8 steps that did not focus on change but addressing the people who are affected by the change. He created a sequential list of steps for leaders to help them manage change. Kotter’s 8 steps include; establishing a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communi-

cating the change vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture.

The first step is to create a sense of urgency that shows the employees why the change is required and its importance. Managers can start the conversation by discussing the problems or trends in the market. Next, managers form a coalition of employees from different departments, who can promote change within the organization. These steps hold high value as support is required from the majority of employees, otherwise, no change can take place (Appelbaum et al., 2012). The third step is developing a vision and strategy that is to be achieved if the change is implemented which in the next step be clearly communicated to the employees repeatedly in all the possible forms. After the vision is communicated, the employees must be empowered to take actions that will lead to achieving the desired vision. Employees can be empowered by supporting them to take risks and modify the structures and systems that act as a hindrance to the new vision. Communication plays a vital role here, if there is a misconception about the vision or if the employees are not aware, the whole change initiative can fall apart. The sixth step of Kotter's model is to generate short term wins, this step is identifying the success and reward each effort put forward to keep employees motivated towards long term goals (Pietersen, 2002). The next step is to consolidate gains and produce more change, which

can be done by hiring, promoting and developing people who can promote change and get more resources if required. The last and the eighth step is anchoring new approaches in the culture, which is to articulate connections between new behavior and organizational success (Kotter, 2012).

The change vision was communicated personally, through messages and online platform.

Comair Limited was undergoing an operational change which somehow affected the working culture of employees, hence Kotter's 8 step model was more appropriate to be applicable. However, the current analysis of the case study shows that some of the steps of Kotter's 8 step model were followed by Comair. For example; the senior management team established a sense of urgency by identifying the need for change. They created the guiding coalition or change agents in the form of the change management team and the learning and developing a team. They developed a vision and strategy to make Comair a professionally run organization, by using Sabre Airways Solution. The change vision was communicated personally, through messages and online platform. However, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture were the steps that Comair neglected. They did not reward and recognize employees for cross-over done by them to use Sabre's platform.

Recommendations & Conclusion

There were some limitations that could have been addressed by Comair. The first is the time frame of transition, Comair started using the Sabre Airline Solutions platform after eighteen months of initial discussion with only 10 weeks of training. The whole operation of Comair was supposed to be done on a completely new platform, so we would suggest that the time frame of training should have been more than 10 weeks, as the success of the whole change process was based on the implementation of Sabre's Platform.

Comair's training process and communications were very widespread. They had appointed a lot of people within the organization who helped them manage change and reduce the noise and stress caused by the idea of operational and organizational change. But even after having many change agents, there were many unanswered questions of the employees. So, it was felt that having so many positions not only made the transition smooth but also created confusion about who is the go-to person for a given problem.

Comair collected feedback from employees in the middle of the transition process through regular surveys. The feedback received from these surveys was invaluable, the feedback was taken too often and that there was too much data to be processed and Sabre's team had to go to the top management for answers. So, data collected from the survey was not used; thus, the employ-

ees felt they are involved. The leadership at Comair should have collected these feedbacks since they planned to initiate change to make the transition process smoother and address problems before the change was initiated, organized lesser surveys, or used fully the data, thus collected.

Comair could have consulted other airline solutions like Travelport, Amadeus, Cornerstone, OpenSky, Lanyon, etc., and do a SWOT analysis before making a contract with Sabre. This would have provided more exposure to Comair's database.

Change is essential for organizations to be competitive and meet the needs of customers in order to sustain profitability. This has made the management of change very vital for surviving. Change can be managed by applying different theories and models like the ADKAR model, Action Research model, Kotter's 3 step model, Kurt Lewin's Force field analysis and 3 stage model, etc., depending on the nature and extent of change. Comair was successful to implement a huge operational change within a year. The leadership team at Comair Limited gave vital importance to the employees and kept them at the center during the whole transition process. The leadership team set clear visions and desired outcomes and made sure all the concerns of the employees were addressed by the change agents. The fears and doubts of the employees were eliminated and their feedback was taken in the form of surveys. Learning and development have taken place throughout the organization

and the competencies and skills gained through this process have been invaluable. Comair was clear about the need for change and with the help of committed employees they were able to execute one of the single biggest business transformations in history.

The leadership team at Comair Limited gave vital importance to the employees and kept them at the center during the whole transition process.

Comair has and will continue to deliver substantial improvements in revenue integrity, inventory management, and optimized ticket pricing, as well as improved crew and airport staff productivity.

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