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Abstract

As ideals about what is worth having, doing, and being, values are core to organizational functioning. Various organizational elements, such as design, identity, and culture, as well as organizational practices, are infused with values, pointing to the critical role values play during organizational change. While we know that the congruence between established values and those of prescribed changes influences change outcomes, our understanding of the role of values in organizational change processes remains largely speculative. In this paper, I outline how taking a value-centered approach to organizational change can enhance our understanding of organizational change processes.

Keywords

organizational change, change leadership, change management, change commitment, organizational behavior

Values play a key role in early organizational scholarship. Selznick (1957) theorized the institutionalization of organizations as a process of “value infusion” and conceptualized organizations as “vehicles” through which values are pursued. Values are important because they serve as ideals about what is “worth having, doing and being” (Selznick, 1992, p. 60) and function as frames of reference for the selection and evaluation of behavior inside organizations (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Furthermore, values are central to core organizational elements such as design (Greenwood & Hinings,

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1996), identity (Gioia et al., 2000), and culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). At the same time, scholars have long recognized that organizations' demonstration of conformity with the prevailing values in their environment is inextricably linked to their chances of being considered legitimate and their survival (Meyer & Scott, 1983).

Despite this, values have become "most notable by their absence from the current work" (Kraatz et al., 2020, p. 475) and our understanding of the role of values in organizational processes remains underdeveloped, prompting scholars to call for renewed attention to the central role of values in organizational functioning (Amis & Greenwood, 2020; Kraatz et al., 2020). Friedland (2017) is among those who argue that without attending to values, scholarship neglects the "why," the purpose that drives actors and ultimately forms, maintains, and transforms institutions. Particularly lacking is research that has examined values in organizational change processes. While research has demonstrated that values impact how change takes place (e.g., Amis et al., 2002), our understanding of their role in change processes remains largely speculative, with values often conflated with or subsumed by other organizational elements, such as culture (Amis & Greenwood, 2020).

In this paper, I join calls for renewed attention to values by making a case for applying a value-centered approach to organizational change. I start by reflecting backward to recap what we know about values in organizational change. I then project forward and introduce several research opportunities that taking a value-centered approach offers for enhancing our understanding of organizational change. In doing so, I hope to inspire organizational change scholars to join efforts for moving values from their current peripheral place back to a more central position in change scholarship.

Reflecting Backward: The Role of Values in Organizational Change

To project forward, we need to first reflect backward and consider what we already know about the role of values in organizational change. A key characteristic of values is important here, namely that they operate at different levels. As a core property of human actors, values have mostly been studied at the individual level. However, values also reside in "other social entities", including groups, institutions, and societies" (Kraatz et al., 2020, p. 476). For both individuals and organizations, values provide a sense of direction and serve as an anchor point for what is desirable. The congruence between individual and organizational values is key to several organizational processes such as employee satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions (Ostroff et al., 2005), and as such values can be a source of both motivation (in cases of values congruence) and tension (in cases of values incongruence) inside organizations, with obvious implications for organizational change.

In the context of change, Amis et al. (2002) found that the alignment between organizational members' values and those inherent in the prescribed structural changes determined both the pace at which organizational change could be realized and the extent to which individuals supported or resisted change. Organizations with

members holding values that were aligned with the values of prescribed changes were able to transform more rapidly than those in which this was not the case. Consequently, recipients' reaction to change will be influenced by the values individuals hold and the extent to which these coincide with the proposed change in such a way that change will be supported if values align but will be likely resisted if values clash. Others came to similar conclusions with Neves and Caetano (2009, p. 626) contending that "employees' commitment to change can ... be looked at as a function of the change's fit to employees' values." Burnes and Jackson (2011) found that the values alignment between those involved in the change, the objective of the change, and the chosen approach was key to realizing change. These findings suggest that the alignment between individual and organizational values and those inherent in a change effort determine change outcomes.

Another stream of research has looked at how individuals engage in "values work," described as "the work that is going on at any moment as values practices emerge and are performed, as well as the effects values practices perform and provoke as they work their way through an organization" (Gehman et al., 2013, p. 102). Under this view, values are embedded in and performed through practices, serving change agents as critical tools to bring about change (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) showed how actors strategically used values work to bring about changes in behavior in the context of organized crime. Similarly, Chatterjee et al. (2021) demonstrated how actors engaged in strategic values work and introduced organizational practices infused with new values of gender equality in a context previously dominated by traditional values, thus initiating social change. Collectively, this work highlights the performative power of values and demonstrates how actors can strategically use values work to bring about change. These insights are particularly important for our understanding of organizational change that involves the adaptation of deeply held values.

Projecting Forward: Reinfusing Values Into Research on Organizational Change

While research points to the critical role of values in organizational change, much remains to be uncovered about their impact, making a value-centered approach to change necessary. Adopting a value-centered approach to change becomes particularly compelling when considering that organizations must increasingly engage in transformations that are violating individuals' or organizations' values. The marketization of the social sector, for example, has coerced some organizations to embrace practices that are antithetical to their core values (Coule & Bain, 2021). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to radically transform their business models and adopt practices that challenged their core values. Li (2021), for example, showed how arthouse theatres implemented screening services, something previously perceived as antithetical to their core values. Furthermore, the values of those inhabiting organizations have changed, and with them our approaches to change need to be reconsidered. Millennials challenge established values and practices

in organizations (Pasmore & Woodman, 2017), which requires not only rethinking the role of individual and organizational values inside organizations but also how change can be achieved.

In addition to being better able to explore the change challenges organizations face, taking a value-centered approach has several additional advantages. First, focusing on values allows us to span different levels of analysis and explore how change at one level influences, and is influenced by, changes at other levels. Because values reside at the societal, organizational, group, and individual levels, a value-centered approach allows us to, for example, explore how changes in societal and/or individual values impact organizations – the Black Lives Matter movement is a case in point. After George Floyd’s tragic death in 2020, changes were implemented in several organizations, with Johnson & Johnson stopping to sell skin-whitening products (Cramer, 2020) and Quaker Oats, “acknowledge[ing] that [their] origins were based on a racial stereotype” (The Quaker Oats Company, 2021), deciding to rebrand its “Aunt Jemima” pancake mix (previously showing a black woman on its packaging), something which triggered other organizations to follow suit. Scholars applying a value-centered approach are uniquely positioned to uncover how value changes transcend across levels and what processes are at play in such contexts. This also provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between individuals’ and organizations’ values and contribute to work focusing on organizations as “inhabited by people” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), thus attending to recent calls to “bring the manager back in” (AOM, 2021), and for a people-centered approach to change (Amis & Janz, 2020).

Second, with values the basis of various organizational elements, a value-centered approach allows scholars to unpack the relationship between those elements during change. Scholars have, for example, suggested that changes in values will necessarily influence identity (Gioia et al., 2013) and impact design (Hinings et al., 1996). At the same time, changes in design can trigger identity change (Altman & Tripsas, 2015). Despite these apparent linkages, little is known about the joint dynamics of design and identity during change and the role of values in such contexts. Focusing on values seems particularly promising when studying change in hybrid organizations, which combine “elements that would conventionally not go together” (Smith & Besharov, 2019, p. 1). Scholars in this area have tended to apply one of three theoretical perspectives, focusing on logics, identity, or design, respectively, but these have rarely spoken to each other (Battilana & Lee, 2014). With values central to identity, logics, and design, focusing on values can be fruitful in enhancing our knowledge about how these value-infused organizational elements interplay during change.

Third, considering values’ embeddedness in various core organizational elements and their situatedness across different levels, taking a value-centered approach will enable us to better capture the processes of change by focusing, on the one hand, on organizations as composed of various value-infused elements (such as culture, design, identity, and practices) that interrelate in complex intraorganizational systems which, on the other hand, are situated in environments in which (potentially contradictory) values exert different pressures on organizations. As such, focusing

on the role of values enables us to develop more useful process models of change in complex social systems, something which – despite their obvious importance for our theories on organizational change – is still lacking (Pasmore & Woodman, 2017). Focusing on values will also allow us to explore how organizations embedded in complex social systems can collaborate to realize social change, an important theme explored in the forthcoming special issue of *JABS* on “Collaborating across organizational boundaries.”

Finally, putting values at the core of our scholarly endeavors can enhance our understanding of the leadership capabilities required for successful change. It is well recognized that the success of organizational change efforts is greatly influenced by effective change leadership (Oreg & Berson, 2019) and that leadership is underpinned by values (Burnes et al., 2018). While our current theorizing “does not examine leader behaviors vis a vis a particular change” (Herold et al., 2008, p. 346), we know that organizational change efforts differ in terms of their “depth.” It was in an early *JABS* article that Harrison (1970, p. 181) first proposed this idea, referring to change depth in terms of “how deep, value-laden, emotionally charged, and central to the individual’s sense of self ... the issues and processes” at stake during a change event are. Value-laden change likely requires different leadership approaches compared to change efforts that leave the values of those involved untouched. Applying a value-centered approach to change leadership can thus provide insights that enhance our understanding of how change can be effectively led.

Taken together, applying a value-centered approach to change will enable us to explore how change unfolds across the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels and how changes to different organizational elements impact each other, thus enhancing our understanding of change processes within and across organizations. Furthermore, we will be able to better capture the challenges change leaders face and develop theoretical insights into how value-laden change can be led successfully. As such, projecting forward involves reflecting backward by building on early organizational thinking in which values were the focus of scholarly inquiries and seen as core to organizational functioning.


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