

A Contingency Framework for a Working Theory of Implementation

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Abstract

Organizational change has been studied over many years in terms of how it takes place and what form the organization takes after such change. What is lacking though is a theory of implementation to guide the practical aspects of organizational change. This paper proposes a first step towards understanding implementation by proposing a working theory of implementation based on a framework borrowed from Political Science literature. The Contingency Model of mediation provides a framework for understanding conflict mediation.

Conflicts have an intrinsically normative quality in that most want to see them end so change is inherent in any form of intervention. This means at the heart of any mediation effort is a change initiative. As such, it would make sense to link the processes used in conflict mediation to those made in organizational change initiatives. The contingency model requires that change agents not only understand the characteristics and identities of those within the organization but also understand their own roles and the effect they have in the initiative.

Three contextual factors in international conflict have parallels in organizations: the nature of the disputing parties, the nature of the dispute and the nature of the mediator. In understanding these three concepts, a change agent can better tailor a change process to fit the organization and in so doing increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. Understanding the nature of the disputing parties is parallel to understanding the individual identities and motivations within the organization. Understanding the nature of the dispute is parallel to understanding the nature of the initiative itself. Here, understanding what it is the organization is trying to do and why is important before undertaking any initiative. Lastly, understanding the nature of the mediator is parallel to understanding the role of the consultant since bringing an outside perspective can be disruptive rather than productive unless the consultant or agent understands themselves, what they are bringing to the organization and how they bring it.

This paper provides basic information on the Contingency Model as it is used in International Relations and International Conflict before applying the model as a framework

for understanding organizational change and initiative implementation, as summarized above. I further provide implications for international settings, arguably areas where contextual factors become critical for any organizational change initiative, especially in an increasingly global and flat business terrain.

Introduction

Implementation of organizational change initiatives has had rocky outcomes over the past three decades. With only about a third of change programs actually achieving desired outcomes it is important to understand ways in which implementation can be improved (Sirkin et al., 2005). This paper proposes a first step along that path of understanding by proposing a working theory of implementation using a concept from Political Science. Specifically drawing from International Relations, aspects of the “Contingency Model” of conflict resolution are paralleled to change initiatives within organizations (Bercovitch & Langley, 1993).

Conflicts have an inherently normative quality in that everyone prefers peace over war. As such, attempts at mediation are meant to produce a change in the situation where it is hoped that the outcomes are positive and beneficial for all those involved. These intentions are paralleled in organizational change initiatives, especially by external consultants. It would go against the very nature of consulting to not want to produce positive outcomes for the organization in which the consultant has been asked to help (Schein, 1999). Further, a consultant’s job is to create benefit for all involved in a change initiative in the hopes of increasing engagement and acceptance. It is not a large leap to see the parallel in mediating international conflicts.

The Contingency Model emphasizes understanding the nature of the situation before initiating any mediation process. For an organizational change initiative, this idea applies directly either for internal initiatives or for outside change consultants. Reminiscent of Schein’s “Ten Process Principles” (1999), the perspective of an external consultant is the focus here as he/she can directly be likened to a mediator in international conflict. Although a similar contingency theory exists in Organizational Change literature predicated upon the same paradigm, I chose to barrow the Contingency Model from International Conflict literature as it not only provides a perspective outside the standard organizational change and management literature but also, rather than being a theory of how to view change initiatives, it is a model for how to approach them from the onset, giving it an inherently practical aspect.

One additional benefit of the Contingency Model is that it looks at three contextual factors in international conflict that have parallels in organizations. They are the nature of the disputing parties/organization, the nature of the dispute/nature of change initiative and the

nature of the mediator/change agent. In understanding these three concepts, a change agent can better tailor a change process to fit the organization and in so doing increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. Before going into its application to organizations, a basic understanding of the model is needed.

The Contingency Model

Third party participation in international conflict has received increasing attention since the mid-1980's (Fisher & Keashly, 1991). Negotiation literature accounted for most of the earlier work in conflict studies but recent efforts have attempted to create generalized theories that bring together work on negotiation and studies of third party involvement in international conflicts (Fisher & Keashly, 1991; Bercovitch & Houston, 2000).

Even though these studies have been useful in their application to real world settings, new discussions have begun to emphasize the sociological characteristics of the disputants involved in conflicts. Traditional theories of international conflict simplify their examination of disputes by ignoring or minimizing the importance of these characteristics, believing that by doing so, the theory can be applied to any international conflict. Within the past two decades, the characteristics of the disputants, as well as those of third parties, have been taken into account. Much of the research on third party intervention deals almost exclusively with mediation usually because most observers treat mediation as the most common form of third party intervention (Bercovitch, 1984; Holsti, 1987; Bercovitch & Langley, 1993).

The latest structure for analyzing international conflict that has gained widespread use among scholars of Conflict Resolution is the Contingency Model. The Contingency Model has many applications in international mediation research but largely it is used in aggregate analyses of a large number of cases (Jackson, 2000). The Contingency Model addresses a weakness of previous research in that it gives equal weight to both contextual and process factors. Richard Jackson notes that the Contingency Model

is predicated on the notion that conflict management is a social process whose outcomes are dependent upon, or contingent on, aspects of the structure and process of the conflict. That is, outcomes are determined by the interaction of certain input variables mediated through the structure and actual situation of the conflict management (Jackson, 2000: pg. 327).

Further, the Contingency model recognizes a reciprocal relationship between the nature of the conflict and the mediation process used to manage it rather than a unidirectional relationship (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000). Figure 1 below presents the model.

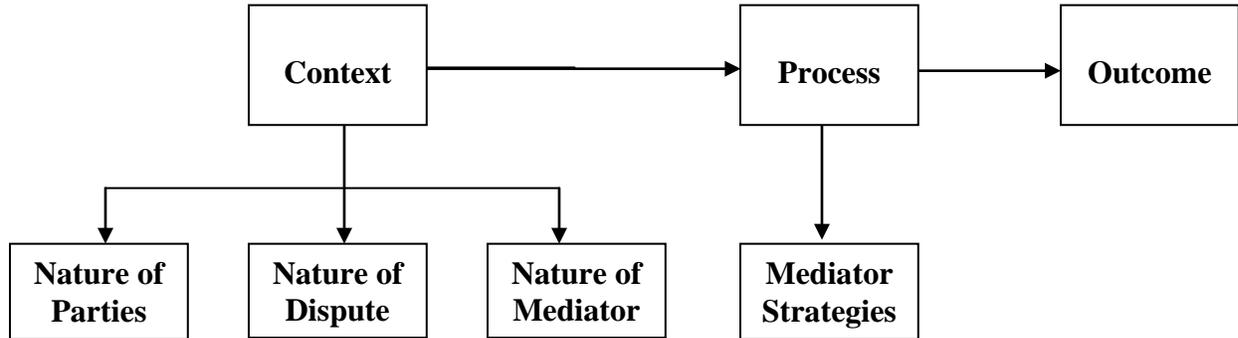


Figure 1: The Contingency Model of Mediation (Bercovitch and Langley, 1993)

The Contingency Model begins with an analysis of the context of the conflict. This includes an assessment of two environmental factors that influence any conflict: (1) the nature of the dispute and (2) how the parties involved relate to the nature of the dispute (Bercovitch et al., 1991; Jackson, 2000). Some scholars have included a third contextual factor, the “nature” of the mediator, which can add more explanatory power to the model because it incorporates an analysis of the influence of the mediator’s characteristics on the process of mediation (Bercovitch et al., 1991; Bercovitch & Langley, 1993).

The second part of the model is the process implemented by the mediator. Here, strategies and techniques are analyzed and from these two factors emerges the outcome. More recent work has updated this model by breaking down each part and adding more detailed groupings to each category (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000) or by describing the parts in terms of the conditions they represent, i.e. antecedent conditions, current conditions, consequent conditions (Jackson, 2000), but the general outline of the model remains the same.

Because of the generality of this model it has a wide range of applications in International Conflict research. It encompasses many of the different factors influencing international conflict by creating generalized categories and leaves it up to the researcher to apply the model to specific conflicts. For third party mediation it is especially useful because “a contingency approach would work to match the type of third party intervention to certain characteristics of the conflict in question” (Fisher & Keashly, 1991).

It is important to remember that the Contingency Model is not a theory. It is meant as a guide for the development of research designs and for the generation of theories. It is not a tool for predicting specific outcomes. For example, Bercovitch, et. al. used the model to design a statistical analysis of 284 international conflicts between 1945 and 1989. They

coded characteristics of disputants and used regression analyses postulating a relationship between those characteristics and successful attempts at mediation (Bercovitch et. al., 1991).

In the last step of the model, the actual process used by the mediator, a distinction is made between the behavior of the mediator and the communicative function the mediator performs (Kleiboer, 1996). The behavior is the strategy or techniques the mediator uses to bring about the outcome of the mediation effort. The communicative function of a mediator involves relating and interpreting information between the disputing parties. The point of the Contingency Model is that these two processes depend on the previous step where the mediator works to understand the context of the dispute as described above.

Application to Organizational Change

At the heart of conflict mediation is essentially a change initiative. The idea of mediating a conflict is to change the situation to end the conflict. As such, there can be direct links with the Contingency Model of conflict mediation to organizational change initiatives. The Contingency Model prescribes starting with an understanding of the context as it relates to three factors. The first of these contextual factors is a familiarity with the organization as it currently exists or functions. What is described as the Nature of the Disputing Parties in the original model I call the Nature of the Organization. For an organizational change initiative this means understanding the formal and informal structure as well as the culture of the organization, preferably from the member's perspective (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

According to Beer, Eisenstat & Spector (1990) the structure and systems within an organization are critical and so advise that these are the last things to be changed. Further, they believe that change initiatives that seek to change the culture of an organization are inherently flawed (Beer et al., 1990). An understanding of the nature of the organization from the beginning will provide a basic understanding of the situation as it exists at the onset. This is crucial because any process of change that is at odds with the culture of the organization will struggle to succeed at best and fail from the start at worst (Detert et al., 2000).

The second contextual factor is a familiarity with the change being sought. What the model describes as the Nature of the Dispute I call the Nature of the Change Initiative. It is easy to pin a label on a problem and apply a cookie-cutter solution. However, no two problems are the same because no two organizations are the same. After understanding the nature of the organization it is important to know what the organization wants to change given that understanding. By defining the issue, and in some cases redefining it as per the situation, with sufficient detail unique to the organization, change agents are better equipped to provide processes for change customized to the organization's needs. Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1990) suggest that one can create energy in an organization by including all stakeholders in defining the change the organizations desires. This method allows for greater

and more detailed information of what exactly is the organization needing to change and why it wants to change it. Including all levels will provide a wealth of information not normally available in diagnosing issues. With this information, consultants can better fit the change process to focus on what actually needs to be changed and thus increasing the chance for success.

The last contextual factor is understanding the role of the consultant in the change initiative. What is described as the Nature of the Mediator I call the Nature of the Consultant. As an external consultant, it is important to understand that any change initiative can be viewed as an imposed process from outsiders (Schein, 1999). This can be seen as disruptive by employees so understanding what the consultant's influence in the organization is can be crucial because every interaction has consequences (Schein, 1999). As such, the two functions a mediator plays in conflict resolution can inform a consultant's role in a change process. However, while the behavior of a consultant is dependent upon the change process applied, the communicative function may be more important (Hardy et al., 2000; Alvesson & Karreman, 2005).

The consultant should understand what information is communicated and how they communicate it to all levels of an organization so that employees understand what is being done, why it is being done and what the importance of any particular change is for the employee. Further, a consultant needs to communicate between levels so that upper management and front-line employees are provided with necessary information. Not all employees of an organization will understand the same idea in the same way. It is important for the consultant to interpret information in a way that is understandable at all levels of the organization (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). By playing an active role in the change initiative and understanding the influence they have on it, a consultant can facilitate a successful process rather than imposing a preset approach. Figure 2 shows the modified contingency model as it would look for organizational change.

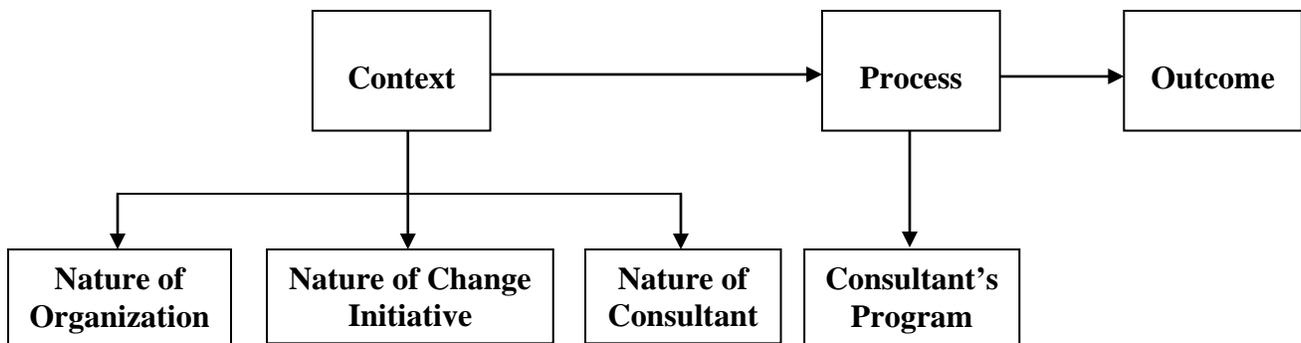


Figure 2: The Contingency Model of Organizational Change

Conclusion

After the context is understood then ideally the change process will flow from it. Change agents should utilize the information gathered from the organization to fit the change process to the organization. This means first employing a program that utilizes the existing formal and informal structures of the organization and functions with the organizational culture, not against it. It should also keep the goal of the change initiative at its core so that the change process addresses what the organization's needs really are, even if this means that the consultant needs to redefine the problem to get at the true issues. Finally the consultant's program should be facilitated by the consultant in a way that maintains lines of communication and interprets information as needed for all stakeholders. The consultant should do this while being constantly aware of their role and the impact their presence has on the organization.

The consultant's program should not merely take into account the context of the organization but rather should develop directly from it. This may mean that the entire initiative requires more time and effort but by working with the organization's context then the chance for success should increase. What is also important is that a feedback system be established while the program is in place and outcomes are produced. Since change initiatives can, on some level, change aspects of the organizational context it is important to have those changes link back to the contextual understanding as the process unfolds so that changes can be made to the program or negative outcomes can be minimized as they occur. By having a constant feedback system, the entire process can evolve and be malleable enough to account for the change as it occurs. This will only increase the probably for success even more.

International Implications

The international implications of applying the Contingency Model to organizational change come directly from the original use of the model in international relations and are two-fold. First, in an increasingly global setting, businesses are finding themselves hiring employees from various cultural backgrounds and even from various nations and ethnicities. As such, an increasingly diverse workforce means that organizational change is subject to the varying cultural norms of the employees. Not only does this need to be taken into account when forming a clear message of change but it can also be the source of the need for change. Here, understanding the nature of the organization (i.e. how culturally diverse is the workforce) and the nature of the change initiative (i.e. will implementation require questioning assumptions and education). As such, external consultants operating within the same country may enter an organization with cultural assumptions that many employees may not understand; so called "ways of doing things" that are actually unique to the specific

nation in which that organization operates. This would require the consultant to further understand their own nature in entering an organization.

Second, in an increasingly global business environment, stakeholders for any business extend beyond the borders of the home country. So much so that organizations are not restricted to a single nation but operate in multiple nations and regions, each with unique and differing cultures, attitudes and beliefs on how business should be conducted. As such, the need for a contextual understanding at the beginning of any change initiative is even more important. Just as understanding the diversity of a workforce within a single location, external consultants also need to understand the diversity of operational norms among several locations affected by the change initiative. For the same reasons stated above, the nature of the organization and the change initiative must be understood and taken into account when designing and implementing change. Of more importance is understanding the nature of the consultant since they will not only be entering an organization from the outside but possibly another nation or culture, which can be even more alien, and thus, imposing to an organization (i.e. an American imposing American business ideals in a non-western organization).

Similar to the Contingency Model of conflict mediation, change agents are seen as third-parties and are outsiders in the initiative. Cultural misunderstandings or even violations in the context of mediation can result in the disruption of the mediation process and could negatively impact the conflict by prolonging it further than necessary. In the context of organizational change, it could undermine the change initiative and prolong the underlying issue for which change was necessary in the first place. Indeed, in conflict mediation and organizational change, the detriment could even be a loss of confidence in the mediator/consultant, which could make further initiatives harder to accept in the future.

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