

Innovation Through Radical Circles:
Insights from Organizational Transformation of a Middle School

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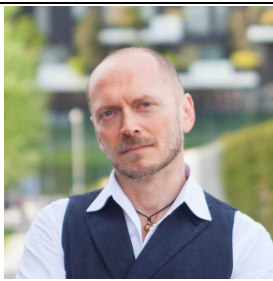
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Abstract

Organizations continually face challenges of navigating the complexities of organizational transformation. We offer a comprehensive approach – organizational innovation through radical circles – that attempts to address many of the problems associated with organizational change and development. We use a real-world example of the transformation of a school system to illustrate the essence and the power of radical circles to drive change. We offer insights for OD practitioners about creating a culture that may foster radical circles and we suggest avenues for further research into the power of radical circles for affecting organizational transformation.

Introduction

Organizations continually face pressure to transform in the face of ever-changing industries and more intense global competition. Global economic conditions both facilitate and threaten growth and profitability; complex regional social dynamics challenge firms to develop and retain human capital; rapid technological change enables increased efficiency while speeding up the pace of obsolescence; increased sustainability pressures threaten long-preserved business models; and the increasing pace of innovation within and across industries shrinks product development cycles and continually introduces new competitors to many markets. While these are but a few of the challenges and opportunities facing modern organizations, each increases the pressure on firms and managers to transform their organizations to better address the threats and opportunities. However, scholars and practitioners continue to indicate that organizational transformation is not only difficult, but most often results in failure (Beer, 2009; Pasmore & Woodman, 2017).

Scholars have offered a variety of perspectives and models to assist organizations in confronting the need for transformation. Cameron and Green (2015), identify no fewer than nine models for organizational change and transformation, and readily admit that the list is far from exhaustive. Scholars often characterize organizational change and transformation as either planned or unplanned (Knowles and Saxberg, 1988), while identifying a variety of approaches to facilitate either perspective. Additionally, in a survey of the change and transformation literature, Todnem By (2005) characterizes the process by the rate of occurrence, by how the change comes about, and by the scale of the change, while identifying 11 different change processes across the three characterizations.

We offer a comprehensive approach to organizational transformation that demonstrates a new and innovative perspective on a possible engine of initiating and executing change: the radical circle (“RC”). Radical circles differ significantly from other organizational transformation-focused groups, including work teams, task forces, learning circles, research circles, study circles, quality improvement circles, redesign teams or other formal work groups. Unlike any of these other groups, the RC is not a directive of management and is both emergent and unplanned. The membership in a RC is entirely voluntary and membership is policed by the members themselves. In its early stages of development, an RC tends to work under the radar and in secrecy. Further, it does not need the support of specific managers or champions – although an organization may ultimately tolerate the existence of such a group.

Rather than a proscribed, static organizational change process – which have been the predominant change process approach, and researchers assert contribute to a 70% failure rate (Pasmore, 2015) – RCs promote and reward non-linear thinking that may better achieve organizational transformation in the face of an unknowable number of internal and external threats to organizational stability and survival. The RC enables the surfacing and integration of bits and pieces of disparate knowledge; creates a greater understanding of the need for change; frames the change in a manner more aligned with the objectives of the drivers of change; illustrates the process by which those driving the change formulate a guiding mental model; and provides a flexible roadmap for undertaking the transformation process. Our illustrative case study of the organizational transformation of the SWM Middle School highlights a five-year process that was triggered and driven by a radical circle comprised of parents, teachers, administrators and other community members at large.

Planned change, emergent change and organizational transformation

One primary division among organizational transformation perspectives is the concept of planned versus emergent change. Planned change is a “formal procedure that is introduced and actively managed by managers or consultants” and participation for organization members is “typically expected to occur within the framework of the designed change” (Livne-Tarandach and Bartunek, 2009: 4). The assumption that organizational transformation can be intentional and executed in an orderly, predictable fashion underlies the planned change perspective (Knowles and Saxberg, 1988).

An alternative perspective is that of emergent change, which asserts that organizational change is “continuous, unpredictable, and essentially political in nature” (Livne-Tarandach and Bartunek, 2009: 5). Given the inability to plan and control the change process from the top, the emergent change perspective often arises from the bottom up. Scholars assert that the success of the emergent approach may depend on organizations facing constant threats in “dynamic and unpredictable environments to which they constantly have to adapt” (Todnem By, 2005: 376).

One perspective is that change may more effectively originate from the individuals within an organization (more of a bottom-up perspective), rather than from proscribed direction from the organization’s leaders (a top-down approach). In their recent examination of the evolution of organizational transformation and organizational development, Bartunek and Jones explain that “adequate attention is not explicitly paid to the experiences of individuals being exposed and participating in particular change processes” (2017: 144). Bartunek and Jones (2017) indicate that examining individuals’ participation in organizational transformation can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the transformation process.

One perspective on the components of the mechanisms driving organizational change centers on a “tapestry” of three elements - cognitive, structural and procedural – drawn from organizational learning processes (Cirella et al., 2016; Fredberg et al., 2011; Shani and Docherty, 2003). These elements provide broad configuration and guiding principles for a self-organizing entity that may emerge from the disruptions in the field, as espoused by Lewin and others (Burnes, 2004; Lewin, 1951). The emergent nature of each self-organizing entity triggers the development of a unique tapestry that contains different compositions of these three components. (See Table 1 for further detail on the tapestry of learning mechanisms) Combined, the tapestry of cognitive, structural and procedural elements may enable a newly formed entity – being formal or an informal - to stimulate sense-making, idea generation and problem solving critical for organizational transformation.

Insert table 1 about here

Towards a comprehensive model

A comprehensive model addressing the identification, formation and development of an emergent agent of organizational transformation needs to serve as a lens through which we can attempt to make sense of the change process. One lens that has been observed to be a meaningful model for organizational change and the development of a new organizational vision is that of a radical circle (Farrell, 2001; Verganti and Shani, 2016). As defined by Verganti and Shani, a radical circle is:

“a set of individuals who realize they have a common sense of malaise concerning the existing vision of a business and share similar insights about future directions that challenge the existing dominant myths of their organization. Therefore, over a period of time, they work voluntarily to explore a new vision, make it

grow, almost secretly, without a formal commitment, until the transformation takes off” (2016: 105).

A radical circle provides the economic and social capital; the encouragement and support; and the constructive criticism necessary to identify, test and refine innovative ideas necessary to pursue organizational transformation (Verganti and Shani, 2016). We believe that a RC can be an effective answer to the questions surrounding emergent change’s lack of coherent models or techniques to facilitate execution. Specifically, the emergence and development of a radical circle may generate a new vision that can best serve an organization going forward, and through the RC process, produce a successful result strengthened through the alignment of numerous perspectives of a committed group of individuals.

A RC is established through the interpersonal connections among individuals. A foundational component is the trust among the ‘radicals’ who recognize current challenges and opportunities and envision an alternative vision, and/or practices, and/or products and services. This trust is developed through informal connections that were likely built during work time – beyond formal work roles. Often, circles come together as friendship circles first (Farrell, 2001), and ultimately transition to an organization focus. As the group evolves, the circle develops a common set of attitudes and values – driven by the sense of malaise for the current situation (Verganti and Shani, 2016). RCs share the need for a common place; a place that is supplementary to workplace dynamics, tasks and roles.

Through honest conversation and ongoing interactions, a radical circle develops a shared vision and a purpose for existence. The cognitive, structural and procedural elements of the group’s operations emerge and are formed into operating boundaries, norms, work routines, languages and rituals. The RC discusses future work and organizational challenges, and these interactions facilitate the development of high quality relationships among the group members –

which can produce high levels of collective creativity and innovation. The relationships among the group members and the ongoing interactions provide stability to the circle. Additionally, the routines are critical for circle success, given the voluntary nature of RC membership and the lack of formal structure as a result of the radical circle forming outside of the bounds of the formal organizational context. The circle provides an “intimate protected environment where to dare to do outlandish experimentation” (Verganti and Shani, 2016: 108).

Early RC work might involve idea generation and critical reflection with a specific focus on addressing alternatives to what is viewed by individuals as a problematic current firm vision. The circle provides a “low-stakes” environment for not only idea generation, but honest dialog, exchanges about ideas and clashes of ideas that might not be welcomed in a more traditional organizational change process. Further, the trust among circle members and the clear identification of a common goal (i.e., addressing the “hated” current firm vision) facilitate more robust critical reflection and refinement of ideas. A radical circle is focused on the clashing and fusing of perspectives, rather than the more mundane generation of ideas (Verganti, 2016). The RC can exchange productive feedback and challenge different perspectives without the fear of delivering a solution because the circle operates “before there is formal commitment on the deeper exploration of a new vision” (Verganti and Shani, 2016: 109). Verganti and Shani term this idea refinement process as the “quest”, where the emerging new vision can be made “more robust before making it visible and submitting it for approval” (2016: 106).

Following the formulation of the new vision through the “quest”, the RC searches for a member of the executive team that the RC feels might have an open mind and be willing to give the emerging alternative vision full consideration. Such a person needs to be trusted by the RC as a person who has the skill set and capability to help build support within the formal

management team about the possible new vision. Here again, some incubation period seems to be needed for dialogue at many levels, such as within the top management team, between the RC and the management team, and within the RC. The conversations tend to lead to the strengthening of the new vision.

The RC’s culture of honest dialogue may also enable a more comprehensive and effective implementation strategy for the new vision/transformation through more creative approaches and a more refined commitment to the potential change. As top management takes ownership of the new vision, the RC’s role and internally driven mission seems to have completed its initial purpose of existence. At that point, the RC can begin to dissolve. The transformation process may be incorporated into the more ‘traditional’ organizational form as the new vision passes greater scrutiny and attracts a broad range of executive and organizational support. As managers and the top management team embrace the change, the process may transform to a more top-down approach – driven by the top management team and afforded resources for implementation. The commitment of corporate resources may signal the end of the need for the radical circle. Table 2 below captures some of the key features of an RC.

Insert table 2 about here

Illustrative Case – The SWM Middle School

Our illustrative case centers on the organizational transformation at the SWM Middle School (“SWM”)¹. The school is now one of the model middle schools in the United States. The school has received state and national awards for student performance and achievement and has a documented record of commitment to continuous improvement, innovativeness and

¹ The name of the school and the individuals involved have been changed to protect anonymity.

community involvement in the education process. Twenty years ago, SWM could not be characterized in this way, and faced serious threat of closure or dramatic changes. Much of the successful transformation was driven by the emergence of and the work done by a radical circle.

In examining the SWM transformation, we interviewed a number of parties involved in the SMS transformation process, including parents, school administrators, teachers and other school stakeholders. We interviewed five parents, two school administrators, six teachers, three staff members and two regional administrators. Each of these interviews was unstructured, which provided the subjects the opportunity to expand upon areas of specific interest to them and provided us with greater depth of insight into the entire transformation process. Additional information was gathered through school, county and state documents. Specific data collected included student populations, faculty headcount, student/teacher ratios, and average standardized test scores over a 10 year period covering both before and after the transformation.

The SWM Middle School

The SWM Middle School is situated within a bedroom community approximately 15 miles from a large metropolitan city. The school is led by two full time administrators, a principal and vice principal, and 18 full time teaching positions, which are divided among 28 staff members. Like most public schools in the United States, SWM is embedded within multiple levels of oversight, from the district, to the county (one of 37 counties in the state), to the region (one of 8 in the state), to the state, and, ultimately, to the U.S. Department of Education. Each level of oversight brings its own requirements and challenges that school administrators, teachers and parents must address each year.

Many public schools in the U.S. have faced threats to their existence from funding shortfalls, changing education requirements, shifting student demographics and the rise of charter schools and greater parental school choice. In the late 1990's and early 2000's, SWM was not immune from challenges to its survival. SWM and other schools in its district faced significant funding shortfalls and SWM's students' performance was below state-wide averages. These factors fueled rumors that persisted across the county that there were threats to close SWM. While no formal announcement was ever made regarding any potential closing, rumors of SWM facing closure circulated through a variety of informal communication channels in the community. Despite the lack of a formal threat, a variety of interview subjects indicated that conversations among individuals throughout the district began to occur concerning the state of SWM. An informal social group that shared a passion for the school, which we have titled Alpha Group², emerged as a driving force for change with regards to SWM. The Alpha Group became a radical circle that spearheaded the organizational transformation at SWM.

The Alpha Group was a small group that started with five individuals that met once a week on Saturday to bicycle together for a couple of hours and grew into a group of nine that included the "original" five plus four others. The cycling group activity was informal and without any official rules beyond the decision at the end of the cycling event about the timing of the next and initial discussion about destination for the ride. Individuals would bring others periodically, but the core five cyclists remained together from late 1990s. Beyond their passion for cycling, four of the five were connected to SWM, either as parents, teachers or staff members. Periodically, following the cycling event, the group would congregate at a local eating

² The term 'Alpha Group' was created by the authors to encapsulate the members of the RC.

establishment for a quick bite or a drink. As the threats to SWM's survival surfaced, the social conversation of the cycling group began to focus on SWM.

A month into the initial conversations following the cycle rides, one of the cyclists suggested that they get together at her house for a drink to continue the conversation about the challenges for SWM and the community. She suggested that if they know of others that share the same concern, they should invite them as well. Nine individuals came for the social, four were staff members from SWM, three parents of students at SWM, and two individuals who were not affiliated with the school in any formal context (one was a lay leader in a religious organization and one that was an executive in a technology company). Individuals described the meeting as loaded with passion, care and worry about the school and the community. Individuals enjoyed each other's company and the group agreed to continue to meet. The Alpha Group members evolved to become a group of friends that met for potluck dinners at various group members' homes. During the early stages of the development of the radical circle, the dinners were irregularly scheduled and mostly of a social nature.

As the social gatherings continued, the major focus of the group's discussion centered on the members' shared concern for the present and future of SWM. At that point, the issues of group size and the importance of confidentiality were surfaced. The fact that the desire was to continue to meet at homes, dictated the need to limit the group size. The group agreed that at this point no new individuals would be invited to join. Also, since some of the members were also school employees, it was agreed that whatever was being discussed would stay within the group. More specifically, group members indicated that the primary topics of discussion regarding SWM were focused on "how do we save the school?" and "what can be done to make the school the best that it can be?" Early conversations were still driven by the random

generation of specific ideas, including: 1.) forming partnerships between students, parents, and community members in order to create a nurturing environments for students both inside and outside the school; 2.) empowering each student to become an active learner and contributing member of the learning community; 3.) developing innovative curriculum that could involve the members of the community at large; 4.) integrating advanced technology into the learning process; 5.) generating support from the district educational system and permission to experiment with innovative learning processes; and 6.) motivating SWM's teachers and administrators to experiment with alternative curriculum and classroom management.

Within three months of its initial get together, the Alpha Group realized that “we had many ideas, some were going in the same direction, some were pointing in completely different directions, some were in harmony with one another and some were clashing.” “Honestly, we did not know what to do with all the ideas that were generated.” At this critical juncture, the conversation shifted to “How can we have an impact?” “The challenge was how to move from many scattered ideas into a common vision that will have an impact.” In other words, a key milestone in the process was how to move from being a collection of individuals attracted to one another by a common malaise about the current situation into a group with an impact. The group dedicated its next four get-togethers to the development of a strategy for action.

After further discussions regarding the strategy for action, the Alpha Group invited the principal and the superintendent to meet separately with the group. The group used the members' history and experience with the principal and the newly appointed superintendent of the school district to further inform their discussions. The previous experience that individual members had with the school's principal and the superintendent suggested that the administrators needed to hear what the group had to say, as both administrators seem to have been embedded in

a traditional educational paradigm or maybe did not see a way to transform the system. Both administrators were informed that the requested meetings were with a group of friends, including a few teachers from SWM that were concerned about the school and its future. Separate meetings were planned in order to encapsulate different messages to the different administrators. The meeting with the principal was intended to show the group's support for the principal and express the group's desire to help in sustaining the school. The meeting with the superintendent enabled her to share her vision for the school district with the group, as well as to hear some of the group's concerns regarding the persistent rumors of school closings and its ideas for possible actions. Both administrators applauded the group's ongoing commitment to the school success, and the many great ideas generated. Group members characterized these meetings as positive. "I found the administrators to be of an open mind and concern." "They welcomed our effort and commitment to help." "As a member of the school staff I was proud of my principal, he was touched by the caring and was listening to everything we said." "We were asked if we were willing to continue in some kind of a role to help advance the school."

Following the meetings and all of the previous work of the Alpha Group, the administrators created a small operating group and requested that the group deliver within a month a proposed roadmap and process for action. The operating group was comprised of a senior administrator from the superintendent's office, the school's principal, and three members from the Alpha Group, including one teacher. Given the newly-garnered administration support and commitment of resources to the transformation process, the work of the Alpha Group radical circle transitioned to the more traditional change process (Pasmore, 2015; Shani & Docherty, 2003) driven by the operating committee.

The operating group developed a preliminary road map that was presented to the superintendent. Within six months of the transition to the operating committee, three major volunteer-based entities were created to advance the SWM transformation:

- The SWM Foundation (“Foundation”). Established as a non-profit organization with the express purpose of raising money to offset any state shortfall of funding for schools in the district. The declared mission was “to provide a halt to the educational cutbacks that have plagued the district.” Fund raising events were designed and led by the group. Since its formation, the Foundation has donated over \$2,250,000 to the district.
- The Parents Association Group (“PAG”). Created to “promote the welfare of the children and to facilitate communications among parents, teachers, and trustees.” The group meets once a month to elicit and coordinate parental activities during and after school hours. Some of the group’s activities included supporting the after-hours educational programs, celebrating the Chinese New Year with the community, and addressing child safety to and from school.
- The School Improvement Brain Trust Group (“SIBTG”). Created to focus on a continuous improvement program that would integrate innovative thinking into the learning process. The group meets once a month with the sole focus on generating innovative ideas on ‘what’ and ‘how’ to improve the learning processes. Some of the innovations that were triggered by the group include a set of experimental designs on different ways to organize and lead a theme-based integrated curriculum.

These groups continue to operate more than a decade after formation and continue to support the operations of SWM and its students.

The Alpha Group's initiatives – with the support of the Foundation, the PAG and the SIBTG – generated significant improvements within SWM, and alleviated any pressure to close the school. Key metrics included graduation rates, university attendance and completion, and performance on statewide assessments. District studies of SWM reported that by 2015, 95% of SWM students graduated from high school, increasing from 61% in 1987, 75% in 2002, and 91% in 2007. By 2016, 90% of SWM students start college, and of those, 95% graduate with a first university degree. For the last ten years, SWM students' results on key statewide assessments have ranged from the 92nd to the 98th percentile statewide. The superintendent claims that “the successful transformation of SWM is attributed to the hard work and commitment of the many individuals from the community that chose to be engaged at a high level.” She further claimed that “The [Alpha Group's] willingness to convert fear into a new much more radical vision was instrumental in triggering the transformation. The principal's willingness to take the risk and embark on this unprecedented change journey and its complex process is what helped save the school and led it to its current success.” Across a wide array of measures of success, the transformation of SWM has succeeded in improving the education experience for its students and providing strong foundations for future academic success.

Discussion

The radical circle enhances an organization's understanding of the need for change; namely by illuminating that the impetus for change may emerge more organically through the efforts of individuals, rather than broader aspects of the organization. The radical circle creates the context within which radical new thinking can develop and triggers organizational

transformation. Being embedded in existing thinking paradigms and practice prevents members of a system from seeing radical new directions (Verganti and Shani, 2016).

In addition to the emotionally-centered formation impetus, the RC seems to emerge quickly as a meaningful entity in the transformation process – bypassing much of the expected small group formation processes illustrated by Tuckman (1965) and others (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). While the RC may have its own stages of group development, they do not appear to be as linear as those outlined in Tuckman’s ‘forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning’ approach (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). In fact, the RC process appears to leapfrog any forming and storming stage to reach an initial performing stage as a result of the way that they come together. Members of the RC share a common enemy, a common malaise towards the status quo as they converge rapidly on what they dislike, which serves as the common platform for collaborative exploration. As honest dialogue takes hold, clashes of ideas begin to emerge that tend to force the RC to possibly revisit the processes of establishing group norms or operating procedures. However, any organizing or group formation activities within the RC appear significantly less structured than any other group development processes.

While a radical circle may have its foundations in friendship circles (Farrell, 2001), it is meaningfully different from many other organizational groups, including learning circles, research circles, design groups, study circles, quality improvement circles, or change-oriented task forces (Holmstrand et al., 2008). The primary differentiating factor between the RC and these other groups is that each of these other groups has been created through management fiat or other formal organizational process. A RC forms organically, and as seen in the SWM example, members come from different organizations or, at a minimum, from disparate areas of an

organization (Verganti and Shani, 2016). The driving force for RC formation is the passion for addressing a perceived threat to organizational survival not necessarily shared by others – not an assignment to a task force or pre-assigned membership onto a research or quality improvement circle. This passion may heighten commitment of RC members and enhance the chances of success for any organizational transformation emerging from the RC’s work.

The shared passion that is driven by a shared sense of malaise with the existing situation and the emotions underlying the formation and efforts of the RC pave the way for greater chances of success for any organizational transformation. The RC may establish a more comprehensive and “battle tested” approach to organizational transformation through its rigorous quest process – featuring comprehensive feedback, criticism, clashes of ideas and ongoing idea refinement prior to any disclosure of the idea to a broader audience. Additionally, the RC seeks a few potentially strong advocates, or champions, outside of the RC to disclose the group’s ideas to before presenting them to senior management or other stakeholders. After a heated discussion, the RC that emerged at SWM took advantage of the lean organization structure of the school system and chose to link with a school administrator and district superintendent as the possible champions. Both were viewed as individuals with high integrity who have been in the system for many years, embedded in the traditional ways of school administration and, if exposed to a radical new way to transform the school that will enhance learning, might be willing to take the lead and champion the transformation.

These champions may give the RC’s ideas greater legitimacy than if the ideas were presented to a broader group of stakeholders directly by the RC. In addition, these champions may enable the RC to overcome initial resistance to change from senior management or other meaningful stakeholders, as the champions may engender confidence from senior management

that might not be present if senior management was confronted by a group of “radicals” with ideas to change the organization. A more robustly tested solution may facilitate easier top management buy-in to the circle’s desired solution. Finally, the radical circle facilitates easier handoff of the desired transformation process to more appropriate execution personnel given the inherent malleability and temporary nature of the radical circle.

The emergence of the RC, by its very nature, develops a tapestry of mechanisms – cognitive, structural and procedural – in order to sustain the energy, passion and action underlying the change process. The RC in our SWM Middle School example displayed such mechanisms such as the new vision and quest (cognitive), creation of the operating group, seven subcommittees and three standing organizations (structural), and the few rules and routines of working and communicating (procedural). Various members of the school community – outside of the RC – suggested that the tapestry of mechanisms had a major influence on the evolution of the effort. While some studies began to explore the impact of the learning mechanisms tapestry (i.e., Cirella et al., 2016; Fredberg et al., 2011; Shani and Docherty, 2003), further empirical study is needed to understand better the actual configuration of the tapestry, the synergy between different mechanisms and the impact of the dynamics between them on the outcome of a transformation effort.

Ultimately, the RC functions as an engine for innovation. Driven by a collective passion to address threats to an organization’s core mission or even its survival, the RC harnesses the power of its members to generate, test and refine solutions. Unencumbered by formal organizational boundaries, procedural constraints or traditional group dynamics, the RC brings new ideas to light that are aimed at redefining the organization – innovations in an organization’s strategy or mission that were unidentified previously. RC members are drawn to the cause

through shared malaise with the current situation, a collective appreciation for each other as well as a recognition of the seriousness of the problem at hand. Despite the success of the RC in this SWM middle school situation, further research is needed to unlock the extent to which the RC overcomes the challenges associated with typical change processes.

Considerations for Practice

In order for our perspective to be of use for managers and other practitioners, we need to better understand whether firms can create environments in which radical circles can emerge. Organization development practitioners can facilitate the creation process of a culture that nurtures innovation through both formal and emergent mechanisms that co-exist. The insights about creating parallel organizations, one that addresses the operational and one that addresses the innovation challenges has been documented in the literature (Galbraith, 1973; Bushe & Shani, 1991). As suggested by this study, while establishing such a culture might be desirable, the OD practitioner needs to explore carefully alternative ways of doing so that are likely to fit with the current organizational culture.

Beyond efforts to enhance an emerging RC-supportive culture, leadership may need to be “retrained” to welcome the potentially radical ideas emerging from a radical circle, and to gain comfort with the concept of radical elements operating within the firm in the first place. Any perception of a loss of control or relinquishment of a grip on the reins of organizational transformation may take a significant adjustment period. Managers and executives experiencing these challenges to the fundamental elements of leadership may need additional support from boards of directors and other stakeholders, or require additional outside mentorship, to welcome the bottom-up oriented approach to change.

Practitioners likely will need to recognize the risks of multiple radical circles “percolating” within an organization. Can a firm manage these processes to avoid conflicts or experiencing radical circles working at cross purposes. The emerging nature of complex adaptive systems (Olson & Eoyang, 2001) suggests that practitioners and organizational development and change professionals may need a dedicated effort to embrace radical circles.

Conclusion

The process of organizational transformation is a difficult one to study. Examples from the field, like that presented here, may not be the ideal approach for examining all of the mechanisms and drivers of organizational transformation. A variety of scholars has used real-world case studies to examine organizational change, but other empirical approaches are needed to enhance the understanding of organizational transformation. New approaches to conducting real time evaluation of organizational transformation are necessary.

The examination of the SWM transformation was carried out as an extension of the work advanced by Farrell (2001) and Verganti and Shani (2016) for the purpose of gaining a deeper level insight into the phenomenon of RCs in organizations. Furthermore, the focus was on investigating the possible role that an RC can play as the engine for organizational transformation. The SWM example demonstrated that an RC played a critical role in developing a new radical vision, triggering and enhancing the transformation process of the system, its survival and success. Finally, some considerations for organization development practitioners were explored and possible research directions identified.

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Table 1 – Elements of a Learning Process Tapestry

Component	Function	Contributions
Cognitive	Critical to “underpin generically subjective sense-making and enable ... [the entity] ... to operate with shared meaning” (Fredberg et al., 2011: 124)	Value and mission statements, policies and plans and other strategy documents (Fredberg et al., 2011)
Structural	Encompass communication channels, delineate roles, and can establish formal and informal forums for joint exploration and debate (Fredberg et al., 2011)	Physical structure to facilitate communication among entity members, as well as organize work roles to improve sense-making or problem solving
Procedural	Facilitate collective learning, as well as enable members to share knowledge and communicate across levels of the organization or across organizations (Fredberg et al., 2011: 125)	Rules, routines, methods and tools that can be institutionalized in the organization

Table 2 – Key features of a radical circle

Essence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A group of individuals committed to organizational success who connect voluntarily to address their shared malaise with an organization’s current vision • The circle’s will to change is for the good of the organization, not just as a disruptive rebel force • The intensity of the discontent serves as the magnet that draws individuals (at time strangers) from across the organization together to explore alternative visions
Theoretical foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sociology: Collaborative circles (i.e., Farrell, 2001) • Organization Design and Innovation: Information processing in times of task uncertainty (i.e., Galbraith, 1974) • Organization Learning: Learning Mechanisms (i.e., Shani & Docherty, 2003)
Key resources/functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframing the problem • Membership by invitation only • Secrecy • Honest dialogue • Collaboration • Criticism and Exploration
Phases of development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal gatherings – malaise identified through discussion • Identify varying perspectives on problems with current vision • Quest for ideal solution through criticism, exploration and refinement within the circle • Selection of organizational champion from outside the circle to share criticism, exploration and divulge transformation solution • Work with champion to develop organizational support and resources for evaluation and implementation • Transition to traditional organizational change processes • Dissolution of the circle
Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle functions guided by a tapestry of cognitive, structural and procedural elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cognitive elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop language, concepts and values imbued into the circle ▪ Facilitate group sense-making ○ Structural elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create appropriate design configuration ▪ Establish communication channels and roles for joint exploration and critical debate ▪ Facilitate institutionalization of learning into the circle ○ Procedural elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instill rules, routines and tools for the circle to function effectively ▪ Facilitate collective learning and share knowledge across the organization