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Emeritus Professor Dennis Turner: Researcher

by

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Dennis Turner is always responding to a challenge. His typical response has four core characteristics. One is that his understanding and framing of that challenge is grounded in his experience of the world. Having defined his goals and objectives, he then collects the relevant data. Third, he analyses data with integrity. The search is for what the data tells us matters and that will make a difference. His bias is always towards what is actionable. Finally, he looks for help where he does not have the knowledge or expertise. He followed this tried and tested process to ask why some organisations change successfully and many others fail. The journey of discovery is always harder and longer than we expect. So it was for Dennis and his colleague Mike Crawford who brought data collection and analytical skills to the team.

Major case studies were completed at Woolworths, Du Pont Australia, the FAI Group, Storage Tek and Tubemakers. These helped Dennis and Mike to develop their model of strategic change (Turner & Crawford 1998). They found that the competencies for managing successfully today are different from those for building tomorrow. They added to the literature that organisational survival or performance depends upon the development of new competencies, extending the work of Prahalad and Hamel (1990) and Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997).

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To test their theory and measure what makes the difference, Dennis and Mike studied 243 cases of corporate change in the public and private sectors, and in large and small firms. They found that the challenge was larger than expected. Sixty seven per cent of the changes suffered at least one major setback, 47% were hit by two setbacks and 29% by three. Yet, 88% of the managers thought that they had the 'right' answer and almost all, 92%, thought that they had the competency to manage the change. This gap between intentions and deliverables is unacceptable. The consequences and costs are borne by the organisations' shareholders, workforce, suppliers and management among others.

To reduce that gap, Dennis and Mike were looking for '... the few fundamental factors that ... make the difference between success and failure in corporate change.' (Turner & Crawford 1998, pp. ix). They found that 'change effectiveness' or building tomorrow depends on three reshaping competencies. These are *engagement*, *development* and *performance management*. In contrast, 'current business performance' or running today is a function of *biztech*, *marketing and selling*, and *performance management*. Feedback or performance management is common to both. This is consistent with the powerful general finding from goal setting theory that performance and learning depend on effective, timely feedback (Locke & Latham 1990).

The positive influence of marketing and selling on current business performance is consistent with the research on organisational external fit and performance (Miles & Snow 1984). And few would question that development programs are needed to support major changes. Dennis and Mike identify two less well-understood competencies, *biztech* and *engagement*, which drive current business performance and change effectiveness, respectively.

Engagement is about getting the people throughout the organisation informed, involved, committed and motivated to act to achieve the firm's purpose and future directions. It is not about informing and involving people, it is about getting them informed and involved. These are states not processes and their levels can be measured and, therefore, managed. Biztech consists of competencies involved in commanding and understanding the technologies, processes and mechanisms through which the organisation creates and delivers its products and services to its market.

These capabilities can be personal or embedded in the fabric of the organisation, 'in its practices, processes, systems, structures, culture, values, know-how and technologies.' Their influence on performance is stronger when those competencies are embedded in the organisation's fabric rather than owned by individuals. And, in the latter case, they leave the organisation when their owners leave. While engagement competency tends to be individually owned rather than embedded in the organisation's competency set, it is still the case that its influence on change effectiveness is stronger when it is embedded than personally owned.

Competences are necessary but not sufficient conditions for effective performance. Dennis and Mike show that organizational states, including commitment, empowerment and esprit de corps are linked to successful change and business performance. For example, states of commitment, understanding and empowerment enhance change effectiveness, while a state of conflict reduces it; and a state of high esprit de corps is positively linked to current business performance.

States as described by Dennis and Mike have much in common with dimensions of culture. Critical to their findings is an inclusive culture in which strategic change may ultimately be decided by the few but is delivered by the many. Consistent with that they show how effective strategic change requires shifts in the attitudes, behaviours and competencies of the many, who are not 'sold' the vision of the few but are engaged in the design and building of tomorrow.

The arguments and empirical analysis presented by Dennis and Mike are strong and persuasive. But Dennis's bias is always towards action and what makes a difference. What sticks in my mind, long after having read their book—*Change Power*—and Dennis's other research, are the examples used to illustrate and breathe life into the models, like the story about Paul Simon putting four purchases on the Board table and asking everyone how much they cost in Woolworths compared to their closest competitor, Franklins. It is stories like this that address the goal stated in the book's introduction as to: 'Provide a powerful, practical framework to focus your actions on the things that matter most to change success. It will give you new tools and concepts, and help you apply them to your business. It will increase your personal skills and impact in managing change'.

What makes Dennis's research special is that tight link between theory and practice. He reminds me of Lewin's famous phrase 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory'.

References

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