

ABSTRACT

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Singing Rails On Organising for Change in the Swedish Rail

Organisations are a part of the modern project. If equipped with the right technology, planning, control and supervision, they will lead the way to a perfect world. The mainstream in organisation theory follows this thought by posing ever the same question – how to change organisations so that they will function as they should? And yet there is a substantial body of research showing that it is easier to plan and decide upon changes than to carry them out. Change is constant, but relatively seldom according to plans. This is especially true of so-called programmatic change, controlled and initiated top-down. Nonetheless, managerial attempts to introduce change continue and seem to become intensified. Why?

Looking for answers, the author questions the view that technical/economic rationality governs organising in practice, on the basis of a study of a public sector organisation in times of "marketisation". Management groups were observed for 3 years, and the observation revealed how they cope with conflicting logics between politics and business, how identity and legitimacy are created and upheld and how demands for change are interpreted and transferred into action.

The field material is presented to the readers as a serial, a documentary soap-opera, framed in a longer history of change in the same organisation. Institutional theory is combined with concepts from psychodynamic theory to provide tools for interpretations and analysis. In this way, the concept of uncertainty and the understanding of emotions are given a different meaning than in mainstream organisation theory. Organising and institutionalising are driven not only by externally evoked uncertainty – such as caused by new technology, threatening competitors or an uncertain future – but also by internally evoked uncertainty, anxiety produced in interactions. Emotions are not something irrelevant or disturbing, neither are they something that managers have to control. In the light of the psychodynamic theory, emotions are part of every interaction and as such they need also to be organised.

The study reveals the repetitive patterns in organising that are influenced by the ruling routines and institutions but also become reinforced by different attempts to de-institutionalise. The study concludes with a discussion about the conditions that trigger anxiety, which shows how different unconscious attempts to divert it (e.g. through new activities, new managers, new change programs) create even more anxiety, demanding even more measures to cope with it. The process thus becomes self-propelling.

KEYWORDS: Organisational change, institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation, psychodynamic theory, public sector, anxiety, defence.

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