

What can Change Management Theory teach us in relation to the Brexit process?

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Traditional management theory claims that there are two (2) types of changes taking place in social collective entities, namely the planned and the unplanned change. Planned change can be categorised into two further forms: incremental and radical change. Arguably, the former is a change that is under control, well most of times, referring to the introduction of new software and/or hardware systems, a new legislation, etc. It occurs in a simple and linear fashion. Radical change, although planned, is complex, multilevel and discontinuous.

The Brexit process can be considered as such a phenomenon. The UK Government planned it within a specific time-line but, I am afraid, with somewhat of a wishful thinking approach. In other words, it treated a radical and multilevel change as an incremental one. One basic rule in managing change in organisations is that we cannot treat a radical change as incremental and vice versa. A complex, multilevel change requires complex, multilevel approaches and required time!

Brexit, although it emerged as an unexpected and unplanned change, soon proved to be a planned one, especially after the initiation of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Supposedly, when a country takes such a critical political decision of formally activating the outcome of the June 2016 Referendum, it needs to know the nature of the change process that is being initiated at least.

Since March 2017, Brexit has had all the markings of a planned but complex change process. First of all, it has not followed an incremental logic, but a definite radical one. There was a wider disagreement from the beginning on the nature of the agreement that the British wanted to achieve. This opened problems related to what the UK government was targeting to achieve. Influenced by the campaign 'Brexit means Brexit', the UK government did not realise that the process of Brexit needed to follow a more wise and careful

approach. Secondly, the Brexit process is a multilevel one. It involves different aspects of public policies that need to be taken into account in the synthesis of the targeted outcome including the multitude of different actors that needed to be taken into account.

The UK government seemed to minimise them focusing on a few of them and mainly on the future economic relationship with the EU. Such a multilevel change though includes many aspects, like social, cultural and institutional, that cannot be left behind or, even worse, ignored.

Beyond, the above features of Brexit as a radical change, one can claim that the deadline of achieving the agreement was just a milestone of the change itself. In other words, Brexit does not 'end' after the 29th of March 2019. Actually, the most difficult part of the change will start immediately after moment or should have already been started. Everything that will be agreed to, because there will be an agreement finally as I will argue shortly, needs to be applied. Usually this is a moment of 'fun', since thousands of unplanned issues will emerge (or in some cases could not be planned) in advance that will make Brexit seem rather 'ugly' as a phenomenon.

Hundreds of commercial agreements among UK and EU countries (and maybe more countries) need to be renegotiated, a rather long and painful process and even more so for those that are more directly involved; the status of many people will remain unclear for a period creating additional anxiety; a lot of companies, mainly small and medium enterprises, will face confusion due to the new system and how this will impact their operations; significant political issues will emerge with countries and governments less keen and supportive of Brexit, with Scotland being a prime example. In short, the truly hard part of the change will take place after March when UK government will need to find ways to apply the agreement.

In my opinion, an agreement will finally be achieved since this fits our human nature. If we observe what has been happening it is well-known that the agreement that the Prime Minister attempted to suggest was dramatically rejected by the House of Commons. There is a domino effect of various negative consequences of the no-deal Brexit scenario. The media bombarded us with these consequences, a group of well-known retailers warned of price increases and product

shortages, EU claims that there would be confusion with the status of UK citizens that live in EU countries, Universities indicated that they are going to lose large amounts of EU funding, a number of talented EU citizens would prefer to leave the country, and many more.

These potential outcomes were enough to create a situation of collective stress rooted in our very existence. Neuroscience claims that our brains are prediction machines and therefore they hate uncertainty. Without doubt the possibility of a no-deal Brexit enhances this. In uncertain situations, ambiguity dominates and ambiguity is perceived as a threat since the brain does not know what to make of it.

There are studies suggesting that people may live more comfortably with a negative outcome rather than with the threat of the unknown which stimulates anxiety and fear. The non-deal Brexit falls into this category. It is ambiguous and is perceived as an uncomfortable threat for the brain. Therefore, sooner or later, the decision makers will strike a deal since they will prefer negative, but well-known, consequences from the uncertain and ambiguous outcome of a no-deal one.

In conclusion, for the time being, the UK government has to do three things; first, to realise that a radical change like Brexit cannot be faced as a simple one, and merely adjust its practices. Second, to focus on the period of time after the 29th of March where the real change will take place. Finally, in all cases, UK Government needs to be aware of a negative, but clear solution, it is much more preferred in comparison to an uncertain one.