
The Paradox of Innovation and Urgency

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Abstract

The idea that change efforts demand a sense of urgency is fundamental to many prescriptive change models. The purpose is to create energy and uproot established behaviours, with the idea that change can take place more easily under such conditions. It is not clear that a sense of urgency supports creativity and ability to innovate, however. Indeed, studies indicate that pressure may lead to less creativity and a focus on reducing errors instead of supporting progress. As authors in the change management field almost univocally support a sense of urgency as an important success factor, there seems to be a paradox at hand: urgency both supports change and inhibits it. A lingering question is how this paradox can be resolved. The paper builds on an action research study of seven change initiatives at a large media company which was undergoing a serious crisis. The researchers set up the initiatives together with the organization to study the dynamics of creating innovative change under pressure. The study found that the dynamics in the team changed from one of stress and anxiety to energy and creativity under certain conditions. The paper discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature in the area.

Keywords: change; innovation; urgency, creativity; media; case study; newspapers: action research

Introduction

There is general agreement in the change management literature that a “sense of urgency” is needed for successful change (Cady, Jacobs, Koller, & Spalding, 2014; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1947; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). According to Kotter (1995; 2008), for example, a sense of urgency is created when something is pressingly important, for instance if it is a matter of surviving or related to the difference between success and failure. Arguably, a sense of urgency could create the motivation needed to move away from the current state and change behavior towards reaching something new.

However, inviting people to take part of pain messages such as information about weakening sales, upcoming regulations, predicted technology shift or foreseeable crises may also create a sense of fear. To urge people to see the risks of not surviving as a company, or to encourage the visibility of the thin line between success and failure could also have its disadvantages.

Indeed, other studies suggest that when it comes to new knowledge creation, creativity and acting innovatively, negative emotions such as fear and stress is not beneficial, whereas joy and interest are (Fredrickson, 2001; Lee, Caza, Edmondson, & Thomke, 2003). This is echoed by authors researching organizational renewal capabilities

(Huy, 1999, 2005) stemming from positive emotions (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Fredrickson, 2003; Huy, 1999, 2005).

Hence, the benefit of a sense of urgency is not self-evident in cases where creativity and innovation is needed. With steadily increasing knowledge content of work, speed of innovation and increased organizational complexity, there is a necessity to better understand the relationship between the need for a promotional focus and a sense of urgency. Especially in renewal processes, for example in an industry transformation, where the road ahead is unknown, creativity, learning and new ways of thinking and behaving are crucial. The logical consequence is that the sense of urgency advocated in some of the major contributions to the change management literature can destroy the change it wants to create.

If a sense of urgency is both necessary and detrimental to change, we are faced with what seems to be a paradoxical tension. Management needs to create both pressure and refrain from doing so. Other authors describe that paradoxical tensions can be resolved by higher level solutions (Fredberg, 2014; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith, Binns, & Tushman, 2010). A question that arises is if there is a higher level solution also to the paradox described in this paper, in which a sense of urgency as well as positive emotions and a will to move towards the future (rather than away from the present) guide the change process.

This paper builds on a project that focused on innovation in the media industry during a period of technology transition brought by digitalization. It is widely acknowledged that incumbents find it hard to transform sufficiently to remain successful (Christensen, 1997; Christensen, Suárez, & Utterback, 1998; Miller, 1990). Media industry incumbents are no different (Christensen, Skok, & Allworth, 2012). The case company in question for this paper is Newsgroup, a large media corporation in Sweden. To handle the need to change and innovate in the pressured situation, the management team decided to set up a series of innovation initiatives as tests of a different approach together with internal high potential managers and the research team. The intent for the study from the research team's point of view was to study the dynamics around innovativeness and change.

The change initiatives were - to varying degrees - all successes (to the surprise of management and employees of Newsgroup). This paper focuses on how the initiatives solved the paradox of innovation and urgency, thus creating pressure from the sense of urgency while releasing energy and creativity. We find three key components that changed the dynamics in initiatives: The success-failure relationship; the trust-engagement relationship and the short term-long term relationship.

The paper starts with a theoretical background on the positive and negative side of creating a sense of urgency with a special focus on the effects of urgency in a setting that demands innovation. It continues with a description of the case situation, the intervention methods used, and the findings. The paper ends with discussion and analysis and possible conclusions to be drawn.

Theoretical frame of reference

Kurt Lewin famously proposed that any organization that needs to undergo change has to first “unfreeze” the stable state that the organization is in. Lewin argued that the unfreeze-phase (in his process of unfreezing, changing, refreezing) often needed a deliberate “emotional stir-up” necessary to break through what in his mind were signs of “complacency and self-righteousness” in the organization (Lewin, 1947, p. 35). Likewise, in the well-known “Gleicher change formula” (Beckhard, 1975; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Beer, 2009; Cady et al., 2014) a “dissatisfaction” with status quo, or sense of urgency is central to creating change (along with a well-designed process and a vision/model for a future state). Senge (1990) states that behavior will be changed when there is a real understanding of why it needs to change. Using harsher language, Conner (1992) argues that dispersion of “pain messages” throughout an organization is the first step for creating a commitment for change, as it helps people to disengage from the current state and attract them to the wanted change ahead (ibid.). Kotter (1995; 2008) goes to further length, by stressing the need to bring the outside world into the organizations in order to overcome complacency and create a sense of urgency - otherwise the change effort is doomed. Armenakis et al. (1993) stress the importance of creating a message that shows the discrepancy between the current state and the end state and thereby evoking a common belief that change is needed. In their review, they find that other authors have used concepts such as creating intellectual pain, diffusing dissatisfaction or threat of organizational failure to describe the similar ways of assuring awareness of the necessity of the change ahead (ibid.). It is reasonable that this

approach is necessary in some situations, for example those where fast cost-cutting programs need to be put into work (what Beer & Nohria, 2000a, call E-strategies).

However, in a case where renewal beyond incremental improvements or cost cutting programs is needed, it is essential that the organization develops new capabilities to embrace the change ahead (what Beer & Nohria, 2000a, call O-strategies). Whereas an E-strategy approach is driven top down and the answers are pre-specified (Beer & Nohria, 2000a; Beer & Nohria, 2000b), the O-strategy demands that the organization takes part in developing the future answers. Most change theory assumes that also an O-strategy needs a sense of urgency, however. Herein lies a conundrum. It is commonly assumed that both “rewards” and “threats” can and be used in order to influence behavior in a wanted direction (Fredrickson, 2003; Higgins, 1997). But to follow Elliot (2008), the capacity to make decisions, solve problems and collaborate is reduced with a threat response/prevention focus (Higgins, 1997) and increased with a reward response/promotion focus (ibid.). In addition, when threatened, people are inhibited to perceive subtle signals required for solving non-linear problems (Subramaniam, Kounios, Bowden, Parrish, & Jung-Beeman, 2009). In order to be creative, open minded and use the full potential of the brain it is important to feel safe and to create a mutual sense of trust (Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009; Robertson et al., 2007).

The negative effects of organizational responses to perceived threats are described in research on “defensive routines”. Defensive routines are routines that people set up in order to protect themselves and their organizations from embarrassment and threats (Argyris, 1993; Kylén, 1999). They increase in importance as organizations respond to threats, resulting in inability to learn and innovate (Argyris, 1993). The unintended consequence is that the defensive ways of acting protects the current way of thinking and doing and therefore inoculates the organization and its members to learning and innovation.

Creativity, trust and open communication are needed in order to find new solutions to complex questions (Kylén, 1999; Senge, 1990). For new knowledge creation as well as for thinking and acting innovatively, negative emotions such as fear and shame seem to be detrimental, whereas joy and interest are beneficial (Fredrickson, 2001; Lee et al., 2003); Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Positive emotions broaden one's awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2001). Over time, this broadened behavioral repertoire builds skills and resources, whereas negative emotions prompt narrow, immediate survival-oriented behaviors (ibid.). Cooperrider & Sekerka (2003) propose a model for positive organizational development, where challenging the organization by inquiry leads to the elevation of strengths.

Amabile and Kramer (2011) show how positive emotion created by “small wins” in project work support creativity and productivity. Managers play an important role as catalysts to create this sense of progress, which becomes a collective experience that propels the project/organization forward. The opposite is also true, however. Feelings of anxiety and stress, accentuated by dysfunctional, control oriented management more focused on controlling for setbacks rather than supporting progress, stops any attempts to creativity and lowers productivity significantly (ibid.).

In related research, Huy (1999; 2006) argues that renewal capabilities, such as organizational learning, receptivity to change and creativity, of an organization are key to succeeding with organizational transformations. These organizational capabilities come from positive emotions such as fun, hope, and expressed sympathy. Hence, Huy (2006) stresses the importance on focusing on evoking emotions supporting the change ahead. Building on research from other fields, the benefit of a sense of urgency and the pressure that comes with it is not self-evident. Many authors agree that in a simplified form, human actions derive from the urge to move away from a perceived threat or towards a perceived reward (Fredrickson, 2003; Robertson et al., 2007). Lieberman and Eisenberger (2009) argue that emotions create the same types of responses as physical threats or rewards – meaning that for instance the chance of moving towards happiness or away from shame is just as real as moving towards food and away from danger.

Arguably, a sense of urgency is not necessarily beneficial to simulate more creativity, learning and open mindedness. So if authors in the change area almost univocally support a sense of urgency as a key factor, change either does not need the factors just listed, or there is a paradox involved in creating a sense of urgency: it both supports change and inhibits it. A lingering question is how this paradoxical tension can be solved.

The case of Newsgroup

The Scandinavian media house Newsgroup contained six regional newspapers with print, internet and mobile editions, as well as and four free daily newspapers. When the study began in 2014, the print editions reached approximately one million readers every day. Newsgroup and its competitors were fast to adopt the internet in the beginning of the 2000s (Fredberg, 2003), but were, as many in the business, not prepared for the breakthrough of mobile media. Although the threat from digital and mobile media was well understood, Newsgroup were for a long time able to keep profits up through price increases, industry consolidation and by trimming existing working models (this is consistent with the findings of Christensen, 1997). In Newsgroup's case, this period lasted until around 2009. However, advertisement revenue fell with 8-9% yearly in the years 2009-2013 (Barman, 2014). In the middle of 2014 the company was trying to recover from a bad hit in 2013, a tax decision from high court, and a need to refinance its activities with a group of banks who demanded increasingly higher risk premiums on their lending to the group. Newsgroup was, to say the least, under severe pressure at the time of study.

Developing the capability to change and innovate is necessary to survive in any technological shift. However, though Newsgroup had been on a slippery slope for some years they had not been able to create, carry out and implement enough innovativity to meet the changing environment.

Method

The study was part of a research project designed to understand innovation in times of crisis. The situation in which the study was made was in this regard a special case of change in which the pressure and urgency was constantly present. Because of Newsgroup's additional problems described above, the alertness on the need to change was even higher than it had been in the years before the study began, according to company representatives. But so was also the tendency of the company to focus even more on the sources of revenue that still existed, although they were quickly shrinking.

Data for the paper was gathered through case study with Newsgroup 2013-2015. The study was longitudinal in the sense that instead of a few snapshots over time, the researchers followed Newsgroup on a weekly basis. Management scholars have long called for more longitudinal research to understand the nature of organizational change (Pettigrew, 1990). There has more recently been growing interest in structured qualitative research in management on issues relevant for both academic research and industry practice (Van de Ven, 2007). This paper responds by employing the logic of inductive inquiry around multiple cases in the same setting (Eisenhardt, 1989), which is a necessary approach for studying organizational processes that do not easily lend themselves to quantitative measurements.

The initiatives were set up according to these specifications. The research team was involved in supporting the identification of challenges and in following project meetings, making after action debriefing with team members and interviewing key members.

As the crisis deepened, Newsgroup's top management team, put under vast pressure from the dramatically changing newspaper industry, decided to take on a new way of working renew the organization. Supported by the researchers, they used two top management workshops to identify two key challenges that needed to be addressed in the near future and formed initiatives around them. After those two first challenges, learnings pointed towards three new challenges and thereafter two more - in total seven change initiatives, which they perceived as crucial for future success. The demands on the challenges were the following

- The challenges should be critical for future success
- Short time frame and limited demands for project structure
- Goals that are beyond what is expected that the team can manage with the existing working model
- The solution does not exist; it has to be created

The initiatives were of different character. All seven included an innovative approach to selling advertisement. An example of this was a new use of big data to target advertisement, in which the project team needed to sell a version of the offering but with limited functionality. Six of them included an innovative approach to the editorial/journalistic part of the newspaper aspect, for example a new way of collaborating between the mobile,

web and paper in the reporting of Sweden's most popular television show – the Eurovision Song Contest. All initiatives also demanded the different parts of the organization to rethink the way they collaborated. An example of this was to harmonize (to 85%) part 2 of the paid newspapers in all of Newsgroup.

The management team and the researchers organized tests of innovation and change in “breakthrough initiatives”. The model that was used to drive the initiatives was rather simple but distinct. It built on the assumptions that performance pressure can drive new kinds of behavior (Schaffer & Thomson, 1992), that change is best achieved through fast cycles of change (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990), and that “part-whole” relationships need to be managed by inviting complexity in the development, rather than reducing it (Van de Ven, 1986, suggests that the whole should be designed into the parts). To increase the sense of urgency and pressure beyond normal, the projects had very tight deadlines, very high performance goals and complex team set ups (for a further description, see Fredberg & Pregmark, 2016). This made them deviate substantially from the standard project models as described in the literature (Doran, 1981). The change initiatives all took place in a division of six medium- to large newspapers of Newsgroup. Building on this prior knowledge, each initiative had:

- a three month running period
- a very tough organizational challenge that demanded an innovative approach for it to be solved
- a simplified project set up (review meetings every week, but no stage gates)
- a team that replicated the organizational complexity where the solution should work

This way of working was designed to answer the renewal setting where the future state was unknown but results needed to be produced immediately. This was an action research project (Argyris, 1993; Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985), in which the researchers supported the set-up of the initiatives, followed them through their duration, and arranged reflection sessions together with the participants. Beyond being present in the organization on a weekly basis for different manager and project team meetings, the researchers conducted 14 interviews specifically related to the initiatives, and engaged in 25 learning meetings with the project participants.

Findings

When interviewing members of the top management team, there was no doubt that they were fully aware of the ongoing crises in the industry and in Newsgroup. Plans of letting people go were made and cost cutting initiatives were launched. Whereas the top management had their rationalization agenda all figured out, they had very few ideas or plans for where to go next and how to develop the next successful business.

A general slogan guiding the change agenda was “everything that could be done jointly should be done jointly”, indicating the aim of finding cost-cutting synergies across papers and functions. In a conversation between two members of the top management team one of them said: “When saying that, we were actually trying to give the organization a direction. I realize now that we are not giving any sort of hope or passion in that statement”.

Still, though aware that they as management team had not been able to deliver a compelling vision, they were a bit frustrated with lack of engagement in forward looking initiatives. As one top manager put it: “It is like the whole organization is running around doing things, but I am not sure we are focusing on the right things, the things that will create our future.”

As the top management team decided to try another approach to developing innovative renewal capabilities (as described in the method section above), they had no trouble finding areas that needed innovative thinking and new ways of acting. Deciding on ideas for initiatives was not as easy. After a whole day workshop they were able to identify two challenges. Three months later, after finishing the first two, three more was nominated, thereafter two more.

The project managers and the members of their teams were selected for being high potentials in the organization, with innovative minds. As the initiatives got going, they seemed to follow the same path in terms of sense of commitment, engagement, collaboration and idea generation. Each kick-off meeting started off somewhat hesitant. The appointed project manager had to push hard to get the energy going. In one initiative the project manager had a team where all but one had to leave for other things during the meeting. In the first project meeting, the conversation was hard to steer towards ideating about what needed to be achieved, when and in what way. Team

members dwelled in the present, prioritizing time to discuss the tough situation for the organization instead, in some cases expressing doubt that these breakthrough initiatives would make any difference at all. Instead, one main focus was to try to negotiate the seemingly impossible goal ahead. However, the project managers had been assigned from top management to stand firm and clear about the challenge and the goal formulation. The project managers also made a point of explaining that the goal was deliberately set “too” high, to force the ideas created to be outside the box and challenge current working models. Moreover, it was explained to the project teams that the sponsor of the project (a member of the top management team) was aware of the unreasonably high targets. It was communicated from the top management team that though they thought it to be unlikely that the tough goals would be achieved, they still had high hopes.

Gradually, the project mood in the projects teams changed. Passivity and resistance seemed to change into activity and energy. After finishing, one project manager said:

“Now, this project has been so much fun. So much work but so much fun. And the level of our solutions is, at least in this context, remarkable”.

The other project managers experienced the same journey. The level of creativity and collaboration as well as levels of trust increased during the project. In the final project documentation from one initiative it was stated: “this project became a vitamin injection”, hence giving energy instead of draining it.

According to several project members, the one key for transferring the perceived stress from the overall situation into energy was the formulation of the challenge. In the final report one project team concluded that the ambitious goal forced them to think differently. As a sponsor of one project said: “This was a very good way of letting out the creative capacity”. Moreover, the complexity of the challenge gave them no choice but to cooperate. In order to succeed, the different competencies and different papers needed to work together. Moreover, the overly ambitious goal had a somewhat unexpected effect. Since it was not a traditional “stretch-goal” that ultimately one was expected to reach, it was more of a dream. A sponsor of one project concluded: “It is a huge difference doing something to succeed than doing it to avoid to fail”. Many project members agreed. They did not feel that not reaching the goal would be a failure, but reaching it would be fantastic.

Team members also mentioned the support from top management. Several team members as well as project managers described the perception that they were in this challenge together with their sponsor and the management team, as opposed to just reporting to them. Project managers described that they came to the management team reporting, but were not really nervous. Instead they perceived that the management team was there to help. Moreover, they described a sense of trust and safety, where raising issues was aloud and encouraged. One project manager expressed:

“When reporting to the top management I perceived that obstacles are there to be tackled and failures are there to be learnt from. I imagine this is not always the sensations when presenting to our top management”.

One other common comment about how energy, creativity and collaboration was released is related to the challenges’ connection to the strategic agenda. Top management declared that these initiatives were prioritized initiatives, designed to be important step towards a new, to some extent unknown, future. Moreover, the management attention was high, in terms of every project having a top manager as a sponsor and all projects were reported to the top management team. According to team members, this clarified the strategic importance and sense of urgency of the project. As one project manager said: “It is exciting to think about that I might be a part of saving the organization and finding the new future.

The results of the projects were astonishing. In five of the seven cases the impossible goals were met or exceeded. In one, the result was a clear improvement but still missed the target quite substantially. However, in that case the learning from the project formed the basis for designing a new organizational structure. In one project the result was not quite up to the target level, but the learning form the project contributed to the success of the next project in the same field.

Case analysis

Newsgroup was clearly in trouble. National media prophesized that it would go bankrupt in 6-12 months. The sense of urgency was clearly there. Moreover, the threat from new technology had been known for years and still not much innovation had taken place. At the very core of the method chosen to drive the projects was that the challenge set should be so tough that it was impossible to make it by using the old working model. Hence, the challenge given to each project team was to some extent unreasonable and was aiming much higher than the traditional project targets.

The first reaction from several of the team members in all cases was that the goal was too high, bordering to the impossible. Top management team members pointed out that everyone was aware of how ambitious the targets were, that they had degrees of freedom in seeking for solutions, and that the people were chosen because they might have a chance of succeeding. Instead of a fear for not reaching the target, the teams started seeing the opportunities. Moreover, it was clear that the team members had everything to win and almost nothing to lose. When project managers, projects managers and sponsors were asked what created the shift from being daunted by the challenge to moving into a productive and creative spirit and accomplishing astonishing results, their answers can be grouped in three categories:

- The success-failure relationship: The unreasonably high target levels as formulated in the challenge created a space where reaching the goals would be a success, but not doing so would not be considered failure.
- The trust-engagement relationship: The close collaboration with top management and the attention to the issues that the initiatives received installed a sense of trust that the project team and top management were in the projects together, and that it required engagement on both their parts.
- The short term-long term relationship: Newsgroup lacked a clear strategic agenda. However, the clarity of the importance of the challenge in relation to the future success of the organization made team members and projects managers feel that they connected with a potential strategic agenda that could be important for future success. In other words, the solution space was very open. This gave project members not only the responsibility over results but also authority over the solutions. The short term exaggerated goals made it ok to shoot for something beyond what was present in the organization, to potentially fail, but still have the work be potentially useful for the long term.

Discussion

Many researchers argue that a burning platform or a sense of urgency (Armenakis et al., 1993; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Conner, 1992; Kotter, 1995) is important to create effective change. In Newsgroup, the sense of urgency was clearly present, enhanced both through planned communication, weekly updates and through lay-offs. Consequently, the pressure put on both management and employees was evident. However, Newsgroup was in need of renewal in its core, demanding renewal capabilities such as learning and creativity (Huy, 2006), which in turn comes from positive emotions. It can be argued that pressure, stress and perceived threats are negative for the ability to change, since both the capacity for analysis and creativity is lowered (Lieberman, 2013), defensive routines are created (Argyris, 1993) and the possibility to be effective and creative decreases (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Creating a goal which deliberately is set so high that it cannot be reached with the current working model would according to this logic not produce better results, but worse. However, as is evident from the cases, this did not happen.

The traditional way of driving change is to slice up the urgent situation ahead and translate it into project targets. Work in organizations is generally organized around target setting that suggests that targets are to be met (Doran, 1981). The work in the initiatives described here followed a different logic. Failure (in terms of not reaching the goals) was assumed from the beginning, but the team had many degrees of freedom in working with the task.

Arguably, the organization found a way to manage the success-failure relationship in a way that became productive. The challenges were set up and formulated to keep the pressure (and motivation) from the overall

sense of urgency while releasing the perceived stress. Through setting unreasonably high targets, which no project team could be expected to reach, the data indicates that the team members perceived that they could not lose – only win. Hence, deviating from the traditional model of setting goals designed to be reachable and realistic (Doran, 1981) seems to be a way of turning pressure into energy and motivation instead of fear and friction.

Also, whereas it is often assumed that team members in “regular” development projects use the existing working model to achieve a certain result, the idea here is that they need to invent new ways of working. The data suggests that the project members in the seven initiatives found ways to not only succeed in not only completing their challenge, they data indicates that they did so through finding new ways, daring to try something new and to collaborate. All these features are fostered through positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2003). Moreover, it seems that all project groups came to have a culture where they reach out, both within the group and to the organization to look for answers and seek help, which is important in order to create new knowledge (Lee et al, 2003). Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003) bring forward a model for positive organizational change, containing the steps elevation of inquiry, fusion of strengths and activation of energy. It could be discussed if the unreasonably high targets could be a way of “forcing” the team into these phases. The data tells us that no-one in any of the project teams started off with a clear picture of what to do and how to do it, since it had never been done before. It was easy to let the guard down when there is no losing, only winning. It seems that this caused the project managers to adapt a new style of being the ones asking questions and seeking help instead of having answers, finding out and using each team member’s strengths, which seem to have led to motivation, energy and action.

To enable this to happen, the role of management in creating the right trust-engagement relationship is arguably of importance. This is in line with Amabile and Kramer’s (2011) argument that the managers work as catalysts to enable the risk taking that is always involved in innovative work. In the words of (1997), management was able to create a promotion focus in the teams although they were put under very high pressure. This goes to show that the high pressure and a tangible sense of urgency is not in conflict with a promotion focus or positive emotions such as described by for example Huy (1999; 2006), provided that management is able to solve for this paradoxical tension by creating a work set up that allows for a different dynamic to take place. This is arguably an example of a higher level solution (Fredberg, 2014; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith et al., 2010). The tension here is further resolved by the management of the short term-long term relationship. The move by management to give the project initiative authority over the solution space, with very little governing on the potential solutions further relieves the pressure on the project team and allows for the paradoxical tension to be resolved.

Hence, to embrace the creation of an overall sense of urgency, but not transferring that pressure into projects seem to be a success factor. It seems that unreasonably high project goals might create a motivation “towards success” rather than “away from failure and potentially create positive emotions that allows people to bring their best in terms of creativity, collaboration and new knowledge creation (Fredrickson, 2003).

Contribution

Contribution to theory

The paper contributes by proposing how the conflict between pressure and innovation can be resolved. It is hypothesized that the way the challenges were set up in these seven cases was a possibility to keep the pressure while releasing the perceived stress, thereby allowing for a promotion focus and thereby innovation. The data indicates that the team members perceived that they could not lose – only win. Hence, deviating from the traditional model of setting realistic goals seems to be a way of turning pressure into energy instead of friction.

Also, whereas it is often assumed that team members in “regular” innovation projects use the existing working model, the idea here is that they need to invent new ways of working. In these seven cases the project teams succeeded in not only to complete their challenge, but also finding new ways to collaborate and to innovate. Moreover, it seems that all project groups came to have a culture where they reached out to others to look for answers and seek help. Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003) argue for a model for positive organizational change, containing the steps elevation of inquiry, fusion of strengths and activation of energy. It can be argued that the unreasonably high targets are a way to “force” the team into these phases. Moreover, it was easy to let the guard down when there is no losing, only winning. It seems that this caused project managers to be inquiring, rather advocating, and to use each team members’ strengths, which seem to have led to motivation, energy and action.

In our view, the major contribution is our suggestion a higher level solution to the paradoxical tension between urgency and innovation. Following this suggestion, smaller contributions are made regarding the management of pressure in organization, and the relation between a long term vision and short term goals.

Practical implications

In an age of fast moving markets and technological shifts, organizations need to understand how to innovate while their major markets are going down. Although their general tendency is to concentrate even more on the core operations that provides the revenues necessary for survival (Christensen, 1997; Christensen et al., 2012), they need to achieve innovative change under pressure. This is not a trivial task, as periods of transformation continuously disrupt this organizational alignment (Burke, 2011) that makes them successful (Beer, 2009). Most incumbents fail to make this change (Christensen, 1997; Christensen et al., 1998) because they fail to respond with innovative products and processes in a timely manner.

Our attempt is to create leads to how management can combine a high pressure environment with creative, innovative change. Here, to embrace the creation of an overall sense of urgency, but not transferring that pressure into projects seem to be a success factor. It seems that unreasonably high project goals under special conditions create a motivation “towards success” rather than “away from failure” and positive emotions that allow people to bring their best in terms of creativity, collaboration and new knowledge creation (Fredrickson, 2003). Indeed, setting up change initiatives in a similar way that was done here, and have the organization manage the relationships between success and failure, trust and engagement and short term long term agenda could be a way of organizing strategic renewal under high degrees of pressure/with a very high sense of urgency, while keeping a clear view of the corporate intent while allowing freedom and creativity as a force for moving forwards.

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