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Initiating Change Processes from a Systemic Perspective: A Qualitative Focus Group Study with Systemic Consultants

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Article Info

Abstract
This paper examines how systemic consultants experience and shape the initiation phase of organisational change processes. Drawing on systemic theory and constructivist epistemology, the study explores which factors are perceived as decisive at the beginning of change initiatives and which systemic approaches and methods are applied in practice. Empirical data were generated through a qualitative focus group with experienced systemic consultants. The analysis highlights the importance of trust-building and transparency, which contributes to a greater sense of security, as well as the importance of participation, role clarification and resource orientation during the early stages of change. Findings further reveal tensions between systemic principles and structural organisational constraints such as limited voluntariness and predefined outcomes. The paper contributes to organisational change research by linking systemic stance with tangible practitioner experiences in the initiation of change processes.

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1. Introduction
Organisations are increasingly confronted with continuous and accelerating change driven by digitalisation, market dynamics, and societal transformation. While change has become a permanent condition of organisational life, many change initiatives still fail or encounter strong resistance. Research suggests that difficulties often arise not during implementation but already at the beginning of change processes.

The initiation phase of change plays a crucial role in shaping expectations, trust, and commitment. From a systemic perspective, change cannot be controlled through linear planning but unfolds through interaction, communication, and meaning-making (Krizanits, 2013) [5]. This paper investigates how systemic consultants experience the initiation of change processes and which factors they identify as critical for success.

The guiding research question is: Which factors do systemic consultants consider decisive for the successful initiation of change processes, and which systemic approaches and methods do they apply?

2. Theoretical Foundations
Systemic approaches to organisational change are grounded in systems theory, constructivism, and second-order cybernetics. Organisations are understood as complex social systems characterised by interaction patterns, feedback loops, and observer-dependence (Luhmann, 1994; Simon, 2006) [7, 9].

Systemic thinking is characterised by non-judgement, conscious not-knowing, appreciation of interactions, and respect for multiple perceived realities. Consultants refrain from expert-driven solutions and instead facilitate reflection and self-organisation (Ellebracht, 2018) [1]. Change is conceptualised as a process that should emerge from within the system (Ellebracht, 2018; Grossmann, 2021; Krizanits, 2013) [1, 2, 5].

In the context of change initiation, systemic theory emphasises the importance of relationship-building, context clarification, and shared understanding (Ellebracht, 2018; Königswieser, 2023) [1, 4]. Early conversations shape the framework within which change unfolds and influence how uncertainty, resistance, and emotions are addressed. This requires adequate time investment to establish a solid foundation for change.

3. Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research design aligned with systemic and constructivist assumptions. Empirical data were collected through a focus group interview with three experienced systemic consultants.

Participants were selected purposively based on their professional experience in accompanying organisational change processes. The focus group was conducted online and moderated using systemic principles, encouraging open exchange and multiple perspectives rather than consensus.

The discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using qualitative content analysis following Mayring (Mayring, 2015) [8]. Categories were developed inductively from the data material to capture central themes related to change initiation (Kuckartz, 2022) [6].

4. Results and Discussion

The findings underline that the initiation of change processes is strongly shaped by how change is introduced and communicated. Participants reported that lack of transparency and sudden announcements often lead to insecurity and resistance.

Trust-building emerged as a central factor (Ellebracht, 2018; Krizanits, 2013) [1, 5]. Consultants emphasised the importance of acknowledging emotions, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and engaging in dialogue at eye level. Questions such as 'What do you need in order to move along?' were described as helpful systemic impulses.

Resource orientation was identified as another key element. Recognising existing competencies, experience, and contextual resources helped stabilise systems during uncertainty (Hänsel, 2013; Krizanits, 2013) [3, 5]. At the same time, participants highlighted tensions between systemic ideals and organisational realities, such as top-down decisions and limited participation.

Overall, the results illustrate that systemic approaches require time and openness and may foster sustainable engagement and shared responsibility (Grossmann, 2021; Krizanits, 2013) [2, 5].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the initiation phase of change processes can be regarded as a critical leverage point for systemic consulting. A systemic stance supports trust, participation, and sense-making during times of uncertainty. Therefore, it is recommended to devote sufficient time to the initiation phase of change and to communicate as transparently as possible, specifically in situations of uncertainty. It may also be helpful to clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations at an early stage. In addition, it appears advisable to actively involve affected stakeholders and to acknowledge emotions appropriately.

Future research could include employee perspectives and examine how different initiation styles are perceived, retrospectively.

6. Thank-You Note

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