



MADZIVIRE CENTRE OF TRANSFORMATION

*“Nurturing Lifelong Learning”.*

*MaCoTra Singing ORGANISATIONS THAT TRANSFORM:  
An Example of a Grounded Theory Research Proposal*

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a derivative of my doctoral thesis at the University of South Africa's (UNISA) School of Business Leadership (SBL) from 2001 to 2003. The electronic version of the thesis is available on the Unisa Institutional Repository.

The thesis was inspired by Mbeki's (1998:239) assertion that "*ex Africa semper aliquid novi!* – something new always comes from Africa."

The study was an inductive study using grounded theory, rooted in case study methodology based on Eisenhardt's (1989) eight steps of building theory from case study research.

This article contributes towards sharpening insights of students who are challenged to write up research proposals.

The particular slant is for those students interested in qualitative research methodologies, particularly 'grounded theory.'

## AN EXAMPLE OF A GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH PROPOSAL

### RESEARCH TOPIC

#### **ORGANISATIONS THAT TRANSFORM: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES IN THE EMERGING ECONOMY OF ZIMBABWE**

#### **Background to the problem**

The modern workplace is full of interesting paradox.

Whereas global companies are looking to emerging markets for growth, companies in emerging markets are searching for ways into the burgeoning global economy.

The globalisation of markets and rapid diffusion of technologies are fast transforming the economies of the world. Clegg and Birch (1998) suggest that businesses employing traditional management techniques are facing increasingly difficult challenges. These challenges daily demand for innovation, flexibility and constant change as well as excellent customer care, inspirational leadership and superb communication.

Secretan (1999:3) summarises the paradox by saying: "There is a growing sense of anxious anticipation in the modern workplace, of impending change: the shadow of apprehension, disenchantment and betrayal conflicts with the light of hope, opportunity and new beginnings".

There, indeed, is need to cast eyes back on the journey that transforming organisations have travelled in order to draw lessons to pave the way into the future.

Of interest is what has happened and is happening in the world of emerging economies.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of emerging economies is that they have opened up dramatically since the last twenty years. Ramamurti (2000) asserts that this has heightened competitive pressures on national firms. This exogenous increase in firm competition is a cause for change.

Although organisations get involved in change efforts, researchers have consistently sent the disturbing and recurring message that about 70% of change initiatives fail. This has resulted in an increasing number of researchers getting interested in finding out why the failure rate is so high.

Beer and Nohria (2000:133) attribute most of the failures to the rush by managers to change their organisations by “immersing themselves in an alphabet soup of initiatives. They lose focus and become mesmerised by all the advice available in print and on-line about why companies should change, what they should try to accomplish, and how they should do it”. The two researchers suggest that business executives have to understand the nature and process of corporate change much better.

Other researchers share this concern.

Ferreira (1997:86), for example, points out: “over the past twenty-five years, a substantial amount of research has focused on the character, process, and content of organisational change, as well as the circumstances surrounding the change.” The scanned literature confirms that the emphasis of such research efforts has been on antecedents or consequences of change. Ferreira, however, highlights that there is now growing interest in the study of processes relating to how organisational change arises, develops and progresses.

This view is supported by Greiner (1998:68) who argues that “there is still much to learn about processes of development in organisations”. Of significance is the indication by Greiner (1998:68) that “researchers are just beginning to study specific developmental problems of structure, control, rewards, and management style in different industries and in a variety of cultures”.

These concerns imply that an in-depth examination and understanding of challenges related to organisational transformation is warranted. Such an understanding is required in order to improve the odds of success of change initiatives.

In the cited literature, there is a distinct absence of studies focusing on exploring the challenges of organisational transformation in emerging economies.

What is critical is that organisations in emerging economies must become more flexible, more responsive, and more willing to change and adapt, if they are to survive.

Organisations in emerging economies, particularly in Africa, need to enter the global market. This realisation has inspired thinkers like Mbeki (1998), Makgoba (1999), and Mbigi (2000) to search for an African business renaissance.

Mbigi (2000:3), for example, presents Africa as an adolescent continent requiring strong parenting. He argues that “Africa was thrown into the throes and waves of transformation with limited preparation and collective knowledge to meet the challenges”. The implication is that organisations in Africa need to learn faster than the rate of transformation to revitalise the economy.

This may be achieved through in-depth studies of the challenges of organisational transformation of individual companies in Southern Africa. Specifically, the experiences of companies in Zimbabwe (between 1980 when the country attained its independence and 2000) may provide interesting insights into how an organisation can thrive and prosper in a hostile and challenging global world.

The study is also inspired by Dess and Picken (2000:12) who present a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a global company asserting:

Learning is at the heart of a company's ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. It is the key to being able both to identify opportunities that others might not see and to exploit those opportunities rapidly and fully. This means that in order to generate extraordinary value for its shareholders, a company has to learn better than its competitors and apply that knowledge throughout its businesses faster and more widely than they do.

It would appear sustaining such constant change demands understanding the sources of the challenges of change and having workable strategies to deal with such challenges.

A unique opportunity to learn from histories of companies is presenting itself. As Einhorn and Hogarth (1999) put it, “All decisions are about the future. But deciding what to do and how to do it naturally draws on past experience”. Thus, looking forward involves looking backward in order to avoid making bad decisions relating to change.

On the basis of the foregoing, this study has three major objectives:

- (a) To establish the similarities and differences in the experiences of Zimbabwean companies regarding organizational transformation;
- (b) To find out whether theories of organizational transformation that have been successful in developed economies have been applied in the selected companies;
- (c) To draw lessons from those change efforts that succeeded and those that failed so as to apply these lessons to companies in emerging economies.



## **The statement of the problem**

This research proposes to examine the challenges of organisational transformation in emerging economies with special reference to Zimbabwe and to develop a theory/model to resolve such challenges.

## **The subproblems**

*The first subproblem.* The first subproblem is to examine the experiences of four Zimbabwean companies regarding organisational transformation.

*The second subproblem.* The second subproblem is to identify the points of convergence of the experiences of the chosen companies regarding organisational transformation.

*The third subproblem.* The third subproblem is to identify the points of divergence of experiences of the chosen companies regarding organisational transformation.

*The fourth subproblem.* The fourth subproblem is to identify those issues that trigger organisational transformation.

*The fifth subproblem.* The fifth subproblem is to explore the Best-Practices in organisational transformation.

*The sixth subproblem.* The sixth subproblem is to develop a theory/model to resolve the transformation challenges of companies in emerging economies, using the four Zimbabwean companies as anchors.

## **The Questions**

*The first question.* What have four selected Zimbabwean companies experienced during their transformation efforts?

*The second question.* What are the points of convergence of the experiences of the chosen companies regarding organisational transformation?

*The third question.* What are the points of divergence of the experiences of the chosen companies regarding organisational transformation?

*The fourth question.* Which issues trigger organisational transformation?

*The fifth question.* Which are the local and global Best-Practices in organisational transformation?

*The sixth question.* What organizational transformation theory/model is suitable for companies in Zimbabwe and what general theory/model is suitable for companies in emerging economies?

## **The delimitations**

The study will focus on the business sector.

The study examines the experiences of four companies in Zimbabwe.

## **Definition of terms**

**Change.** Change is 'in its broadest sense, a continuous, planned or unplanned response to pressures and forces' (Jick, 1993).

**Developed economy.** A 'developed economy' is an economy where most goods and services are easily accessible to most of its members, usually characterised by low inflation rates, high economic growth, relatively low unemployment rates, and good democratic governance (www.google.com).

**Emerging/Developing economies.** 'Emerging/Developing economies' refers to 'economies characterized by the following six broad features: low levels of living, low levels of productivity, high rates of population growth and dependency burdens, high and rising levels of unemployment, significant dependence on agricultural production and primary product exports, and' subject to 'dominance, dependence, and vulnerability in international relations' (Todaro, 1985).

**Organizations.** "Goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity" (Aldrich, 1999:2).

**Transformation.** Transformation refers to 'periodic, discontinuous, metamorphic, or frame-breaking changes in organizations to overcome inertia or stagnation and to enable better alignment with the environment' (Ferreira, 1997).

## **Assumptions**

- Africa is in a transformation mode.
- There is a need to continue searching for an African business renaissance.
- The Zimbabwean company experiences from 1980 to 2000 are a piece of ground to learn from.
- Organisational transformation is an intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual journey.
- Organisational transformation is achieved through inspiring one person at a time.
- An inspired team is composed of a number of inspired persons working together.
- Groups of inspired teams become inspired communities.
- A growing presence of inspired communities contributes to an inspired world.

## **Importance of the study**

As we grapple with challenges of organisational change and transformation, it appears we need to be in touch with who we are. However, we cannot appreciate who we are and what we want to become if we have no understanding of where we came from.

Africa is endowed with a cultural heritage that draws significantly from spirituality. This spirituality focuses on the existence and significance of a hierarchy of spirits. Only one African thinker, Lovemore Mbigi, has concentrated his work on how an understanding of this heritage may lead to an African business renaissance.

Mbigi (2000:10) argues, “The African Business Renaissance is about our organisations finding innovative ways of doing business by harnessing cultural strengths and inspirations to meet the challenges of global competition”. Mbigi potently suggests that organisations need to embark on a cultural renaissance by dealing with their negative past and grievances.

This stance is consonant with Makgoba’s (1999:viii) view that “African knowledge systems, experiences and contributions remain an untapped reservoir of future innovations and solutions to some of humanity’s complex problems”.

This study focuses on gaining deep appreciation of the challenges (including the ‘negative past and grievances’ Mbigi talks about) related to organisational transformation in emerging economies. The key contribution of the study is the addition of new insights on transformation theories, models, techniques and practices needed to create organisations that are inspiring places for employees, customers and suppliers in emerging economies.

The resultant best practice theory/model should provide a practical, experience-based framework extracted from the actual practice, methods and actions of the chosen Zimbabwean companies. The emergent theory/model should help companies effectively manage and lead the transformation process. It should provide a new sense of purpose, cultural values, standards and spirits to companies in order to energise them into an African business renaissance.

Overall, the study is an attempt to address the knowledge gap existing in terms of the applicability of existing change theories in non-Western, emerging nations.

## **SOURCE REFERENCE**

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