

HEADS ROLL BUT IDEAS REMAIN: THE DYNAMICS OF LEGITIMATION IN A CONTEXT OF RADICAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The legitimation of radical organizational change is a challenging endeavor, since the disruption of an organization's culture, routines, and power structures can trigger resistance. Change agency units created to promote and implement such change are thus likely to face multiple legitimacy tensions. Based on a three-year inductive study of a large-scale reform aiming at "liberating work" in the French public administration, we examine how a change agency unit navigates such tensions over time: between different targets of legitimation; between different audiences; and between different legitimation strategies. Surprisingly, we find that legitimacy judgments regarding the content of change and the change agent become decoupled over time, as favorable social judgments of the radical change project emerge even as the change agency unit promoting it is rejected. We develop an inductive process model that unpacks the dynamics of legitimation in the context of radical change, explaining this outcome. The model highlights the dynamic interplay between perceived legitimacy challenges, the legitimation strategies that change agents perform, audiences' judgments, and change outcomes, contributing to process theorizing about legitimation in the context of radical change.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Organizational Change, Public Administration, Ethnography.