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BAM Paper

**Extreme Resistance or Resistance at the Extremes?
Ameliorating Rejection During Intense Change**

Developmental paper

Introduction

Resistance is a consistent theme in the change management literature (Buchanan and Boddy 1992, Beer and Nohria 2000, Dawson 2003b). This paper presents a preliminary analysis of observed organisational strategies used to lower resistance to organisational change in an extreme context (policing change in Northern Ireland). It briefly presents relevant literature on the concept of change resistance in extreme environments, some background to the case itself and the research approach adopted. It concludes with some tentative conclusions about how such strategies may be effective in less extreme change environments.

Change resistance in extreme environments

The large and varied nature of the research on organisational change leaves a considerable body of work to draw on, but a difficult landscape to navigate. Any study focused on change in extremis will rely heavily on literature which places context and process as central areas of analysis, and approaches which seek to convey the 'embeddedness' of the organisation in its political, social and historical context (Pettigrew et al: 1992). An explicit acknowledgement that 'real life' change implementation is often interactive and muddled, and that within those tensions (Pettigrew: 1990; Dawson: 2003a; Barley: 1990)(Buchanan and Badham 1999), significant lessons can be learned. The role of 'power processes' within an organisation and the interaction between internal power and external power brokerage is even more significant than normal to a change process in an extreme context (Pettigrew, in Cummings & Wilson: 2003, Dawson: 2003b), as is the need to be aware of the particular qualities of radical change and not just change after shock (Amis, Slack et al. 2004). Internal political processes are also crucial (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). Resistance also represents a significant area of literature in its own right (Coch and French 1948, Scott Sherman and Garland 2007, Ford, Ford et al. 2008, Charles and Dawson 2011, Weick 2011, Georgalis, Samaratunge et al. 2014, Huy, Corley et al. 2014, Klonek, Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2014, Burnes 2015) with recurring leitmotifs of failed implementation, justice perceptions, political behaviour, the significance of context and the role of resistance as a change 'resource'. Recent work on extreme environments has also explored the conditions and processes that inhibit or discourage change after an extreme events (Buchanan

2011) (Denyer and Pilbeam 2014) and helpfully delineate extreme from routine change contexts. The role of risk control, defensive agendas, the media and the unappealing nature of such environments for change agents themselves make implementation difficult. This work is insightful, not least because it illustrates for us that change after an extreme event is less not more likely, even when the stakes are extremely high (Buchanan 2011). This raises interesting questions of types of change resistance in such environments and also the myriad of responses to resistance which exist in organisations operating in extreme contexts (Reichers, Wanous et al. 1997). This paper contends that those responses to resistance have not been fully explored.

Case Background

Nearly 4000 people died in Northern Ireland's long running conflict, 314 of them police officers (Brewer and Magee 1991, Brewer 1996, Hennessey 1999, Guelke and Milton-Edwards 2000). The republican and loyalist ceasefires of 1994 were the first significant signal that NI society was moving beyond the 'troubles' and towards a normalised political environment. The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998 cemented that movement (Hennessey 1999). Policing was a key and seemingly unresolvable element of the conflict, seen as unrepresentative and partisan. Its reform or 'recasting' in a new dispensation was an integral part of the conflict transformation endeavour (Ellison 2010, Goldie and Murphy 2010). As one of the most controversial elements of the conflicted past, it had remained outside the Agreement and was subject to a specific commission of interest (1999), generally known as the Patten Commission. The Commission's far reaching proposals included a change of name, badge and uniform, the introduction of 50/50 recruitment (50% Roman Catholic and 50% other), a new focus on human rights, a new district command and headquarter structure, a review of 'Special Branch' and covert techniques, a concern for 'policing with the community' and a significant voluntary severance process to make room for new recruits, unconnected with the past history of the organisation (Murphy 2013).

Research design

The development of this study requires the retrospective analysis of an existing data set. The data set in question consists of over seventy transcribed interviews, some amounting to over ten thousand words, as well as an extensive research diary, organisational documentation and extensive secondary source material. The

interviews took place over an extended period of almost ten years, and cover an organisational timeframe of nearly seventeen years. Early interview present a post hoc rendering by interviewees of the early part of the change process. Many individuals were interviewed more than once over that timeframe. Data analysis was carried out through conventional techniques of data reduction: with the case narrative attempting to provide open contextual descriptions of the dynamic change process (Miles and Huberman 1994, Dawson 2003b, Pettigrew 2012). A chronology of intra-organisational events was constructed and compared, then merged with a chronology of events external to the organisation to determine further links and interactions between context and process.

A longitudinal approach was adopted. The period covered begins in 1996 with the RUC's own 'Fundamental Review' and ends in 2012 with the PSNI embroiled in a Public Accounts Committee Enquiry into the '*Retire and Rehire*' controversy and the appointment of the present Chief Constable. The timeframe of organisational change covers a period of 18 years that have been some of the most fast-paced in Northern Ireland's recent history. In terms of coincident time cycles, this period included a series of elections, the annually recurrent and fraught loyalist order marching disturbances, and significant (decision making) party political conferences, four different Chief Constables and a complete change in the police senior command team. It also saw the devolution of Policing and Justice to the Northern Ireland Executive. Temporal bracketing (Smith and Elliott 2007, Langley, Smallman et al. 2013) was used to identify and demarcate change phases and a conjectural reasoning approach (Plowman, Baker et al. 2007) was employed in an effort to disentangle causal complexity and take into account systematic factors, the development of processes overtime and the impact of individuals on development.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that five distinct resistance amelioration approaches existed within the organisation to politically act against resistance to change. The first of these strategies can be termed *professional persuasion*: identified within those who were often external change agents and acted to influence and persuade those opposed to change of the merits of the process. The second can be named *mid level fixing*: seen operating with regard to those within the organisation who acted politically to oppose

resistance, to openly challenge resisters but who had little in the way of 'rank' leadership role. Often such fixers acted as representatives of and communication conduits to and for the organisation's leaders, often with an eye to their own personal advancement. The third approach can be referred to as *critical scrutiny*. This was characterised by the championing of individuals and indeed the creation of sub level organisational structures to act as a controlled foil to the change process. By moving this disparate group into a role with direct links to the organisations top team, significant resistance arguments were aired and managed in advance of the full organisational engagement process. The penultimate approach can be termed *visioning opportunism*: a clear articulation of the type of leadership, career opportunities and potential advancement that was available to the organisation members who embraced the change. The last discernible strategy can be characterised as *Change obfuscation* – conscious communication by the leadership through internal messaging that the organisation was not in fact changing, and that members would retain their identity and build on it within the new dispensation.

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