Journal of Educational Leadership in Action

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*

Article 10

9-2020

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Recommended Citation

Gearin, Christopher A.; Dunican, Brian; and Castles, John (2020) "Increased Ambiguity and Resistance While New College Leaders Learn Their Roles," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol7/iss1/10

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INCREASED AMBIGUITY AND RESISTANCE WHILE NEW COLLEGE LEADERS LEARN THEIR ROLES

Article by Christopher A. Gearin, Brian Dunican, and Jason Castles

Abstract

This article explores tolerance of ambiguity and its effect on change resistance from the perception of new higher education presidents who often feel overwhelmed by the level of perceived resistance while they learn a new environment. Two separate yet complementary studies were compared for resistance to change: one qualitative and one quantitative. The qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore a new higher education leaders' perspective of facing resistance during the change process. The quantitative study examined the 36-question survey results of individual higher education employees affected by higher education change. The intersection of the two studies explored, through different lenses, how leaders face perceived resistance versus how employees perceive change and then exhibit resistant-like behavior. Results included that the majority of higher education employees were intolerant to ambiguity, and that uncertainty due to new leadership exacerbated this condition. The authors argued against the prevailing advice of putting vision delivery on hold. Rather, the authors recommend that new leaders clearly communicate the vision formation process while maintaining intentional and transparent collaboration with the community.

Keywords: new leader, resistance, intolerance of ambiguity, organizational cynicism, inertia, cognitive dissonance

Introduction

For presidents, especially, that first year is incredibly intense. They want to have a long-term vision, but they also need to know what they must do today and tomorrow—all while learning their way around a new campus, literally and figuratively. (Trachtenberg et al., 2013, p. 122)

The purpose of this paper is to explore the intersection of tolerance of ambiguity with different types of perceived resistance, and their effects on the approaches of new leaders attempting to learn their new roles. In most new college presidencies, the major change on campus is the new leader, and especially so when the hire is an outsider (Gearin, 2017). Adding to the complexity of a new leader, new higher education presidents are encouraged to hold off on delivering a vision until they are acclimated, have studied the environment, and listened to the concerns of constituents. Gaudiani (1996) described the vision development process for a new college president as lasting from one to two years. During this gap in time without a vision, faculty and staff wonder how they will be affected, and uncertainty and fear reaches a fever pitch.

The changes examined in the qualitative study caused instant ambiguity: constituents were unfamiliar with the new leaders, and they were uncertain as to how they would be affected by the changes the new leaders would make. Change efforts induce stress on almost everyone inside the affected organization. Adding urgency and risk to the equation raises the level of potential complications. Change agents may become quickly agitated at employees they deem resistant. A leader who labels the employees as resistant can cause change failure by creating more resistance. The leaders found themselves encountering roadblocks to change while simultaneously learning their new environment. Employees demonstrated characteristics of resistance, cognitive dissonance, cynicism, organizational inertia, and intolerance of ambiguity.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do new higher education leaders affect the level of resistance?

2. How do higher education staff, faculty, and administrators feel about following new leaders in an uncertain environment?

3. What is the level of ambiguity tolerance and resistance to change in higher education institutions with new leaders?

Literature Review

Tolerance for Ambiguity

The American college or university is a prototypic organized anarchy. It does not know what it is doing. Its goals are either vague or in dispute. Its technology familiar but not understood. Its major participants wander in and out of the organization. (Cohen & March, 1986, p. 3)

According to Cohen et al. (1972), universities are loosely-coupled organizations containing a collection of choices and decision situations maintaining processes not fully understood by their employees.

Past studies (Dunican et al., 2019; Oreg, 2003) have looked at whether employees were tolerant or intolerant of ambiguity. Those employees who are tolerant of ambiguity are, in general, more open to change situations. Employees with an intolerance of ambiguity are more reluctant to accept change. In this study, tolerance of ambiguity was defined as the predisposition to consider ambiguous situations as attractive or interesting, and intolerance for ambiguity as the predisposition to consider ambiguous situations as threatening (Budner, 1962; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949).

Change Process

Heath and Heath (2010) offered that resistance is often the result of lack of clarity. Their change approach resembles Lewin's (1951) three-step change approach. Heath and Heath (2010) metaphorically compared the struggles for generating behavioral changes to a person riding and steering an elephant: 1. Direct the rider – The rider represents the thought process of understanding the need for change. As the rider tries to analyze the need for change, it is imperative that the reasons are explicit to prevent areas of ambiguity. Without this clarity, resistance is often elevated, and frustrations surge among those impacted by the change process. 2. Motivate the elephant – The elephant represents the emotional side of engaging participants through the change process. Many people are creatures of habit, and change takes energy, no matter how small. Too many changes over a short period of time that require shifts in behaviors can cause exhaustion during the process. Exhaustion can be mistaken for resistance, laziness, or disengagement. 3. Shape the path – The path of the elephant and the rider represents the environment in which change is created. Change can create hostile environments; yet during successful changes, the distractions for choosing to change are limited or eliminated. Those impacted by change have a clear path to remain focused on the destination.

Leadership Transition, Vision, and Change

New presidents, in the early stages, may not fully understand the processes they are expected to change. Sanaghan and Eberbach (2012) recommended that new college presidents hold off on delivering visions, and advised that the new leaders would be better served learning about the college and getting to know constituents. Similarly, many of the participants in this study discussed attending seminars specifically designed for new college presidents, and several of the presidents commented on receiving advice during training to hold off on delivering a vision. Sanaghan and Eberbach (2012) also warned against the common pressure from trustees to new college presidents to deliver a vision early in order to create the impression that the new leaders are visionary, because this tactic most often sets impractical expectations and ends in disaster. At the same time, Gearin (2017) found that resistant behavior builds due to an intolerance for ambiguity while new presidents wait and considering what to change.

Neumann and Bensimon (1990) concluded that the personal expectations of new college presidents guide and limit what they learn, understand, and interpret, and these

perceptions can lead to successes or failures. In a related study of college presidents and their errors, Neumann (1990) concluded that most errors were directly attributable to unclear or inaccurate expectations by new presidents. According to Kotter (1995), new leaders, as change agents, often want to get started too quickly, before they have accurately assessed the necessary steps. They have expectations for what needs to be done, and they want to get going. Wiser (2009) concluded that a new college president should develop an understanding of cultures and earn the trust of employees first, before making decisions affecting their new campus.

Gabarro (2007) set out to determine why some leaders failed while others succeeded in leader successions, and found that successful transitions followed a similar path through the formation of relationships with key employees. The study results indicated that matching expectations between key personnel and a new leader is one of the most crucial elements of the initial transition. Gabarro also concluded that acting too quickly or too slowly changes the employees' expectations of new leaders almost immediately; therefore, the beginning of a new leader's tenure is crucial. Smollan (2013) found that when change is anticipated, typical employees worry whether their needs will be taken into account by the new leader.

Resistance and Employee Behavior

Resistance is frequently misunderstood simply as employees possessing poor behaviors and bad attitudes, followed by action or inaction by employees out of fear. Resistance is often caused by a failure of communication, which leaves employees unsure of what to expect, because they were not given an opportunity to understand the change initiative. Leaders do not always spend enough time explaining the how and why behind a change effort. As Kotter et al. (1986) pointed out, leaders often blame employees after a failed change effort, rather than blaming themselves for fumbling the initiative. Rather than engage them, leaders often blame persons not on board with change. Smollan (2011) found that many constituents resist change, and not just lower-level employees. Governing boards, external stakeholders, community groups and others also resist changes. Dent and Goldberg (1999) further rationalized the concept that individuals resist the loss of control, perceived benefits, or fear of the unknown, rather than resisting change itself. Regardless of the organizational level, resistance can be misunderstood and cause stagnation (Burke, 2014). Most organizational change flounders because the experience of loss is not properly considered. When the threats of loss are so severe as to increase people's sense of helplessness, their ability to master themselves and their environments decreases. To undertake successful organizational change, an executive must anticipate and provide means of working through that loss (Burke, 2014). Dent and Goldberg (1999) proposed that when reviewing resistance through a single lens, the complexity can be overwhelming, yet the subject could be better understood when viewed through factors related to psychological losses. Dubrin and Ireland (1993) suggested mitigating resistance by exploring three fear factors for employees: (a) fear of negative outcomes, (b) fear of the unknown, and (c) fear of the flaws seen in the management's plan.

Resistance routinely is considered the enemy of successful change (Waddell & Sohal, 1998). Cognitive dissonance, often mistaken for resistance, is a state of behavior when people have a natural motivational drive to rid themselves of the mental conflict caused by differing cognitions (Festinger, 1957). Change initiatives can cause cognitive dissonance in employees, who are uncertain how to interpret the new information related to change. These disconnects occur during change efforts, and can lead to resistant behaviors in employees, who often lack complete understanding of why a change is necessary, and may ignore new information and negative feedback unconsciously in order to keep old processes in place (Jermias, 2000). These individual states of confusion or disconnect can occur during change efforts, and can lead to seemingly resistant behavior in employees. The result of proposed change initiatives can cause cognitive dissonance in staff or faculty members, who are uncertain how to interpret new information or why change is necessary. Nolan and Nail (2014) conducted a quantitative research study with 81 university students as participants and concluded that individuals who do not like change are more inclined to experience cognitive dissonance. Additional findings included that dissonance was related more to practical rather than emotional reasons on the individual level. Lilly and Durr (2012) looked at cognitive dissonance theory in a quantitative study on technological changes at work. The findings showed that leadership style and leader behavior can cause cognitive dissonance in the employee, negatively affecting employee attitude toward accepting change. Leaders, as change agents planning a change event, often overlook the promotion of a new mindset for their employees as an essential part of the implementation plan (Kets de Vries et al., 2009).

Resistance can also be displayed as organizational cynicism, which is a negative attitude, usually towards leadership, from groups or individuals within an organization. Cynicism often increases over time due to past failed change attempts and causing pessimism to become entrenched (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Ozler et al., 2011). Organizational cynicism takes place when an individual believes something could be improved but fixing the problems necessary for improvement or resolution are beyond the individual's control (Vance et al., 1996). Historically, organizational cynicism literature also focused on lower level employees, blaming these workers for change failure. Cynical behavior exists throughout organizations, and cynicism by management or higher-level stakeholders can be even more destructive to change efforts.

Andersson and Bateman (1997) found that it is common for a new leader entering an organization to face preexisting cynical attitudes. Perceived injustices and frustration caused by the inability of an individual to make improvements triggered organizational cynicism, and the cynical employees then exhibited less loyalty toward the organization. Similarly, Reichers et al. (1997) found that past failed change efforts and negative interactions with change agents caused organizational cynicism.

Research shows that organizational cynicism affects the relationships between leaders and members, and those members who perceive they work in an unfairly political or negative environment may develop cynicism toward the leaders and the organization (Davis & Gardner, 2004).

Organizational inertia is the result of individuals within organizations developing and refining processes and behaviors over time that become embedded in the people, systems, and culture, making changes and adaptations difficult (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Lane, 2007; Levinthal, 1991; Rumelt, 1995). Colleges and universities are conservative in practice and culture. These principles and practices are handed down continuously from professors to graduate students in a perpetual cycle (Lane, 2007). Macri et al. (2002) found that inertial forces constantly reinforce themselves, making adaptive change even more difficult. Similarly, Sydow et al. (2009) concluded that the processes created over time to maintain and stabilize an institution can threaten a leader's ability to make necessary changes. Miller (1993) found that processes which had been in place for a long time with a prior leader caused greater inertia when change was attempted, making change even more difficult for a new leader.

Methodology

Participants

This study used mixed data, utilizing a previous qualitative study on new presidents and a previous quantitative study on the intersection of tolerance to ambiguity and resistance to change. The combined research explored the intersection of the phenomenon of new college presidents and the intolerance of ambiguity of employees in a higher education environment. The qualitative study used a phenomenological approach conducted with 11 newer presidents (i.e. designated institutional CEO) of four-year colleges and universities who served in their positions for less than four years. The study was both explorative and descriptive. The participants for this study were single-campus top administrators. They were each new to the institution and hired directly into the president position. They may have previously worked at another college, but not in a presidential role. All participants were first-time presidents. The study focused on the commonalities between the presidents' experiences, and how they sought to make sense of expectations and managing resistance as new presidents. The participants were interviewed in person or over the telephone, depending on constraints of distance and time. The face-to-face interviews took place in the offices of the participants. The remaining participants were interviewed by telephone from the researcher's office. Participants were asked a series of 13 standardized open-ended questions. The interviews were 30-60 minutes in length.

The study findings were reexamined through a lens focusing on intolerance of ambiguity as a source of resistance.

For the quantitative, non-experimental study, data were collected utilizing two main instruments: Budner's (1962) Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (TOA), and Oreg's (2003) Resistance to Change Scale (RTC). Additional questions on mindfulness were included in the original survey but not included in this study. The mean, median, mode, standard deviation, and other selected variables were measured using descriptive statistics. The scores from the TOA scale and RTC scale ratings were used to test the significance of the relationships between each subscale were computed using bivariate correlations.

Statistical analyses were conducted in multiple phases to investigate the relationship between TOA and RTC for higher education employees. Three additional questions were added to the survey focusing on knowing and trusting a leader prior to knowing a vision or being asked to change.

The quantitative study participants included faculty, staff, and administrators self-identifying as working full time at U.S. higher education institutions, and who had volunteered to participate in the survey. Participants could not proceed through the survey unless all questions were answered. Participants were reached through a process of snowball-sampling, which was used to access individuals from all levels and within a variety of higher education settings. The quantitative survey was initially sent to known participants, who had the option of sending the surveys to other individuals. While the original study of this survey focused on the initial 38 survey responses (Dunican et al., 2019), the survey ultimately captured a total of 45 participants of complete responses. Three additional questions, not included in the previous study, focused on knowing and trusting a leader prior to knowing a vision or being asked to accept change.

Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale

Budner's (1962) Tolerance of Ambiguity scale contains three subscales (novelty, complexity, and insolubility) adding more specific detail underneath the ambiguity paradigm. The TOA mean (and not the subscales) were considered in this study. The scale contains 16 items with ratings from 1 to 7, where 1 represents a strong disagreement and a greater tolerance of ambiguity, and 7 indicates the greatest level of intolerance of ambiguity. The Cronbach alpha based on this study's participants was .509, which is not particularly strong, but is similar to the earlier studies (Dunican & Keaster, 2015; Dunican et. al., 2019).

Resistance to Change Scale

Oreg's (2003) Resistance to Change scale has four subscales: routine seeking (RC), emotional reaction (ER), short-term focus (STF), and cognitive rigidity (CR). The scale contains 17 items with ratings of 1 to 6, with 1 indicating the lowest level of resistance. Higher scores (on overall scale or subscale) indicates higher resistance to change.

Additional questions on new leaders

Three additional questions were asked of survey participants. Based on a rating scale of 1 to 6, the questions were: 1) (Vision) I would rather know a leader's vision before I'm asked to follow a leader; 2) (Reason) I would rather know the reason for change prior to being asked to change anything; 3) (Trust) Knowing and trusting a leader is important before being asked to change what I do.

Results

The results presented in the current study provided correlations related to the responses of two validated instruments. The demographics are reported in Table 1, and represent gender, education, the number of years at the institutions, and the number of direct reports for the 45 participants. Other demographics related to age and ethnicity were recorded, yet statistical analyses were not conducted due to the disproportionate distribution of the data collected.

The findings of the quantitative study seemed to indicate there were no significant differences in tolerance of ambiguity and resistance to change between participants by gender ($p = .418$), ($p = .875$) with or without direct reporting staff ($p = .156$), or by years of service ($p = .176$). The qualitative study supported the notion of a strong relationship between intolerance of ambiguity and perceived resistance to change.

A careful consideration of both studies was conducted by each researcher, looking for intersecting points of data. The qualitative study was reexamined for instances of tolerance or intolerance of ambiguity as described by the participants.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do new higher education leaders affect the level of resistance?

2. How do higher education staff, faculty, and administrators feel about following new leaders in an uncertain environment?

3. What is the level of ambiguity tolerance and resistance to change in higher education institutions with new leaders?

- **Table 1 - Demographic Information of Participating Higher Education Personnel. See Attached**

In general, the new presidents in the qualitative study began their tenure conducting "meet and greet" tours at their campuses. While assessing changes and getting to know constituents, they held off on delivering visions or revealing details on potential changes. Ostensibly, this vision-delay tactic provided new presidents with an opportunity to discover opportunities to change, or to simply gain acceptance before delivering and implementing a prescribed vision to the affected parties. Regardless, intolerance to ambiguity was high in the environment, and the delay seemed to increase fear and concern.

Theme I: I would rather know a leader's vision before I am asked to follow a leader

In Table 2, the results of the quantitative study showed that higher education employees, with a mean of 5.20 on a ratings scale of 1 to 6, would rather know the leader's vision before being asked to follow a leader.

- **Table 2 - Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants). See Attached**

In the qualitative study, new presidents struggled to hold off persistent questions on explaining a vision:

It is interesting, I had meetings early on, and people would say things like: What's your vision? I would say, well, I'm not sure. How do you expect me to have a vision? If you don't have a vision, and you've been here for [decades], how am I supposed to suddenly give you a vision? (P1)

Most of the presidents discussed how important it was to not provide specific changes and to hold off making promises, and explained:

I think the main key is to truly listen to what people are saying but make no promises…until you know what the priorities of the board will be, [because] making any promises is kind of the kiss of death. (P4)

This president described what occurred when a vision isn't delivered, and that the lack of information and fear can cause people to create their own assumptions:

I have found that people fill in a gap that they are filling in with the wrong information that wasn't intended at all, but because nothing was said anywhere…they come up with their own conclusion. I don't know if that creates resistance, but it doesn't work very well usually. (P9)

Many presidents were pressured by nervous trustees to provide a vision. The presidents asked the trustees for time and trust to deliver the right changes without describing what would change:

The resistance is in things like that…like asking trustees to slow down on their expectations of my vision. It is a lot of: "we'll be fine, don't worry. I'm strong, and I see it, and I'm smart, so I actually know that I can say this and in 5 years we'll just be better." (P11)

The new presidents do not know their way around campus and yet constituents are asking them what they plan to change. Fending off the pressure for a new direction driven by the need for less ambiguity greatly challenged the new presidents, who fought to establish trust while simultaneously buying time to learn their new campus and its employees.

Theme II: I would rather know the reason for change prior to being asked to change anything

Table 3 shows the results of the quantitative study indicating that higher education employees, with a mean of 4.91 on a ratings scale of 1 to 6, would rather know the reason for change prior to being asked to change anything.

- **Table 3 - Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants). See Attached**

In the qualitative study, new presidents fought the urge to say more on what might change. One president sensed fear, uncertainty, and organizational cynicism at an early faculty meeting:

The first meeting we had—everything was crossed…eyes were crossed, legs were crossed, arms were crossed. Essentially, it was fear. I just asked "What is everyone afraid of?" I'd gone prepared to make a presentation, and I'm thinking no one is going to listen until I break through this. The department chair said "We are afraid you are coming here to fire all of us." Which I had the right to do. They knew that. Once we got that out of the way, we were able to move forward. But that was really pretty tough. (P10)

The new presidents observed reactions as they navigated meetings with employees, who struggled with understanding the new leader:

[The constituents] have been entrenched in a modality of the way the world works. I come in with another worldview about how that works. There is bound to be some dissonance at some level there. (P11)

Employees struggled with the lack of information on what would change. The division seemed to describe observations of employees as either tolerant or intolerant toward ambiguity. This president sorted resistant people into different types:

I've been in this game long enough and people respond to change in very different ways. There are some folks who are resistant to change…it just makes them uncomfortable. They don't like change, they like their cookie the way it was yesterday. Some people are resistant to change because that is the way they are wired, activist-oriented, and they are anti-institutional, they mistrust institutions…and then there are people who just love change. (P8)

The intolerance of ambiguity appeared to the presidents as resistance. The new leaders recognized the need for transparency, and the campus stakeholders demanded it from them in a series of power struggles. Still careful about making the wrong move, the presidents held back on the details. The need for people to know the rationale for potential changes caused power struggles.

Theme III: Knowing and trusting a leader is important before being asked to change what I do

The results from the quantitative study showed higher education employees, with a mean of 5.16 on a ratings scale of 1 to 6, would rather know and trust a leader before being asked to change what they do.

- **Table 4 - Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants). See Attached**

In the qualitative study, new presidents were met with a lack of trust as employees struggled with ambiguity. This new president described this issue:

If I'm going to be honest, I want to have my breakfast place that I have the same breakfast at every Saturday to be there. I don't want to change that breakfast. I don't want that menu item changed. That's what I like, it's what I want to have, and I'm used to it. I think we are humans, and in leadership roles it is about making people feel that you, your team, and the organization can [be trusted]. (P7)

Presidents went across campus on the lookout for potential followers, and presumably for employees who are more tolerant of ambiguity and open to change.

Evaluating how much resistance might be out there about a certain change…then it becomes: how you set the table for change? How do you get the folks who are most likely to be the cheerleaders of the change engaged and motivated? (P7)

Some presidents identified and connected to like-minded employees who they perceived as open to change, and assembled sounding boards for future projects:

I've been able to form good relationships with well-respected senior tenured faculty members. And so I use them as an opportunity to [have] a 'kitchen cabinet,' [people] that I can throw [an idea] at and get a feel for. And if I can convince them, I have an ally in the faculty to speak up. I think that's really, really important. (P3)

Recognizing that they could not win over everyone, the new presidents resorted to assembling groups of people who voiced trust in them from the beginning. The underlying rationale became about developing new 'champions' for changes who would be better equipped to influence resistors, who they knew better than the new president did.

Theme IV: The intersection of intolerance of ambiguity and resistance to change.

Many of the employees under these new presidents were confused, intolerant of ambiguity, and wanted tangible plans delivered to them. One new leader struggled with the trust of an employee who seemed to crave a more concrete understanding of the future, and less ambiguity:

She doesn't see the other side yet, I guess. She's also an alum. So I think if she does hang in there, I think she'll see her degree worth inflate tremendously in the next few years. But I just don't know that she can see the forest for the trees. (P6)

This president considered methods to keep staff engaged while they were noticeably panicked about potential changes,

And so there's fear, there's fear of loss of role, there's fear of loss of self-image that one has about the work that they do, and I think that systemic change within an organization can lead people without the right level of support or preparation can lead them to resist because I believe they're fearful [thinking] "what if I don't measure up?" (P2)

In the end, the new leaders struggled to help some of the employees who exhibited resistant behaviors. The failure to provide enough clear direction to satisfy the employees' intolerance to ambiguity caused some employees to leave the organization.

The scales for TOA (Intolerance of Ambiguity) and RTC (Resistance to Change) complement each other positively. Lower scores in the TOA reveal a desire to have a clear understanding of one's environment by having everything planned or communicated with details. Higher scores indicate a greater tolerance for dealing with unknown circumstances. Lower scores for RTC reflect a positive outlook towards change based on four subcategories: routine seeking, emotional reaction, short-term focus, and cognitive rigidity. Higher scores indicate a tendency to withdraw from the ideas of change.

- **Table 5 - Correlations between Responses on TOA and RTC**. **See Attached**

As shown in Table 5, the Pearson correlational analyses were statistically significant between all variables of the subscales for Resistance to Change and Intolerance of Ambiguity. In comparative studies (Oreg, 2003), resistance to change and tolerance of ambiguity as defined by other researchers, were predicted to have a strong relationship. As a result, participants who reflected high scores in sensation-seeking scored high on tolerance of ambiguity and scored lower on resistance to change. The current study supported the concept of a strong relationship between the two scales, $r(43) = .49$, $p < .01$. The total mean for RTC and TOA was positively related, demonstrating that individuals scoring higher on the TOA scale perceived situations as threatening and have a stronger disposition to resist change. Lower scores on both scales reflect an openness to face resistance and a greater acceptance towards ambiguity.

Moreover, the idea that resistance is a naturally occurring reaction towards change, many may acquiesce prior to accepting a change. Coupled with the varying degrees of resistance and how it is measured in the current study, leaders have a choice to define how to cope with internal and external forces that influence their action towards change and ambiguity.

- **Table 6 - Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Responses of Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale and Resistance to Change Subscales**. **See Attached**

Although the correlations between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Resistance to Change were significant, relationships among all subscales were not. Namely, Short-term Focus and Cognitive Rigidity were not significant, which could indicate that leaders in this capacity may be impacted by short-term inconveniences and frequent deviations from their original plan. More research is required to determine how the types of changes influence a leader's ability to overcome short-term distractions and indecisiveness.

Discussion

Research Question 1: How do new higher education leaders affect the level of resistance?

New college presidents, in an effort to avoid facing resistance, seemed in fact to cause resistant behavior by holding off on delivering their vision. This is confirmed in Table 5 by a moderate, positive correlation (p = .001; r = .491) between resistant behavior and intolerance for ambiguity. The new college president's fear of making an initial mistake may in itself be an error in judgment. The findings confirmed the importance of communication and providing rationale behind a vision or change. Given that the majority of higher education employees possess an intolerance for ambiguity, it could be inferred that a new president might be better served by delivering a vision and any rationale for change earlier, rather than face employees filling in the unknown gaps by themselves.

Research Question 2: How do higher education staff, faculty, and administrators feel about following new leaders in an uncertain environment?

The tolerance for ambiguity was low, since the higher education employees' mean of 5.16 (Table 4) fell between the ranges of "agree" and "strongly agree" to the statement that they would rather know and trust a leader before being asked to change. The perceptions of the new college presidents as described in the qualitative interviews seemed to match these same preferences. The new presidents sensed the fear, dissonance, and resistance in their new employees. The exception to these conditions seemed to be in the few confidants chosen as a 'kitchen cabinet' for the new president to confide in. Some presidents, while learning their new roles, searched for employees more tolerant of ambiguity in hopes of generating more optimism.

Research Question 3: What is the level of ambiguity tolerance and resistance to change in higher education institutions with new leaders?

Higher education employees with a low tolerance for ambiguity felt threatened by uncertain situations and were more likely to resist change. The presidents described the great difficulty in winning over the employees. In some cases, the presidents began

predicting which employees would be able to survive the change processes of their leadership transitions. There was a moderate positive correlation (Table 5; p = .001; r = .491) between the total mean for intolerance for ambiguity and resistance to change.

Limitations of the Study

None of the higher education employees participating in the quantitative study were from the same campus as the new presidents. The underlying assumption of the two studies is the qualitative responses are typical of new college presidents and the quantitative survey responses are typical of higher education employees

Conclusion

A vision cannot be established in an organization by edict, or by the exercise of power or coercion. It is more an act of persuasion, of creating an enthusiastic and dedicated commitment to a vision because it is right for the times, right for the organization, and right for the people who are working in it. (Bennis & Nanus, 2007, p. 99)

The quantitative study found that the majority of higher education employees are intolerant to ambiguity, and therefore less likely to coalesce to change. This finding is consistent with past studies (Dunican et al., 2019; Oreg, 2003). Connecting this finding to the qualitative study led to an important consideration moving forward for higher education leadership. A significant finding of this study indicates that the common tactic of delaying vision-delivery while the new leader learns what to change most likely increases the atmosphere of ambiguity. Therefore, in the early stages of the presidencies considered here, resistant behavior seemed to increase due to an existing or growing intolerance for ambiguity by employees while presidents considered changes.

The prevailing thought and training for new college presidents encourages new leaders to hold off on delivering a vision while learning about their new campus and considering potential change initiatives (Gabarro, 2007; Kotter, 1995; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2012; Wiser, 2009), and many of the participants in this study mentioned this same advice being offered during their formal training. The strategy of holding off on vision delivery is inspired by past missteps by new leaders in which sharing vision plans early led to disastrous results (Neumann & Bensimon, 1990; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2012). The findings here showed that new presidents followed this advice, despite the near certainty that not delivering any vision can create doubt in new employees. Gaudiani (1996) suggested that the vision development process for a new college president could take as long as two years. With inaugurations being held as late as one year after a new president begins, how long is too long to let people wait and worry about a new strategic direction? This tactic can exacerbate intolerance for ambiguity for staff, faculty, students, trustees, and alumni.

Apparently, choosing not to deliver any vision at all is an extreme tactic and could prove just as disastrous as making early vision missteps. According to the findings, without

any vision, uncertainty and fear builds quickly. Therefore, it appears as though new leaders would be better served to focus on communication of the process for their developing vision—one built on collaboration and transparency, and fostering the collective participation of all employees. Leaders presenting a transparent and communicative image to constituencies by presenting quality data and explanations appears to resonate with potentially resistant individuals and lessen the effect of ambiguity intolerance.

The presidents in the qualitative study perceived resistance throughout their institution while they were still learning and beginning to make choices on what must change. Many leaders took a one-size-fits-all approach to resistance, as if all perceived resistors were the same. If intolerance of ambiguity is the root cause of these perceived types of resistance, then a singular approach to all resistors might have been the appropriate choice. However, a new leader requires patience while determining courses for change, and it is likely that the existing tolerance for ambiguity will wane over time.

Connecting both studies, the findings seem to indicate that many leaders address only resistant symptoms during the change process, as opposed to proactively addressing the underlying issue of intolerance of ambiguity. The studies also indicate that fear of loss and confusion could be disguised as resistance, which is contrary to prevailing views that employees always resist change.

Finally, the study illustrates the importance of vision delivery and the dilemma imposed on new college presidents. Speak too soon, and new leaders may face an early exit. Follow the common advice to hold off on vision, and the new leader must beware of the vacuum they create. Fearful employees, intolerant of ambiguity and craving certainty, will fill the void with cynicism and resistant behavior—and put a new leader's beginning in peril. A new president's focus and clear communication on the collaborative process of vision development connects expectations between new leadership and higher education employees, effectively reducing the level of ambiguity and resistance.

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Table 1

Demographic Information of Participating Higher Education Personnel

Variable	Level	*N*	Percent
Gender	Male	11	24.40
	Female	34	75.60
Education	4-year College	8	17.70
	Master's Degree or higher	37	82.20
Years at Institution	0 to 4 years	12	26.70
	5 to 10 years	18	40.00
	11 to 20 years	11	24.40
	21 years or more	4	08.90
Direct Reports	0 Direct Reports	9	20.00
	< or = 1 Direct Reports	36	80.00

Note. Total $n = 45$.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants)

Participant Scores	(Vision) I would rather know a leader's vision before I am asked to follow a leader
Mean	5.20
Standard Deviation	.842
Std. Error of Mean	.126
Variance	.709

Note: N = 45; Range = 1 – 6: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Inclined to Disagree, 4 = Inclined to Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants)

Participants Scores	(Reason) I would rather know the reason for change before being asked to change anything
Mean	4.91
Standard Deviation	.925
Std. Error of Mean	.138
Variance	.856

Note: N = 45; Range = 1 – 6: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Inclined to Disagree, 4 = Inclined to Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics on Addendum Instrument Scores (Participants)

Participants Scores	(Trust) Knowing and trusting a leader is important before being asked to change what I do
Mean	5.16
Standard Deviation	.903
Std. Error of Mean	.135
Variance	.816

Note: N = 45; Range = 1 – 6: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Inclined to Disagree, 4 = Inclined to Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Table 5

Correlations between Responses on TOA and RTC

Scales		TOA Total Mean	RTC Total Mean
RTC Total Mean	Pearson Correlation	.491**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001

*$p < .05$ level (two-tailed)

**$p < .01$ level (two-tailed)

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Responses of Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale and Resistance to Change Subscales

Scales	TOA_ Tot	RTC_RS	RTC_ER	RTC_STF	RTC_CR
TOA_Tot	(.51)				
RTC_RS	.50**	(.71)			
RTC_ER	.37**	.61**	(.80)		
RTC_STF	.29	.49**	.70**	(.77)	
RTC_CR	.27	.02	.02	.24	(.62)
# of Items	16	5	4	4	4
Mean	3.31	2.64	3.19	2.77	3.60
SD	.53	.66	.94	.88	.72

Note. $N = 45$. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for each dimension/construct are listed in parentheses on diagonal.

Cronbach's Alpha measures indicated a high internal consistency among the items reflected in each scale.

*p < .05 level (two-tailed)

**p < .01 level (two-tailed)