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Craig R. Seal

California State University, San Bernardino

Donncha Kavanagh

University College Dublin

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EMERGING CONCEPTUAL SCHOLARSHIP

Organizations Don't Resist Change, People Do

Craig R. Seal¹ and Donncha Kavanagh²

Co-Editors

¹*College of Business and Public Administration, California State University, San Bernardino, San Bernardino, California, USA*

²*UCD School of Business, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

In this issue, the Emerging Conceptual Scholarship section presents an innovative framework for understanding resistance to change through the concept of loss. James R. Bailey and Jonathan D. Raelin, in their article “Organizations Don't Resist Change, People Do: Modeling Individual Reactions to Organizational Change Through Loss and Terror Management,” provides a unique understanding of change through the lens of the individual and the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

The author assumes resistance to change starts with the individual (not the organization), is caused by a loss (not the change per se), is an emotional (rather than rational) process, and that overcoming resistance would require a multilevel response (addressing affect, cognition, and behaviors). The article is a response to the largely macro/rational approaches to change and resistance to change that dominates the current literature.

The author incorporates a unique insight by incorporating Terror Management (TM) Theory into the discussion, as a model to better explain both individual resistance and subsequent opportunities to overcome resistance. TM advocates that perceived loss of control (which organizational change often creates) leads to vulnerability and anxiety. To deal with the subsequent loss, an integrated model is needed that addresses micro (individual), meso (existential), and macro (context) individual adjustments as well as different depths within the change process. Reframing the discussion of organizational change within the broader context of individual vulnerability, which fosters resistance, helps inform change efforts, which should focus on multiple-level mitigation strategies to reduce uncertainty and anxiety to be successful.

The author presents an innovative insight into the change literature that calls for a return to more contextualized understanding of change and change management, moving

away from limited quantitative studies toward more nuanced qualitative analysis of change that considers the impact of multiple variables and units of analysis on the process, while positing the individual person as the center of change.

In the second article in this section, “The Effects of Informal Social Structures: A Cognition–Structure–Action Approach,” Harry “Trip” Knoche and Gary J. Castrogiovanni also argue for a shift, in this case a move to studying the effects of informal—rather than formal—structures on behavior. Of course informal structure has been a subject of inquiry for a long time, going at least as far back as Dalton (1959), but Knoche and Castrogiovanni make a distinctive contribution by focusing on the potential effects of two “epistemic motives” on informal structures and the effects of these structures on individual actions. By “epistemic motives” they mean the willingness of individuals to spend cognitive effort processing social information, and they identify two such motives: the need for closure (or stability), and the need for cognition (the desire to get new information and engage in complex analysis of such information).

The authors hypothesize that individuals with a high need for closure will develop strong ties and closed personal networks to maintain stability in their social structure. They further hypothesize that individuals with a high need for cognition will develop new relationships and form personal networks with structural holes in order to gain access to new information and ideas. Building on these ideas they create an integrated cognition–structure–action model that connects personal network structure with action. Specifically, they propose that interdependent actions focused on the welfare of close others will be more likely in “closed” networks with strong ties, while independent action will be more likely in personal networks with structural holes and weak ties.

The authors add another layer to their model by incorporating March's (1991) well-known distinction between exploration and exploitation. Specifically, they argue that in organizations with closed formal structures—which March associates with

Address correspondence to Craig R. Seal, College of Business and Public Administration, California State University, San Bernardino, Jack Brown Hall 563, 5500 University Pkwy., San Bernardino, CA 92407, USA. E-mail: cseal@csusb.edu

exploitation—employees with a need for closure would not need to go outside formal structures to satisfy their epistemic needs, nor would they need to rely significantly on informal structures. In contrast, they propose that individuals with a need for cognition will benefit from interacting with open formal structures, which March associates with exploration.

This model resonates with some ideas running through Bailey's paper, in that both contributions are structured around a multilevel model. Such models bring added complexity, not least in terms of method and analysis, though they also offer a

potentially rich basis for interesting empirical studies. Having carefully developed their model, Knoche and Castrogiovanni proceed to articulate a wide range of possible studies and thought-provoking lines of inquiry.

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