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A study on resistance to change in an environment of constant transition: Expected and unexpected findings and implications for practice

CHANGE IS A DOMINANT PHENOMENON of organisational life in the contemporary era (e.g. see Bozionelos, 2003). As change normally involves perceived inconvenience for its recipients, it is natural to meet resistance.

Influential definitions of resistance to change have adopted analogies from natural sciences, especially physics, to describe it metaphorically as a restraining force that moves into the direction of maintaining the status quo (cf. Lewin, 1952). More recently Brower and Abbolafia (1995) defined resistance as a particular kind of action or inaction, and Ashforth and Mael (1998) defined resistance as defiance or omission. Finally, Sagie, Elizur and Greenbaum (1985) use compliant behaviour as evidence of reduced resistance.

Jermier, Knights and Nord (1994, p.9) noted that 'the most prevalent way of analysing resistance is to see it as a reactive process where agents embedded in power relations actively oppose initiatives by other agents.' And this view is similar to that of Davison (1994, p.94) who noted that resistance includes 'anything and everything that workers do which managers do not want them to do, and what workers do not do that managers wish them to do.' Inherent in these views of resistance to change is the idea that organisations are complex political systems that contain groups with divergent and conflicting interest and objectives. Thus, resistance reflects an attempt by certain groups to defend and protect legitimate group interest in what is essentially a political arena.

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Traditionally, resistance has been viewed under a negative prism. For example, Watson (1982) pointed out that managers often perceive resistance negatively, since they interpret it as disobedience from the part of the employees. Early authors (e.g. Lawrence, 1954) functioned according to the assumption that subordinates will be always opposed to change, and warned managers to avoid creating resistance in subordinates. Such warnings have been continuing until these days (e.g. see Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Hence, 'resistance' has been traditionally utilised as a label to dismiss employee concerns about proposed changes.

However, it is not unlikely that this line of reasoning falls into the trap of the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967), which refers to the natural tendency of people to overestimate the characteristics of actors (e.g. employees to whom change is imposed) and to under-estimate the importance and strength of the situation (e.g. whether the change is reasonable, just or beneficial). As a consequence, another line of literature, not yet well integrated into mainstream research on resistance to change, has focused on the identification of reasons behind employees' opposition to organisational change (Piderit, 2000).

Indeed, research provided evidence that resistance to change from the part of employees does not always have malevolent motives. For example, research on obedience to authority suggests that resistance might be motivated by individuals' desires to act in accordance with their ethical principles (Milgram, 1965; Modigliani & Rochat, 1995).

And some studies have indicated that employees' resistance to organisational actions is frequently motivated by more than mere selfishness (Graham, 1984, 1986); as employees may in fact try to attract the attention of management towards issues that they believe are of importance for organisational performance (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit & Dutton, 1986).

Lewin (1952), whose field theory was pioneering in the understanding of organisational change, pointed that coercive strategies based on greater countervailing forces increased the internal tension of the field leading to negative consequences. In a similar line, Coch and French (1948) studied undesirable behaviours of employees in response to management imposed changes in jobs and work methods; and they concluded that encouragement of employee participation in the planning and design of change would reduce resistance. This point has been reiterated in later studies and writings (e.g. see McCaffrey, Faerman & Hart, 1995).

Finally, adopting a cynical view, prominent consultants noted that the concept of resistance to change has been utilised over the years as a means of blaming the less powerful for unsatisfactory results of changes efforts (see Krantz, 1999, p.42).

The present study

The present work aimed to investigate the prevalence of resistance to change and its relationship with certain key attitudes in organisations that face constant change. Such a study will provide valuable insights on the way employees who face change on an everyday basis view it, and these insights will provide bases for suggestions regarding practice. The following research questions were investigated:

Research question 1: To investigate whether there are gender differences in self-reported resistance to change and in satisfaction with the outcomes of change.

Research question 2: To investigate the relationship of the mode of employment (i.e. full-time vs part-time and permanent vs temporary) with self-reported resistance to change and with satisfaction with the outcomes of change.

Research question 3: To investigate the relationship of self-reported resistance to change with satisfaction with the outcomes of change and other important attitudes, including perceptions of job insecurity due to change.

Method
Setting and Participants

Participants were 61 (28 men and 33 women) full-time and part-time employees in two multinational organisations based in London that had undergone substantial change (i.e. technological, structural and strategic direction) in recent years, especially after the 'September 11' events. Most employees held managerial positions, and mean tenure with the organisation was 6.5 years. This setting and sample were considered ideal for the study on resistance to change and attitudes towards change.

Procedure

Before the main study the questionnaire was piloted to 10 randomly approached employees in the two organisations, who completed it and made comments on the intelligibility of its items. Following the pilot work, 100 packs with questionnaires were posted to a randomly selected sample of employees. Each package included the questionnaire and a cover letter providing information on the study and ensuring confidentiality (though responses were anonymous). Of the recipients of the packs, 61 returned usable responses.

Measures

Resistance against the effected change. This was measured with 19 items in a five-point format (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree). Items were positively (e.g. 'I have a greater senses of achievement in my work than before') and negatively stated (e.g. 'I would prefer things the way they were before the change'), in order to eliminate the impact of the acquiescence effect. Negatively stated items were reversed in the scoring process, so higher scores on the scale indicate less resistance towards the effected changes. Cronbach alpha was 0.61.

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Satisfaction with the outcomes of change. Partici-
pants' satisfaction with the outcomes of the
changes was assessed with two items ('has the
change increased your effectiveness in your
role?' and 'are you generally satisfied with the
new working conditions in the organisation
since the change?) with a 'yes' (coded 1) or 'no'
(coded 0) response format. Coded scores were
summed to produce total scores indicating the
extent to which respondents were satisfied with
the results of the changes.

Orientation towards teamwork. The extent to
which respondents preferred to work as part of a
team was assessed with two items (e.g. 'I prefer to
work in teams') in a five-point response format
(1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree).

Single items with five-point response formats
were utilised to assess the extent to which *respon-
dents trusted the way management had been handling
changes*, the degree to which participants felt that
their *job security was threatened by changes*, and the
degree to which they perceived that *employees had
an input in the planning and implementation of the
changes.*

Results
The descriptive statistics indicated that respon-
dents had a rather neutral approach towards the
changes in their organisations ($M=3.06$,
$SD=0.35$). This suggests that they did not resist
change substantially, but on the other hand that
they were not supportive to change either.

Participants were very mildly positive in their
perceptions on their input into the planning and
implementation of change ($M=3.16$), though it
must be noted that there was extensive variability
in their views on this issue ($SD=1.42$).

On the other hand, however, participants
reported low trust in the way the top manage-
ment were handling change ($M=2.13$, $SD=1.27$);
but they were not particularly worried regarding
their job security amidst the change process
($M=3.15$, $SD=1.24$).

Finally, they were very mildly negative towards
the effects that changes had on their own effec-
tiveness and the effectiveness of their organisa-
tion ($M=0.93$, $SD=0.93$).

Research question 1 was investigated with an
Analysis of Co-variance (ANCOVA), controlling
for full-time or part-time job status. The results
indicated no significant gender differences in
resistance to change, $F(1,58)=2.1$, *ns*. However,
the findings indicated a significant gender

difference in the degree of satisfaction with the
outcomes of change, $F(1,58)=5.87$, $p<0.05$; with
men participants reporting more satisfaction
than women participants (means, adjusted for
the co-variate, were 1.22 and 0.69, respectively).

The first part of research question 2 (i.e.
concerning differences between employees with
full-time and part-time employment status) was
also investigated with an ANCOVA, using gender
as co-variate this time. The results suggested no
significant difference between participants on
full-time and part-time contracts in their resis-
tance to change, $F(1,58)=0.63$, *ns*. However, in
this case too there was a significant difference in
satisfaction with the outcomes of change,
$F(1,58)=6.39$, $p<0.05$. Adjusted mean scores indi-
cated that part-time employees were more satis-
fied than full-time employees with the results
change had on their own personal and on organ-
isational effectiveness (adjusted means were 1.45
and 0.78, respectively). The employment mode
(full-time vs part-time) was not associated with
job insecurity due to changes, $F(1,58)=0.05$, *ns*.

With respect to the second part of research
question 2, the results of the ANCOVA, with
gender and full-time vs part-time status as co-
covariates, showed no significant differences
between participants with permanent and
temporary contacts in resistance to change,
$F(1,58)=0.36$, *ns*, satisfaction towards the
outcomes of change, $F(1,58)=0.73$, *ns*, and job
insecurity due to change, $F(1,58)=0.05$, *ns*.

Research question 3 was investigated with the
calculation of Pearson correlation coefficients,
which are presented in Table 1 (overleaf).

Scores on resistance to change were positively
related to satisfaction with the outcomes of
change ($r=0.25$, $p<0.05$), but they were not
related to scores on any of the other attitudes
towards aspects of change. At this point it should
be kept in mind that higher scores on the scale
on resistance to change indicate less resistance,
hence, the finding was in line with what would be
logically expected.

Regarding satisfaction with the outcomes of
change, in line with would be expected, this was
positively related to perceptions of employees'
input into the change process ($r=0.33$, $p<0.05$).
However, in contrast with what would be
expected, satisfaction with the outcomes of
change was positively related to job insecurity
due to change ($r=0.46$, $p<0.001$) and negatively
related to trust towards the handling of change
by the top management ($r=-0.26$, $p<0.05$).

Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficients (N=61).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Resistance to change (reverse scored)	–	0.25*	-0.08	-0.18	0.02	-0.08
2. Satisfaction with the outcomes of change		–	-0.26*	0.46***	0.33**	-0.27*
3. Trust towards management handling of change			–	-0.28*	-0.28*	0.18
4. Job insecurity due to change				–	0.31*	-0.21
5. Employees' input into the change process					–	-0.11
6. Orientation towards teamwork						–

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

In line with what would be logically expected, the degree to which participants trusted the handling of change by the management was negatively related to their job insecurity due to change ($r=-0.28$, $p<0.05$). On the other hand, the degree of trust towards the handling of the change by management was negatively related to the degree to which participants considered that they had input into the change process ($r=-0.28$, $p<0.05$).

In another case of contrast with what would be expected, feelings of insecurity due to change was positively related to perceived input into the change process ($r=0.31$, $p<0.05$). Finally, the extent to which participants reported preference for teamwork was negatively related to their satisfaction with the outcomes of change ($r=-0.27$, $p<0.05$).

Discussion

The study sought to investigate a number of issues pertinent to employees' perceptions of change in two organisations that had been undergoing virtually constant change for many years. The findings provide certain insights, but also impose some puzzles.

The fact that participants were not particularly worried about their job security can be partly accounted by the fact that change (including downsizing) these days is part of organisational life and that these companies were being involved in constant change for long time intervals. This is likely to have resulted in apathy or cynicism from the part of the employees. On the other hand, it is also likely that these employees had adapted and accepted change as a fact of everyday life.

Also, there was no link between gender and self-reported resistance to change. However, there was a gender difference in satisfaction with change, as men expressed more satisfaction with the outcome of organisational changes than women. Furthermore, men seemed generally satisfied with these outcomes, in contrast to their female counterparts. This suggests that it maybe appropriate to utilise different tactics in order to gain the support of men and women regarding changes. For example, women employees may need to be paid more attention in cases of organisational change, needing on open atmosphere with free and safe expression of concerns and emotions.

Employment status was not related either to job insecurity or to satisfaction with the outcome of change. This implies that, regardless of their job contract (i.e. either on a permanent or a temporary contract, full-time or part-time), all employees are able to view positively organisational goals towards change or acquire a common vision regarding the need for change. The creation of such vision must be fostered with care by organisational agents. In addition, part-time employees reported a greater satisfaction with change. This makes the very interesting implication that part-time workers may need to be seen and treated as of equal value to full-time workers. In general, these findings suggest that temporary and part-time workers should also be seen as valuable, taking into account that they appear to be able to hold at least as positive views on organisational change efforts as their full-time and permanent status counterparts.

Satisfaction with change was inversely related to trust towards the handling of the change

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process, and the latter was negatively related to the degree to with participants considered they had input into the change process. Further research should try to replicate these and to discover the reasons for this relationship pattern. However, this relationship pattern could be accounted for in terms of employees' beliefs that they have to take their fate in their own hands; without holding great expectations from management. Employees in organisations that are found in constant change may in fact become more empowered, as a result of a psychological cognitive mechanism to deal with the pressure and uncertainty of such a situation.

Furthermore, the finding of low level of trust in the way top managers handle changes is in line with the previous account and invites a different view of how managers should manage the change process. For example, to enhance confidence and to manage successfully the subtle dynamics of employees' groups they may need to consider three levels of analysis: key individuals that can act as opinion leaders among employees, the important teams that are involved to 'get things done', and the organisational context. While managers administer many of the changes in order for employees to feel satisfaction with changes trust and confidence must also be conveyed.

As a final point, organisations will continue to change rapidly and these situations with the increasing peace of globalisation, which bring special leadership challenges. We have to remain optimistic. For an improved organisational life it is important to put emphasis in management training and development programmes where top levels would be able to reframe successful the situation and recreated their relationship for the benefits of participants. However, the present study also suggests that employees themselves develop immunity and adaptation structures when faced with constant change. In this sense, change acts as a catalyst for development for employees. Therefore, the management may need to see employees as partners in the difficult task of achieving organisational survival, which normally necessitates change and transformation.

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