A positive approach to stress, resistance, and organizational change

Mahin Tavakoli\textsuperscript{a} \textsuperscript{*}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Psychology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Canada

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Abstract

The literature of organizational change is dominated by the idea that stress and resistance are two independent phenomena, and that they are immediate and natural reactions to organizational change. This paper suggests a model of organizational change that views the stress as a mediator between organizational change and resistance to change. According to this model, stress and resistance are not inevitable reactions to organizational change. Rather, what makes organizational change stressful or susceptible to resistance of employees is the way people are treated during implementation of the change. The model introduces strategies for reducing negative stress and resistance, and for increasing positive stress and positive health outcomes among employees adapting to change.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, change has become a dominant aspect of organizational life (Dupuy, 2002). Downsizing, mergers, innovations in management and in technology, and shifts in the location, time, duration, quality and quantity of tasks and responsibilities are some of the organizational changes that have radically affected work life (e.g., Vecchio & Appelbaum, 1995). Such rapid changes have increased stress among managers and employees (Gibbons, 1998). Various health or behavioural problems are reported as a result of stress in organizational change (Lindstrom, 1990). Recognition of increased organizational stress and its possible correlates with mental health has stimulated many investigations of the adverse effects of stress at the workplace and how much of the stress might be caused by organizational change (e.g., Hansen, 2001). In the 1950s, Kurt Lewin introduced the idea that people resist organizational change. Since then researchers and theorists have devoted a considerable effort to study resistance as an immediate response to organizational change (e.g., Shulman, 1982). This response is considered as a barrier to organizational change, leading to many problems such as tension, low satisfaction with work life, and sometimes the complete failure of the proposed organizational change (e.g., Trice & Beyer, 2001).

However, an emerging approach to social and organizational psychology encourages us to recognize the positive aspects of work (Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2001), which can be applied to the study of organizational change.

* Mahin Tavakoli. Tel.: 1-613-5202600 (ext: 4578).
\textit{E-mail address: mtkhomei@connect.carleton.ca.}
The positive approach strives to develop nurturing organizations and institutions that create positive experiences like joy, hope, and devotion (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This paper focuses on the positive approach and attempts to illustrate that the organizational environment can prevent or reduce negative effects of organizational change, and can produce constructive affect and behaviours if the environment affords some positive actions.

2. Stress as a positive stimulus

Stress is an inevitable component of everyday life and puts demands on mind and body. Selye (1993) distinguished bad stress from good stress by labeling them as distress and eustress, or stress of fulfillment. Considering the possible positive effects of stress on human beings lives, Selye proposed maximizing the eustress components of life rather than avoiding stress. Although stress may have an adaptive and motivational role in the lives of human beings, and despite the enormous number of studies on the negative effects of job stress, there are only a few examples of generating or maximizing the eustress of organizational life, especially eustress related to organizational change. Beyond a few studies (e.g., Werbel, 1983) that suggest higher levels of organizational commitment, mental health, physical health, self-confidence, and self-esteem as some of positive responses to job stress, research on the potential of organizational change to create eustress is scarce.

3. The Positive nature of resistance

Research on organizational change have approached resistance from two opposite perspectives; one viewing resistance as a destructive force in any situation (e.g., Cummings & Huse, 1989), and the other viewing resistance as a positive force (e.g., Perren, 1996). The idea of an absolute positive resistance seems to be an extreme reaction to the more prevalent idea of resistance as wholly negative. I propose a third approach suggesting that resistance to organizational change is problematic in many circumstances, but may be rooted in positive aspects of human nature. I define resistance as “a behavioural reaction or symptom of distress, intended to reduce distress level”. According to this definition, resistance has three positive functions: (1) Resistance as a symptom similar to a pain signals that there is something wrong and warns people to attend to the problems behind it. (2) It serves to manage or control the distress coming from change. (3) Resistance can be a result of employees’ commitment to their current status, tasks, and groups. For example, a feeling of contentment in one’s current work situation (Lewis, 1975), and of attachment can affect people’s preferences for their current job activities and inhibit them from accepting new activities (Staw, 1982). Much resistance is driven by basic socio-psychological needs for security consistency, predictability, and stability in life (Trice & Beyer, 2001).). It is possible to provide arrangements that facilitate employees’ transition from an accepted current status to a new and challenging one, by not threatening employees’ basic human needs during challenges of organizational change. To manage such transitions in organizations, in the following section a model is proposed in which resistance is seen as a product of the ways in which change is introduced to employees.

4. An integrative model of organizational change, stress, and resistance

Generally, stress and resistance have been viewed as two immediate and negative reactions to organizational change. Most of the literature portrays managers as if they are always trapped in a no-win situation. From one side, they are under pressure to make organizational changes to adjust and survive in the changing world. From the other side, they try to alleviate their own distress, often by putting employees under distress, which often generates bad feelings, bitterness, resentment, and employees’ resistance to change. Taking the complexities of organizational change, can it be accomplished without harming employees and managers? What kinds of actions can be taken to protect employees and managers from distress and to fulfill the objectives of organizational change?

With an emphasis on the positive capacity of organizational change, and acknowledging the potential positive and adverse effects of stress of organizational change, I propose a model of organizational change and stress that suggests the process of implementing changes that do not always negatively influence managers and the employees. This model views organizational change as viewed as a two-sided coin, with each side producing different situations. From one side, organizational change may lead to distress and resistance. From the other side, change may produce eustress and positive reactions of employees to the organizational change. The processes through which distress and eustress are generated and the outcomes of distress and eustress are illustrated in Figure 1.
According to the integrative model of organizational change and stress (see Figure 1), the processes and conditions which result in distress, eustress, and their outcomes include:

(a) Organizational change, without any positive actions or methods taken by the managers, may primarily lead to negative thoughts and feelings including perceptions or fears of loss, threat, ambiguity, job insecurity, work overload, lack of control, and/or unpredictability (e.g., Hansen, 2001).

(b) Accompanying the negative perceptions and fears are distress reactions (Kahn & Byosiere, 1990). Distress reactions can be physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural (Lokk & Arnetz, 1997).

(c) The model proposes that distress and resistance are two interconnected phenomena. Resistance to change is part of behavioural reactions of such distress. This is the first model of organizational change to explicitly make this connection. Cummings and Huse (1989) make a vague connection between stress and resistance by saying that people feel job insecurity during organizational change and find it stressful; often uncooperative behaviours and resistance against change are reactions to feelings of job insecurity. However, Cummings and Huse do not mention any direct connection between stress and resistance. Kahn and Byosiere (1990) acknowledge stress as the source of disequilibrium in the workplace. But, instead of paying attention to the reason underlying resistance, which is distress, they focus on symptoms of resistance for reducing resistance.

Research on behavioural reactions to distress gives insight with regard to their similarities to resistance. Some behavioural reactions of stress are: violence and other antisocial acts, self-reports of aggressive traits, and strikes (e.g., Belbin & Stammers, 1972; Bedeian, Armenakis, & Curran, 1980; Spector, 1997). Other counterproductive behaviours include spreading rumours, doing inferior work on purpose, stealing from employer, damaging property, equipment, or products on purpose, damaging property accidentally but not reporting, disrupted performance of social role as citizen, and accidents (Lesowitz, 1996; Sutherland & Cooper, 1991). Some of cognitive and emotional reactions of distress also seem to be similar to the cognitive and emotional state of resistance. This similarity seems
to be suggestive of the common essence of resistance and distress. For example, a tendency to focus on the negative while degrading the positive, rigid thinking patterns, and obsessive thinking are some of many cognitive reactions of distress (Quillian-Wolever & Wolever, 2003) that may be involved in resistance, as well. In the same way, anxiety, irritation, and frustration are some emotional reactions to distress (Warr, 1987).

(d) According to the model, the relationship between distress and resistance may not end at this point; the model suggests that after resistance appears, it can often continue to raise the level of distress in the organization in a vicious cycle (see Figure 1). Cummings and Huse (1989) assert that lack of information will stimulate rumours among stressed employees and that rumours will almost always result in more tension and anxiety. A survey by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company (1993) about workplace violence showed a relationship between job stress and violence and suggested stress could be both a cause and an effect of violence.

(e) Therefore, the negative consequences of resistance affect organizational change negatively.

(f) Organizational change is not preordained to produce distress and resistance. In order to prevent distress and resistance, organizations can adopt methods and actions that help employees believe they have ability, skill, power, or knowledge to cope with the situation. These methods can improve employees coping skills, encourage a positive reframing of the change, or at least prevent viewing the change as threatening. Some of the methods are: (I) Participative organizational change encourages active involvement of employees in decision-making about the process of organizational change (Schraeder, 2001). (II) Benefit finding in change requires managers clearly talk to employees about the anticipated gains and whether the gains outweigh the losses (Trice & Beyer, 2001). (III) Organizational justice concerns the way managers treat employees during organizational change (Lind & Tyler, 1988). (IV) Honest and clear communication refers to providing employees with accurate, detailed, and timely information about the change, its consequences, and about how to cope with the change (Lewis, 1975). (V) Supportive organization refers to a work environment that protects employees from the hassles of organizational change (Smith, 1997). (VI) Training refers to equipping employees with skills and knowledge required for adapting to the organization during and after implementation of the change (Smith, 1997).

(g) The model suggests that these positive actions or methods can change negative perceptions or appraisals of employees. A cognitive change may be achieved by using these methods to address and change their negative thoughts directly. Provision of useful information through communication or through application of benefit finding, which help people realize if the positive consequences of an organizational change outweigh the negative consequences, are examples of methods that may directly lead to a cognitive change.

(h) These positive actions (e.g., training or supportive workplace) can also promote employees’ coping abilities.

(i) Improved coping abilities may facilitate cognitive change in employees. For example, a strong feeling of self-efficacy resulting from training may lead to perceiving the event as not threatening or as positive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

(j) Eustress is consequence of such cognitive changes.

(k) The model suggests that positive responses to change, such as improved health, willingness, cooperation with organizational change, and feelings of challenge, growth, and joy can be some primary results of this situation. Accompanied by these positive responses may be productivity.

(l) These positive responses of employees may contribute to a higher level of eustress. In addition, the positive responses may positively affect organizational change.

(m) The basic assumption underlying the proposed model is that in the same way that negative reactions are a result of negative perceptions about outcomes of organizational change, the positive responses may result from positive appraisals of events. Lazarus (1991) analyses stress in terms of interaction between environmental stressors and individuals’ perception or appraisal of environmental stressors. This perspective introduces individuals’ perceptions or interpretations of a situation as a major determinant of negative or positive emotional reactions to that situation. Lazarus (1969) asserts the perception or appraisal might include how the individual perceives the threats, potential harms, challenges, and perception of her or his own capability to cope with them.

5. Conclusion

The literature on the methods of stress and change management has focused more attention on the relationship between organizational change and resistance, and there is insufficient research on the relationship between organizational change and stress. Most likely, this is not because the researchers find stress of organizational change less important than resistance to organizational change, but rather because research on resistance is more concrete and simple, and thus it is easier to examine. The research on organizational changes that elicit positive feelings is
also scarce. In sum, the basic idea underlying positive organizational change is that if the employees are taken seriously and if they are respected, they will blossom and their power will be oriented toward success of change plans, as well as toward an enjoyable work life. Managers who understand the psychological aspects of organizational change can better plan what methods be used, when they be used, how they be used, and under what specific conditions they may lead to more positive results. Yet, positive organizational changes, in many situations, rely on managers’ creativity, enthusiasm, improvisation, exploration, and enterprise. Finding creative ways of implementing organizational changes that motivate positive responses of employees is a worthwhile challenge.

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