FACILITATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING RESISTANCE

Irina Onyusheva, Ahmed Elswerky, Sasithorn Kanwisit

Turan University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, Stamford International University, Thailand, Bangkok
Dr.irina.onyusheva@gmail.com

The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of employee resistance to organizational change, and to understand why resistance occurs and how to minimize resistance and facilitate the process of change. It is examined some key elements of organizational change such as the scale of change, change enablers, change methods, and change response. It is considered the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions of employees to organizational change, and how these reactions are shaped by individual personalities, the method of implementation, and the management styles and relationships with employees. In addition, this paper includes some research-based recommendations aiming to reduce resistance to change and to facilitate the change process.

Keywords: Organizational change, resistance, management.

Introduction

Organizational changes are constantly required in this era due to globalization, strong competition, technical development, and a customer-driven market. Organizations must adapt to the change or risk falling behind. There are several types of change from a large scale to only a minor change such as company mergers or acquisition, the appointment of a new CEO, and add or removing some departments or divisions that impact the normal operations in the organization. The question is: ‘Do we understand and manage the change properly to avoid resistance to change?’

Regardless of the intensity and objectives of change, the ability to change and its impact is still a complex process. Several research articles were used in this paper to identify the factors necessary to ensure the effective transition and the success of change.

Literature Review

In this section, it is provided a review of the nature of organizational change and some of the key characteristics of change. It is also explored the nature of response to organizational change by means of reviewing some of the theories explaining how change agents and managers respond to organizational change.

What is organizational change?

Whether an organization changes in response to external competitive pressure, regulatory and economic uncertainty, or an innate willingness to innovate and evolve, change is a fact of organizational existence. Leavitt (2003) defines organizational change as any initiative or set of new measures adopted by an organization to achieve a set of
outcomes in response to external and/or internal change forces (Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015).

**Significant change factors.**

The scale of change may be large or small. It can happen at the organization or the industry level, and it may be continuous or discontinuous (Meyer et al., 1990; Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). The researchers argued that management is better able to make adequate decisions when it fully understands the scale and quality of change required. This includes identifying whether the scale of change is large necessitating extensive resources and higher levels of collaboration and employee participation over a period, or is it small in scale requiring fewer resources and prompt implementation. Depending on the type and scale of change, the organization will experience some degree of change in the way it operates.

For any organization to be successful in the implementation of small or large-scale change initiatives, it needs to consider the factors that influence the success of change. These factors are essential to bridge the gap between where the organization stands and where it hopes to be. Anderson and Ackerman (2001) suggest that the main three factors of a broad change strategy are 1) content: the strategy, systems, technologies and work practices needed to change, 2) people: the individuals involved in the change and their behavior when implementing change, and 3) process: the actions and procedures carried out to implement change (Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015).

The method of change is a set of processes and tools that help the management team make effective change decisions as they implement change initiatives (Zook, 2007; Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). Researchers have proposed several change management systems in the last two decades with most of these systems sharing some common processes such as scouting, evaluating current situations, identifying problems, planning and communicating change, and finally implementing the new changes (Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). These systems may allow change managers to align the change initiative with the overall mission and strategy of the organization, and to anticipate problems and plan solutions to these problems.

**Individual response to change.**

Generally, there are two types of reactions to change: reactions to change process and reactions to change outcomes (Georgalis et al. 2014). Change can trigger positive feelings of excitement and happiness, or negative emotions like anger and fear (Vakola et al. 2004). Oreg et al. (2011) proposed that explicit reactions relate directly to how change recipients feel (affective dimension), what they think (cognitive dimension), or what they intend to do (behavioral dimension) in response to the change initiative. Piderit (2000) proposed that individuals operate in all three dimensions leading to either positive or negative reactions as a result of organizational change. Research suggests that there are three types of reactions these are cognitive, affective, and behavioral:

Cognitive reactions involve how individuals create their own interpretations of what is going to happen, how they perceive themselves and what others are thinking or intending. Ellis and Harper (1975) proposed that the emotional and behavioral reactions of an individual depend on the way they structure their thoughts. For example, cognitive reactions can be positive if employees perceive personal gain or benefits from the change outcomes, or they
may react in a negative if they see problems in the change rather than opportunities. Therefore, the quality of the information shared about the change initiative has a direct effect on how the employees evaluate the change and how they react to it.

Affective reactions to organizational change involve how an individual feels about the change. The emotional processes take place in tandem with cognitive processes. Affective reactions to change may be positive involving enthusiasm or excitement, or negative feelings including anxiety, stress, and apprehension (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

Behavior is the physical actions that can be seen or heard, and the mental processes that cannot be seen or heard (Matlin, 1995). Behavioral reactions to change are either positive or negative, and pro-change or anti-change rather than good or bad (Giangreco and Peccei, 2005; Erwin and Garman, 2009). In other words, an individual is more likely to take supportive actions if they accept and embrace the change initiative or behave in a non-supportive way.

The Research Objective

The given research is attempted to better understand 1) why individual resistance to organizational change occurs, and 2) to explore the strategies that organizations develop to ease the resistance to change. Our research produced a number of studies providing an extensive review of literature addressing organizational change and resistance to organizational change, as well as a research-based guide for change managers to help them reduce resistance and facilitate organizational change.

Methods Of Research

Methods of research are retrospective, comparative and systematic analyses, causes and consequences analysis, and expert assessment.

Key Research Findings.

Behavioral, cognitive, and affective resistance

Resistance manifests itself in the strong or weak behaviors in response to change. Bovey and Hede (2001) in Erwin and Garman (2009), reported in their study of nine Australian organizations facing major changes that reactions to change include supportive versus resistant behaviors, active versus passive behaviors, and covert versus overt behaviors. Giangreco and Peccei (2005) in Erwin and Garman (2009) conducted a study of the privatization of an Italian electric company in which 359 mid-level managers expressed in a self-report survey frequent anti-change behaviors such as doing the minimum work required, not actively cooperating the change initiative, and not making an effort to ensure subordinates understood the change effort.

In addition to the behavioral aspect of resistance, Oreg (2006) and Piderit (2000) proposed that resistance also involves cognitive and affective processes (Erwin and Garman, 2009). The cognitive aspect involves how individuals think about change. Negative cognitive reactions to change include a lack of commitment to the change and negative evaluations of the change. The affective response to change relates to how individuals feel about the
change. Negative affective reactions include feelings of stress, anxiety, and anger (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

Piderit (2000) in Erwin and Garman (2009) proposes that cognitive, affective and behavioral processes operate simultaneously, which indicates that individuals may feel conflicted in their response to the change initiative. For example, they may feel hopeful about change, but worried that they may not have the ability to cope with the change process, or they may see the benefits of the change without focusing on making the necessary changes to implement the initiative.

The Influence of Personality, Rewards, and Competence

Researchers also considered the influence of certain personality characteristics on how individuals respond to change and their ability to cope with the process. Oreg (2003) concluded in a study at Cornell University that individuals that have an inclination to seek routines or demonstrated a dogmatic way of thinking are highly predisposed towards resistance. Another study conducted by Wanberg and Banas (2000) proposed that individuals with personal resilience and openness to change are more likely to accommodate a change whether or not they agree to the change. Similarly, Judge et al. (1999) found that self-esteem and risk tolerance were positively related to an individual’s performance and job satisfaction, as well as an individual’s success in coping with organizational change.

Researchers also proposed that individual concerns and perceptions of the implications and outcomes of change influence their response to change. Giangreco and Peccei (2005) proposed in their study of an Italian electric company that an individual’s assessment of whether they will lose or gain because of change determined their attitude towards change. Similarly, Oreg (2006) found that concerns about job security and rewards were linked to affective and cognitive reactions to change. In addition to concerns about threats and benefits, individuals assess their own skills and competencies to predict their success in new roles. Chreim (2006) found that employees were discouraged when they felt that they lacked the capabilities to cope with change initiatives in a study of two large Canadian banks.

The Influence of Communication, Understanding, and Participation

The research papers examined in this study established a correlation between attitudes towards change initiatives and influential factors in the change process such as communication of the change, the level of understanding of change, and the level of participation in the change process. Wanberg and Banas (2000) found in a study of individuals experiencing change in the public housing industry that their attitude towards change was more likely to be more positive when they received high quality information about the change initiatives.

The provision of information only, however, does not guarantee reduced resistance to change as the level of understanding of the change can influence the individuals’ feelings about the change initiative (Erwin and Garman, 2009). Washington and Hacker (2005) concluded in a study of the implementation of a new performance management system in secondary schools in Botswana that individuals were more likely to accept the change and less likely to resist it when the change initiative is well understood.

Lines (2004) reported a strong relationship between employee perceptions of their participation and achieving the goals of the change initiative in a study of 138 managers of a telecommunication company involved in a major strategic reorientation. The higher the level
of employee participation in the change process, the higher the level of achieving the change goals. Lines (2004) defines participation as the involvement of employees in the development of the planning and implementation of change (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

The influence of Management Styles and Relationships

In a study of defense firm employees, Oreg (2006) found that a lack of trust in the ability of management to implement change or to do what was best for the organization as a whole had a strong association with negative cognitive analysis of the change initiative, feelings of anxiety and frustration, and actions resisting the change initiative. Similarly, Stanley et al. (2005) reported that employee’s disbelief in management motives and abilities to achieve change, because of prior negative experiences within the organization, is a predictor or resistance to change.

Szabla (2007) examined how perceptions of leadership strategies influence resistance to organizational change in a study involving union employees of a Midwest county government implementing an electronic performance management system (Erwin and Garman, 2009). Szabla reported that employees that viewed their leaders as being collaborative or focusing on facts and logic seemed to have a positive attitude and supported the change initiative, whereas those that perceived their leaders as using power and coercive reported feelings of anger and frustration.

Van Dam et al. (2008) examined the influence of manager-employee relationships and the interest of managers in the personal development of employees on the resistance to change in a study involving a large housing corporation involved in a merger in the Netherlands. The researchers found that employees that believed they had strong relationships with their managers experienced more trust in management and reported less resistance to change (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

Facilitating Organizational Change

Anticipating Resistance and Planning for Change

In light of the complex interactions between several different change factors and their influence on the success of the change outcomes, organizations need to realize that change can be neither quick nor straightforward, but has to be more flexible and very well planned (Kanter et al., 1992; Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). Careful planning necessitates the alignment of the organization’s existing structure with the new change processes and patterns to achieve the desired outcomes (Bayerl et al., 2013; Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). Similarly, Erwin and Garman (2009) proposed that change agents and managers must anticipate and plan for resistance to change initiatives, stressing the importance of ensuring that organizational policies, goals, and management actions and behaviors are consistent with the change initiatives.

Communicating and Addressing Individuals’ Concerns

Communication is highly significant in the implementation of change initiatives. Organizations that do not communicate provoke high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity leading to misunderstanding and speculation, and potentially wasting time and effort addressing employee concerns and worries. Stuart (1995) described communication as a two-way process in which change agents and managers exchange information and listen to
individuals’ concerns. Erwin and Garman (2009) also stressed the importance of providing ample, clear and quality communications about change initiatives, associated implications, and implementation actions to ensure that individuals understand the change, how it influences them, and what is expected of them.

**Providing Support and Training**

In addition to planning and communication, Erwin and Garman (2009) argue that change management needs to provide adequate support and training in order to develop employee confidence and their capabilities to accomplish change successfully. Stuart (1995) advises that training may help individuals better understand the need for change, and prepare them for the change initiative by developing a new set of skills to be able to carry out new tasks and deliver the desired outcomes. Furthermore, managers should provide additional support to employees that are inclined towards negative reactions and help them understand the need for and requirement to change (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

**Allowing Opportunities for Participation in the Change Process**

There is consensus among researchers that allowing employees to participate in the decision-making process and in the planning and implementation of the change initiative is one of the main contributors to successful organizational change. Erwin and Garman (2009) supported responding to valid resistance to change by providing meaningful opportunities for staff feedback prior to and during the change initiative and using this as a tool to improve the quality of decision-making. The researchers also recommended that management should select and involve individuals with high levels of risk tolerance and positive self-concept in leading and implementing change (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

**Developing Effective Leadership**

Organizations need to develop adequate and competent leadership in order to achieve the desired change outcomes. Shook et al. (2003) proposed that leadership skills and abilities, such as the ability to communicate with, motivate, reward and build teams, are positively correlated to successful change implementation (Appelbaum et al, 2015). Leaders that adopt a management style that encourages collaboration and focuses on facts and logic are able to reduce resistance to change by influencing their followers’ attitudes towards learning and adaptation leading that directly affect the organization’s ability to implement change initiatives (Appelbaum et al, 2015).

In addition, leaders must recognize and respond to individual needs during the change process and provide employee development opportunities. They also need to assess the relationships they form with their employees, and consider means to develop confidence and build trust within their teams (Erwin and Garman, 2009).

**Discussion**

It seems from our examination of the different factors triggering a negative reaction to change that change managers would benefit greatly from building positive relationships with their teams in a climate of openness and understanding of the worrying nature of change. The organization as whole would benefit from this as employees develop positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions as a result of these positive relationships, which may aid
in attaining organizational effectiveness and achieving the desired change outcomes. In addition, change managers should use effective communication to increase the employee awareness and understanding of the change initiative.

Change managers may be able to reduce the extent of resistance to change by involving employees in the change process through the provision of explanations and accurate information about the change process, and through addressing employees’ concerns about change. They should collaborate with employees that are open to change and those who are more inclined toward positive reactions to gain their support and help them encourage other employees who exhibit negative reactions to change, and recognize and reward positive contributions to the change process.

Conclusion

Individual resistance to organizational change often happens from a lack of understanding of the change initiatives that may come from unclear communication, poor relationships between managers and employees, personalities that require job security or routine, and negative attitudes or experiences toward changes. Based on our study, the process to ease the resistance to organizational changes involves anticipating and planning for resistance to change initiatives, clear and high quality of communication to ensure that employees understand the change and what the organization expects from them. Moreover, providing support and training is necessary to prepare employees for change initiatives and focus more on employees who are at risk to resist the change. Lastly, effective leaders who are able to encourage positive engagement and influence the team towards the change initiative. The effective leaders will also need to offer employees opportunities to participate in the decision-making process to develop the connection between the organizational change and employees. In conclusion, the more understanding employees have about organizational change, the easier the management of resistance to organizational change.

References

Appelbaum, S. H., Degbe, M. C., MacDonald, O., Nguyen-Quang, T. (2015), Organizational outcomes of leadership style and resistance to change (Part Two), Industrial And Commercial Training Vol. 47. 3 2015, pp. 135-144, Emerald Group Publishing Limited