

Resistance to Organizational Change: Putting the Jigsaw Together

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It seems as if we once again rhyme to All the King's horses, and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again in our organizations when one examines the change management literature in general and resistance to organizational change literature in particular. It can generally be proposed that most of the literature associated with organizational change takes the perspective that any form of resistance to change is an infuriating obstruction which needs to be overcome. This certainly appears to be the case with the frequent texts and Journal Publications which specifically address change management issues. These Publications seem to view resistance as a deviant behaviour that needs to be comprehended and squashed. However recently it has been proposed that the prevailing view of resistance to change might be questionable as dissent may actually play a positive role in organizations. In this paper we will expand the dialogue surrounding the understanding of resistance to change in organizations within the change literature. This paper follows the perceived understanding of the concept of resistance to change from its acknowledged first appearance in Coch and French's classic study titled Overcoming Resistance to Change (1948). Our study takes into account the various gaps in the literature regarding the issues associated with attempts to delimit and ascribe meaning to organizational phenomena. Particular attention will be given to the idea of 'resistance to [organizational] change'. Well cited historical and contemporary organization studies sources that attempt to describe the concept of resistance to change will be critically appraised. Based on this evaluation we propose that established classifications may serve to limit our understandings of resistance to change, a concept now studied for over half a century.

Field of Research: Change Management, Resistance to Organizational Change.

1. Introduction

Father: This is the way things are, you cannot change nature

Son: Change is nature dad, the part that we can influence, and it starts when we decide.

Father: Where are you going?

Son: With Luck, Forward" (Ratatouille, 2007).

With globalization, the recent financial crisis, environmental challenges and a ravenous desire for new management fads, all organization employees are

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equally exhorted to actively participate in organizational change. It was estimated in the Harvard *Business School Review* that, between 1980 and 1995, change implementation cost for Fortune 100 companies was an average of 1 billion US dollars (Jacobs, 1998). The reported prevalence and the associated cost of organizational change have made the success of change initiatives a major concern for organizations. This poses a mounting responsibility on researchers to provide insights as to how change at workplaces can be managed in better ways.

Despite endless studies to find the formula for successful change initiatives it has been observed that organizational change “has a tendency to produce failure” (Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004:1212). It is believed that 70 percent of all change programmes fail (Balogun & Hailey, 2004). Assuming the validity of the given statistics what is it then that causes this failure? The failure of organizational change may occur for a variety of reasons, including overreaching in the change ideas, inadequate communication of the change to the changee or flawed execution (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

Researchers following this line of reasoning hypothesize that planned organizational change involves planned personal change at an individual level (Matheny, 1998). They speculate that organizational change is most likely to happen when participants decide to change. Researchers have therefore directed their attention to a variety of responses to change to identify the pattern of successful change initiatives, particularly in terms of the receptivity of the employees to a forthcoming change event in their organization. The most studied responses include readiness for change, openness and commitment to change, change related cynicism and resistance (Jimmieson et al., 2008). The focus of this paper will however be confined to explore how resistance has been associated with organizational change within the change literature.

The idea that change is hard, people resist change is a deeply embedded belief in organizational life. It is inscribed in corporate documents, management textbooks, consulting reports, and in societal media outside of organizations (Dent & Powley, 2002). With the foundation laid by Coch and French (1948), the concept of resistance to organizational change began to take shape, and questions about its existence were asked. Resistance has been mostly studied through a negative lens which views it as a dysfunctional yet a common element embedded in the change loop. Although resistance has been frequently conceived as an impediment to change, considerable number of arguments which emphasize the positive role of resistance in organizational also exist in literature.

2. Problem Statement

The preponderance of research focuses mainly on the reasons of the existence of resistance to change and then to devise antidotes for its management. Nevertheless few researchers have managed to see outside the box and have critiqued the subject from its inception to its utility. From the literature it has been

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observed that the concept of resistance to change has been conceived as a paradoxical one. This concept has been understood in both its constructive and pejorative meanings. This dual interpretation of the concept poses challenges in fully comprehending it. Thus, the optimal utility of the concept in organizational practice may not be achieved. This poses a responsibility on the researchers to start studying resistance to change within the interstitial spaces of its understanding. On call of this realization, this paper aspires to explore the gaps identified in the literature regarding the understanding of resistance to change in organizational setting and putting them together alongside each other. These gaps can then be used as a point of reference for the researchers intending to conduct research on resistance to change in future.

3. Research Orientation

This paper was motivated by our own dissatisfaction with the diverse and apparently contradictory understanding of resistance to change in the change literature. In what follows, we review and synthesize the literature on the concept of resistance with the aim of focusing the work on resistance to change in organizations. The articles for this review were chosen on the basis of the frequency of the citations that they have been exposed to. These well cited journal articles were then utilized for reaching the summary of the varied concepts. The critique involves both the common elements and the dimension of variation in how scholars have perceived this term. Our goal has been to clarify the complexity embedded in the concept, and we do not attempt to resolve the debates surrounding resistance to change in the academic literature.

This paper is organized by presenting the Literature Review in the first section. This section is further divided into two parts. First part of the literature review comprises of the background information on how resistance has been perceived by varying authors since the inception of this concept. Second part discusses the various gaps identified by the authors in the literature. Furthermore Discussion section includes proposing future avenues for studying resistance to change. Finally a concise conclusive summary of the contents is presented at the end of the paper.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Background of the Study

Bob Crandall, the former chief of American Airlines is credited with being the brains behind the legendary 'Olive' story. The airline company saved approximately \$40, 000 per year by just removing one olive per salad serving. This example speaks of change and adaptation to more effective solutions. The olive story can be an inspiration to the idea of employing the efficacy of change for improvement in general and businesses in particular. Of course, this change, although high in its financial impact, did not have the immediate and threatening

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impacts on the employees that some managed change projects exhibit. Change in any business is, however, perceived to be inevitable, and businesses are perceived to flourish amid successful change initiatives (Brits, 2006). This perception about necessity of change in organizations typifies the dominant approach of unquestioning acceptance to change within the change literature. Furthermore Thurlow and Mills (2009) propose that change should, can and must be managed in organizations. The conception of managing change has gradually gained academic importance, so much so that organizational change management has emerged as a new field in management studies.

However it is believed that 70 percent of all change programmes fail (Balogun & Hailey, 2004). The argument that this finding applies only to certain types of organizations or sectors is not supported well by the evidence. Eaton (2010) reports that organizational change studies undertaken in UK and US show remarkable consistency in displaying failure statistics across a wide range of sectors, organizational sizes and levels of organizational complexity.

Failure can however hold varying descriptions in varying contexts. Researchers have therefore put their efforts to achieve agreement in describing what constitutes of failure in the organizational change context. Failure is described by Stanleigh (2008) as not being able to yield promised results or not being able to meet stakeholder expectations to a greater degree, decrease in organizational performance or not being able to recover the return on investment (Eaton, 2010). There is a general consensus on the above mentioned description of failure to change initiatives in the change literature.

Resistance through employees' behaviors, attitudes or emotions has been found to significantly stymie change efforts (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Indeed Fortune 500 executives see Resistance to change as their principal obstruction for successful change management implementation (Yue, 2008). Bovey and Hede (2001) found that the organizational change literature also collectively supports this notion. Resistance is therefore studied through a negative lens which sees it as a dysfunctional yet a common element embedded in the change loop.

Although resistance has been frequently conceived as an impediment to change, considerable number of arguments which emphasize the positive role of resistance in organizational also exist in literature. Piderit (2000) recognizes that the term resistance to change was being used to dismiss valid employee concerns about proposed changes in the organization. She contends that by acquiring such behaviors employees might intend to get the top management to pay attention to issues that are not being addressed and are vital to maintain high performance.

Similarly Ford et al. (2008) have developed a framework that considers resistance as a resource which could boost awareness, help return to purpose, build participation and engagement and help to learn from the past mistakes while implementing and inducing change in the organization. Additionally it has

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been proposed that resistance may be a helpful response to perceived unethical procedures that may not be in the best interest of the organization (Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000). Resistance to change has also been associated with promotion of the learning process among organization participants (Erwin and Garman, 2010), particularly with regard to generating ideas for improving the proposed change plan and working towards innovation. Movement from a conventional view of resistance to change to a different perspective of work through resistance has also been supported by Waddell and Sohal (1998) and de Jager (2001).

The conception of resistance to change from a positive lens views it as necessary element that can thus play an important role in successful organizational change (Ford et al., 2008). Proponents argue that if anti resistance interventions were effective enough, there would have been a considerable decline in the statistics on failed change initiatives. They believe that numerous articles and books written to supposedly manage change and overcome resistance to change have failed to provide convincing ideas on how to do so (Furst & Cable, 2008). Yet some argue that the concept should not be over-romanticized (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

The change literature has well established the boundaries of explaining the term resistance to change in both its thoughtful (Ford et al., 2009), facilitative (Thomas et al., 2010) and its dysfunctional construction (Haslam, 2004). However from the above brief review of selected literature it is evident that resistance to change displays paradox in its understanding by having both pejorative and constructive meanings. The next section will outline other gaps in the research reported in the literature on resistance to change to get a basic idea of the depth of complexity this concept holds in its explanation.

4.2. Resistance to Organizational Change: Research Gap

This section will explore the various ways in which resistance to change has been unmasked in the literature and the areas that perhaps did not capture much attention by the researchers in general. Firstly, Dent and Goldberg (1999) indicate that people do not resist change per se, what they resist is the loss that they perceive will be caused due to the proposed change (Cheng & Petrovic-Lazarevic, 2005). Bovey and Hede (2001) further posit that intention to resist is triggered by maladaptive defense mechanisms adopted by individuals in order to protect them from the perceived threats posed by the proposed change. An interesting observation that can be extracted from Bovey and Hede's study is that, in situations where individuals adopt maladaptive defense mechanisms may do so because of the threats that are external to change initiative itself. In such a situation resistance to change can be misjudged with resistance to loss or resistance to mistrust and so on (Dent and Powley, 2001). This directs our attention towards the possibility that the employees' reported resistant behaviour in the resistance studies may have also been caused by reasons that did not initially capture the attention of researchers. Given the probability that the employees were not resisting change per se in the first published work by Coch

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and French (1948), it can be contended that the term coined to name such behaviour as resistance to change may have misled the whole streak of the researchers following this pioneer work. This leaves a research gap in the resistance research that points towards the necessity to validate the appropriate rationalization of the term resistance to change.

Secondly there is very little work on associating resistance with the various categories or types of change in different contexts. There are changes which few in the organization will see as positive that include redundancies, financial savings, reducing office space, delaying salary increases. Other changes are intended to be good overall, although some part of the organization will be hurt or inconvenienced. Examples of such changes include reorganizing a division, streamlining a customer interface knowing it will increase administrative work in the organization, or making an acquisition knowing that the integration will require extra work for the employees. Finally organizations often take actions which they believe will be good for all and then are surprised when not everyone in the organization sees the change as positive. These changes are named as take your medicine, be a team player, improvements respectively (Dent & Powley, 2002). Thus a gap of not been able to reach an agreement on categorizing employees' idiosyncrasies according to various definitions and descriptions of organizational change in the resistance studies is generally visible in the literature. Suggestions on what shape does resistance take in different organizational change contexts directs towards a promising avenue for future research on the subject.

Further work is also needed to explore the soundness of a relatively recent idea that people may actually be more willing to embrace, rather than resist, change. In a study by Dent and Powley (2002) interviewees made 1.9 positive statements about change for every negative statement. Deems (2000) suggestion also supports the idea that we do not naturally resist change but we have the tendency to harmonize with it and flourish amidst it.

Another area of interest for researchers may also be to revisit the previous research on resistance to change that has been conducted with the intention of managing resistance and suggesting anecdotes to minimize its negative impacts in the organizations. As contrastingly commentators have suggested that cynicism, irony, and so forth actually fit the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) and the consulting firms desire the innovative cynic more than the conformist. Rather than to encourage employees to subjectively conform to the 1980s cultures of commitment, the contemporary management gurus invite employees to simply 'be themselves'. In Tom Peter's latest work, he argues that young, imaginative people should be hired by managers who deride managerial hierarchies and authority and display generation Y characteristics, and radiate insubordinate authenticity (cited in Fleming & Spicer, 2008). In management studies, Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) expressed concern that the recalcitrant worker is fast becoming an endangered species in critical organization studies (Mumby, 2005).

5. Discussion

Throughout the literature it has often been assumed that the role of the change agents or the managers is to take the whole responsibility for the change initiative and it is their responsibility to manage all the attempts to undermine the planned change. This implies that the change agents are perceived as privileged in the way that they can decide what constitutes resistance on change recipients' part. This has been an important consideration for the researchers recently. Researchers also point out that that it is inappropriate to label behaviors as resistant or otherwise without prior agreed upon criteria (Knights and McCabe, 2000; Larsen and Tompkins, 2005). It has been suggested that there is a need to devise cautious criteria to sharply distinguish conformity and resistance, accepting the reality that people may consent to, cope and resist at the same time at different levels of consciousness as discussed previously (Zollar and Fairhurst, 2007).

To sum up it can be observed that the recent progress in the organizational change literature indicates that resistance ceases to be entirely an internal psychological dysfunctional behavior. It is seen, instead, as an artifact of interactions between change agent and change recipient, whereby the former makes sense of the reaction of the later. Following this loop it can also be observed that what one manager labels resistance may not be labeled as the same by others. This is evidenced in the case presented by (Ford & Ford, 2010) of the three managers enrolled in Ohio State University who introduced a change programme to their employees and carried a series of meetings with the employees to educate them on the project management procedures and to have their questions answered. Paul reported the experience as unpleasant as he felt pushed backed by a tons of questions of which more than a few he could not answer. Amy said she felt stone-walled by silence. Blaine, however, reported to have an engaging and exciting experience. This example indicates that the element of subjectivity, judgment and sometimes emotions cannot be ruled out while attempting to explain and describe resistance to change.

Building on the argument of subjectivity and limitations in the way the concept of resistance has been studied it can be observed that another important consideration often overlooked by the researchers is that the typical guidelines for overcoming resistance to change prescribe different behaviors for the changer, not the changee (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). The identification of such a gap within the research has lead few authors to argue that although the concept of resistance to change has been widely studied, there are serious practical, ethical and theoretical limitations to it. This argument has taken roots to the extent that some writers have argued for retiring the phrase resistance to change altogether (Merron, 1993; Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Resistance as can be seen from the discussion is therefore not a factual, descriptive report that mirrors reality, something that exists in its own right independent of an observer. Rather it is a distinction in language that creates the

possibility of the observer observing a phenomenon (Ford & Ford, 2009). This indicates that resistance will be the result of a comparison, a categorization, and an abstraction that is dependent on what is being considered and with respect to what sameness is demanded. Nevertheless the approaches which explain resistant behaviors of employees have varied substantially in accordance with the researchers' point of views. Resistance as observed so far is objectified as a socio-psychological phenomenon (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). But if we consider a postmodernist, constructivist perspective in which there is no homogeneous reality that is everywhere the same for everyone. This leads us to consider the possibility of resistance being a "multi authored" process (Buchanan and Dawson 2007: 669) which is the function of the constructed reality in which people live. Perhaps one of the reasons for the inadequate explanation of resistance to change in the literature may be that resistance to change has been under researched through various paradigmatic lenses. Future studies should shift their focus from studying resistance to change as strictly a socio- psychological phenomenon to viewing it as a socially constructed reality whose meanings are contingent on the perceptions and view points of all the change participants in the organization.

6. Conclusion

This paper is aimed at bringing the dispersed puzzle pieces with reference to resistance to organizational change together. Meta-analysis on the subject shows that over the period of more than half a century the research done on this concept reflects more divergence than convergence. Thus a need is identified to put the bits and pieces together and start working towards easing the complexity associated with the meanings and usage of the term. Resistance to change is viewed as a paradox that can have both pejorative and positive outcomes depending on how it is perceived and accommodated.

This paper extends the current lines of the literature by encouraging both the readers and the researchers to critically observe a general trend of managerial perspective taken in the studies related to resistance to organizational change. This paper also recognizes the need for identifying how various behaviors are labeled as resistant and by whom. Future research can attempt to provide general guidelines on how to identify resistant behaviors and how the constructive form of resistant behaviors can be distinguished from their counter behaviors in order to standardize the identification process regardless of who is doing that. This paper also highlights the importance of revisiting this term from the change recipients' point of view in order to incorporate completeness to the subject. Finally it is recommended that future studies should study the concept through various paradigmatic lenses rather than treating the subject as strictly confined to the description attached to it in a singular paradigm.

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