RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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Abstract: Organizations are inherently dynamic; they are born, they grow, expand, and eventually die and/or rejuvenate in new forms. All these processes are possible because of changes that organizations undergo. Thus, change is an instrumental and adaptive feature of any organization. However, evidence from the existing literature and practical observation has shown that change is always countered by resistance from all quarters. This paper provides a conceptual analysis of resistance towards change and how conformity can otherwise be enhanced during the process.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's society and economy, change is an all-pervasive process in organizations. It happens continuously, and often at rapid speed. The process of change has become an everyday part of organizational dynamics, and therefore employees who resist it can actually cripple an organization.

Resistance to change is however, an inevitable response to any major change; this is attributed to the fact that individuals naturally rush to defend the status quo if they feel their security or status is threatened. Folger & Skarlicki (1999:25) argue that organizational change can generate skepticism and resistance in employees, making it sometimes difficult or impossible to implement organizational improvements.

Organizations’ management need to understand, accept and make an effort to work with those showing resistance because acting otherwise can undermine even the most well-intentioned and well-conceived change efforts. Coetsee (1999:205) contributes on this subject by saying that: "any management’s ability to achieve maximum benefits from change depends in part on how effectively they create and maintain a climate that minimizes resistant behavior and encourages acceptance and support”.

II. THE CONCEPT OF RESISTANCE

Various definitions on resistance to organizational change have been given by various scholars, some of which this paper tries to highlight. Resistance to change has been defined by Alvin Zander (1950) in Dent and Goldberg (1999:34) as "behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change. Zaltman & Duncan (1977) in Bradley (2000:76) on the other hand define resistance as "any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo". In the view of Folger & Skarlicki (1999:36) resistance has to do with; employee behavior that seeks to challenge, disrupt, or invert prevailing assumptions, discourses, and power relations”.

Piderit (2000:784) believes that the definition of the term resistance must incorporate a much broader scope. On her part, she argues that there are three different emphases that should be taken into consideration when conceptualizing resistance namely; resistance as a cognitive state, as an emotional state, and as a behavior. In dealing with resistance to change, management must therefore direct their effort to overcome these three aspects of resistance.
The notion that resistance to organizational change can be overcome cognitively suggests that negative thoughts or beliefs about the change do exist. Watson (1982) in Piderit (2000) suggests that what is often labeled as resistance is, in fact, only reluctance.

Other scholars have attempted to define resistance to organizational change based on the emotional factors exhibited as a result of an organizational change. A study by Coch and French (1948) acknowledge that emotional factors such as aggression and frustration to be causing undesirable behaviors and resistance to change. Concurring with Coch and French (1948), Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) noted that resistance to change is a defense mechanism caused by frustration and anxiety (Piderit, 2000).


Although the conceptualizations of resistance as behaviour, an emotion or a belief concept overlap somewhat, they diverge in important ways. Finding a way to bring together these varying facts of change should deepen the organizational understanding of change. Each of the three conceptualizations of resistance has merit and represents an important part of our experience of response to change. Thus, any definition focusing on one view at the expense of the others seems incomplete (Piderit, 2000: 785).

Dent & Goldberg (1999: 26), have added a new dimension in that; they insist that individuals aren't really resisting change, but rather may be resisting the loss of status, loss of pay, or loss of comfort.

Alvin Sander (1950) in his article: “Resistance to Change-Its Analysis and Prevention,” draws a distinction between the symptoms of resistance, like hostility or poor effort, and the underlying causes for the behavior. Rather than providing a systems model, Sander equates resistance in organizations to that of a psychotherapist and a patient. His primary advice for practicing managers is to know what the resistance means so that they may reduce it by working on the causes rather than the symptoms” (Dent & Goldberg, 1999:33)

III. SYMPTOMS OF RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

According to Bhutan (1995), Symptoms are the specific behaviors individuals exhibit when they are resistant to change. These specific behaviours can be categorized into namely; active-resistance and passive-resistance. While symptoms of active-resistance include finding fault, ridiculing, appealing to fear, and manipulating, those of Passive-resistance symptoms include agreeing verbally but not following through, feigning ignorance and withholding information.

Bhutan (1995: 16) adds that there is always the danger of identifying a symptom of resistance when one is really looking for its cause and therefore to diagnose the causes of resistance, one must understand the state of mind of the individuals involved in change. This is attributed to the fact that the most important factors that go into a person’s state of mind are his or her facts, beliefs, feeling, and values”.
IV. CAUSES OF RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

According to Sander (1950), there are six primary reasons for resistance to organizational change namely:

- If the nature of the change is not made clear to the people who are going to be influenced by the change.
- If the change is open to a wide variety of interpretations.
- If those influenced feel strong forces deterring them from changing.
- If the people influenced by the change have pressure put on them to make it instead of having a say in the nature or the direction of the change.
- If the change is made on personal grounds.
- If the change ignores the already established institutions in the group (Dent & Goldberg 1999: 33).

Apart from Sander’s work, the number of the causes of resistance to organizational has since grown, some of which this paper tries to highlight. It has been argued that individuals resist change in an organization because they have to learn something new.

In many cases there isn’t a disagreement with regard to the benefits of the new process, but rather, there is a fear of the unknown future and also the fear of the ability to adapt to the unknown future. On this respect De Jag er (2001:24) argues that most people are reluctant to leave the familiar behind. We are all suspicious about the unfamiliar; we are naturally concerned about how we will get from the old to the new, especially if it involves learning something new and risking failure”.

The next cause for the resistance to organizational change is low tolerance for change which has to do with the fear that one will not be able to develop new skills and behaviors that are required in a new work setting. According to Kotter & Schlesinger (1979), if members of staff of an organization have low tolerance for change, the increased ambiguity that results from the uncertainty associated with having to perform tasks and/or jobs differently would likely cause a resistance to the new way of doing things. In this regard members of staff of an organization may understand the need for change but they may emotionally be unable to make the transition and hence resist for reasons they may not consciously understand.

The other cause of resistance to organizational change is provided by Folger & Skarlicki (1995:36) who argue that resistance to organizational change result from the treatment members of staff of an organization receive in the change process. They attribute change resistance to resentment by members of staff. According to them, resentment by members of staff has to do with reactions by disgruntled employees with regard to the perceived unfairness of the change. The two scholars claim that "resentment-based resistance behaviors, which can range from subtle acts of non-cooperation to industrial sabotage, are often seen by the perpetrators as subjectively justifiable - a way to "get even" for perceived mistreatment and a way for members of staff to exercise their power to restore perceived injustice"

Still on the causes of resistance, Paul Strebel (1996), a professor and director of the Change Program for International Managers at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), attributes resistance as a violation of "personal compacts" organizations have with their members of staff. Personal compacts here refers to the essence of the relationship between members of staff and the organizations defined by reciprocal obligations and mutual commitments that are both stated and implied. In this regard, members of staff fear that any change initiatives proposed by the organization would alter their current terms.
The personal compacts as defined above comprise of formal, psychological, and social dimensions. However, the formal dimension is the most familiar. It is the aspect of the relationship that addresses the basic tasks and performance requirements of the job, and is defined by job descriptions, employee contracts, and performance agreements. Management, in return, agrees to supply the members of staff with the resources needed to perform their job. Consequently, the psychological dimension addresses aspects of the employment relationship that incorporate the elements of mutual trust, loyalty and commitment while the social dimension of the personal compact deals with organizational culture, which encompasses, mission statement, values, ethics and business practices. In addition, Strebel (1996:87) points out that when the personal compacts are disrupted, it upsets the balance, and increases the likelihood of resistance.

The other cause of resistance to organizational change according to Kegan & Lahey (2001:85) is psychological dynamic they called a "competing commitment". This competing commitment dynamic, argues that change is not challenged, but rather it is resisted, or not implemented at all because the members of staff face additional issues or concerns related to the change. The psychological dynamic operates on the fact that when an employee's hidden competing commitment is uncovered, behavior that seems irrational and ineffective suddenly becomes stunningly sensible and masterful and therefore conflict with what the manager and even the employee are trying to achieve.

The above discussion should not mean that competing commitments be viewed as a weakness, but rather, they should be viewed as versions of self-protection on the part of members of staff. According to Kegan & Lahey (2001:88), people protect themselves from "big assumptions" which are deeply rooted beliefs people have about themselves and the world around them. The big assumptions are woven into the very fabric of people's existence; hence people rarely realize they hold them and therefore, they find themselves accepting them as reality. These assumptions put an order to the world and at the same time suggest ways in which the world can go out of order. On this regard, competing commitments arise from these assumptions thereby driving behaviors unwittingly designed to keep the picture intact.

V. POSITIVE ROLES OF RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

It is in most cases the practice of managers to perceive resistance as negative. Likewise members of staff who resist organizational change are viewed as disobedient and obstacles the organization must overcome in order to achieve the new goals. However in certain instances, employee resistance may play a positive and useful role in organizational change. One such positive role is the fact that an insightful and well-intended debate, criticism, or disagreement may be intended to produce better understanding as well as additional options and solutions. According to argument by De Jager (2001:25), "the idea that anyone who questions the need for change has an attitude problem is simply wrong, not only because it discounts past achievements, but also because it makes us vulnerable to indiscriminate and ill-advised change'. De Jager (2001:26), also argues that resistance is simply a very effective, very powerful and very useful survival mechanism'.

In addition, Piderit (2000) points out that what some managers may perceive as disrespectful or unfounded resistance to change might be motivated by an individual's ethical principles or by their desire to protect what they feel is the best interests of the organization. Employee resistance may therefore force the management of an organization to rethink or reevaluate a proposed change initiative. Likewise, employee resistance can also act as a gateway or filter, which can help organizations select from all possible changes the one that is most appropriate to the current situation.
The other positive role of resistance to organizational change is provided by Folger & Skarlicki (1999:37) who argue that "not all interventions are appropriate as implemented –that an organization might be changing the wrong thing or doing it wrongly. Just as conflict can sometimes be used constructively for change, legitimate resistance might bring about additional organizational change".

VI. TRANSITION AND TRANSITIONAL PHENOMENA
The process of change is simply moving from the current way of doing things to a new and different way of doing things (Bridges, 1991). According to Bridges, it isn't the actual change that individuals resist, but rather the transition that must be made to accommodate the change. He argues that "change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy but transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal. Unless transition occurs, change will not work" (Bridges, 1991: 3-4).

Morgan (1997:238) on the other hand suggests that an understanding of the theory of transitional phenomena would provide valuable insight into organizational change, and why it might be met with employee resistance. This theory "suggests that change will occur spontaneously only when people are prepared to relinquish what they hold dear for the purpose of acquiring something new or can find ways of carrying what they value in the old into the new". Morgan adds that in the event that change does not exist naturally, it may be necessary for the organization to create a transitional phenomenon. According to Morgan, creating transitional phenomena would help in the "letting go" of the current way and moving forward to the new way. He goes further to argue that bringing about an organization change "can rarely be done effectively by "selling" or imposing a "change package," an ideology or a set of techniques. The theory of transitional phenomena suggests that in situations of voluntary change, the person doing the change must be in control of the process".

VII. NATURE OF RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE
Leon Coetsee (1999:204) attempts to explain the nature of resistance to change through a continuum model. According to him, in an organizational development literature, acceptance of change (commitment) and rejection of change (resistance) are typically treated as separate, unrelated phenomena. Through the model, Coetsee argues that they are closely linked in the sense that they represent a polarity, with each being the far end of the continuum and that moving from resistance to commitment is done through sequential phases contained within the continuum. This may be illustrated by the following continuum:

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Resistance                                             Acceptance of Change
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VIII. OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE
In the 1940's, Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist first introduced the idea of managing and removing "resistance" to proposed changes occurring within organizations. His early work focused on the aspects of individual behavior that must be addressed in order to bring about effective organizational change.

According to Morgan (1997:294) the contribution of Lewin suggested that any potential change is resisted by forces in the opposite direction. The idea is similar to the dialectical principle that everything generates its opposite. But within Lewin's framework, the forces tend to be external to the change.
process, holding situations in states of dynamic equilibrium. His solution was to advocate that successful change rests in "unfreezing" an established equilibrium by enhancing the forces driving change, or by reducing or removing resisting forces, and then "refreezing" in a new equilibrium state.

A study by Lester Coach and John R. P. French in 1948 at the Hardwood Manufacturing Company which was a pajama making factory located in Virginia suggested that there is need for the management of an organization to involve all members of staff in decision making (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Strebel (1996:87) also suggests that in order to overcome resistance to the organizational change, management of an organization should view how change looks from the employees’ perspective, and to examine the terms of the personal compacts currently in place. He goes further to assert that: 'Unless managers define new terms and persuade employees to accept them, it is unrealistic for managers to expect employees to fully buy into changes that alter the status quo”.

IX. CONCLUSION

Resistance to change is a complex issue facing management in the complex and ever-evolving organization of today. The process of change is ubiquitous, and resistance to organizational change has been identified as a critically important contributor to the failure of many well-intended and well-conceived efforts to initiate change within the organization.

In many cases, vast amounts of resources are expended by organizations to adjust members of staff to a new way of achieving desired goals. The natural propensity for individuals to "defend the status quo" presents a set of challenges that management must overcome in order to bring about desired change. Management must also seriously take into account and consider the myriad of problems that may result if they are not responsive to issues of resistance in the organization.

In order to facilitate a smooth transition from the old to the new, organizations must be competent in effective change management. The process of change management consists of getting of those involved and affected to accept the introduced changes as well as manage any resistance to them.

This paper stresses that change usually involves an individual's psyche, so there are no concrete textbook answers and solutions to the problem. Since each individual is different, their perceptions and reasons for resisting change in organizations are also different. Overcoming resistance to organizational change therefore calls for effective understanding of the unique circumstances within each member of staff that is causing their particular resistance.

REFERENCES