

Resistance to Change (RTC): A Taxonomical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective – This paper debatably argues that there is rather limited and effective framework in managing resistance to change. Thus, a different concept in assessing resistance to change is proposed.

Methodology/Technique – This study is conducted through review of qualitative data based on organizational change literature. It was discovered that previous change research accentuated more on human aspect while missing other potential and critical aspect of change resistance.

Findings – The past studies put more weightage on individual reactions to change. Study believes that everyone has own unique defence mechanisms that protect them from the change which act as barrier from allowing the individual to adapt with the change. Resistance correlates with individual's mind reflecting one's willingness and receptiveness to change while being influences by one's thinking and behavior. Thus, evaluating resistance to change based on human aspect alone will produce dissimilarities in results.

Novelty –Albeit the simplicity of the proposed model, the model will enable the assessment of resistance to change with the larger perspective in tandem with past recommendations of a dire need of better framework in managing resistance to change.

Type of Paper: Review.

Keywords: Resistance to Change; Change Taxonomy; Individual Resistance; Change Programme Resistance; Institution Resistance.

JEL Classification: M50, M54.

1. Introduction

Resistance to change (RTC) is widely discussed by scholars since the 1950s (Rosenberg & Joseph, 2011) and the emergence of the term can be dated back as early as 1928 by the renown change guru, Kurt Lewin. The first published reference regarding research on resistance to change was made by Coch & French during 1948 (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). In the present date, there are various definitions of resistance to change made by scholars. Although there are many spectrums of meaning, all are portraying the same consistency in which resistance to change involves an act of resisting or even opposing a movement from definite or familiar state into an indefinite or unfamiliar state.

* Paper Info: Received: January 16, 2017

Accepted: July 21, 2017

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Past researches indicate that resistance to change has long been conceded as a key problem in organizational change failure (Chiung-Hui & Ing-Chung, 2009). Similarly, managing resistance is the critical aspect whether the change implemented will triumph or not (Decker, Durand, Mayfield, McCornack, Skinner & Perdue, 2012) since resistance has the power to impede, redirect, reject and stop change from happening (Coetsee, 1999). Thus, the effective way to manage change successfully is by understanding the resistance itself (Lawrence, 1969; Canning & Found, 2015). As such, research has shown that 1/2 or 2/3 change efforts fail due to the absence of proper attention given to the “little cognized but critically important contributor” of resistance (Maurer, 1996). Therefore, resistance to change should be given sufficient and holistic consideration by the management.

Unfortunately, the problem remains as failure of change initiatives have been continuously reported in previous researches and the figure remains dominant. Early study discovered that change failure rate was up to 70 percent (Balogun & Hailey, 2004). Previous study also quoted that 40 percent of project change failed (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). The failure rate did not seem to decline as statistics later reveal that two-third of organizational change efforts were labeled as failed (Meaney & Pung, 2008). Other significant finding also discovered that out of 1,532 change agents that have carried out change programs, only 41 percent of the total programs were considered success (Jorgensen, Owen & Heus, 2009). In another study, half of all organizational changes failed (Ford & Ford, 2009). Estimates show that there was a 70 percent failure rate when it comes to organizational change (Maurer, 2010) and the rate was not improving (Rouse, 2011). In addition, other finding expedited and claimed those change failure rates were between 28 percent to as high as 93 percent (Decker et al., 2012). The statistics were not showing any improvement and still portraying a great probability for change effort to fail (Michel, By & Burnes, 2013). Also, in a review of change literature, it was found that the success rate of change program was less than 30 percent (Al-haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

The past and present statistics showed high unfavorable trend in organizational change. The trend in statistics does not show any sign of declining rather the change failure rate still remains dominant. It was expected the numbers will increase due to increase in diversities and complexity in the present and future environment due to technological change, economics uncertainties, industry growth and decline, ever growing global competition and shifts in demography and values coupled with inappropriate strategy in managing change resistance. This will indirectly raise a huge concern for many stakeholders. This paper debatably argues that there is rather limited and effective framework in managing resistance to change. Thus, a different concept in assessing resistance to change is proposed.

2. Literature Review

Resistance to change as defined by an early researcher is “behavior that resolved to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change” (Zander, 1950). Another definition of resistance to change in 1977 made by Zaltman & Duncan is “any action that serves to protect status quo during the pressure to change the status quo” (Employee Resistance, 2014). Later in 1993, the meaning from previous researches are still in line but added that resistance is a natural process. Coghlan (1993) defines change resistance as “a normal and natural response to change since change itself concerns with moving from known to the unknown. The above definition is further reinforced by study in 1999 by the same consistency of meaning which defined resistance to change as “employee act that intends to disrupt, challenge or reverse prevailing assumptions, discourses and power relations (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). In 2011, the meaning is still in line with the previous as it can be defined as “behavior portrayed by employees in an attempt to deny the influence and power of their employers” (Smollan, 2011).

Research found considerable number of frameworks and views to measure resistance to change by past scholars. This was supported by Canning and Found (2015) which mentioned that there are many forms in which resistance to change can manifest. Since resistance is complex, there are many but differing opinion from the past researches towards change resistance (Smollan, 2011). While many scholars found different causes to resistance, some conform the same causes. Harvey and Broyles (2010) listed 20 resistances to change

factors, Rosenberg and Joseph (2011) also reviewed 20 various factors of resistance, active and passive resistance factors (Hultman, 2006), psychological factors, (Pieterse, Caniëls, & Homan, 2012), perception factors (Bovey & Hede, 2001) and others. Nevertheless, past researches discovered that majority of this derived from the employees' psychological wellbeing on how the change affecting them (Pieterse et al., 2012) and this was in tandem to one of the earliest research on resistance to change (Zander, 1950).

Early research highlights the change resistance notion is a result of perception that is influenced by individual's personal growth and development (Bovey & Hede, 2001). In the light of psychological aspect of the resistance, employees were resisting due to perceived threats to their status quo in the sense of loss of status, pay, ideals, integrity and autonomy (Dent & Powley, 2003). This was seconded by later research which discovered that change resistance can be triggered if the organization change challenges the employees' values and perceived rights (Smith, 2005). Past research also classifies resistance in two components which is attitudinal and behavioral (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). Attitudinal resistance can be regarded as a psychological form of rejection towards the needs to change while behavioral resistance is associated with being rejected towards the change effort. This research then discovered that there are five factors that may influence resistance such as communication, participation, job security, trust and procedural justice.

Another research identifies change resistance as active and passive (Hultman, 2006). Active resistance can take forms selective in using facts, finding fault, tempting to fear and being critical while passive resistance is associates with procrastinating, withholding information and being silently reactive. Following this research, a new addition of concept is brought up to the existing theory by Hultman (Singh, Saeed & Bertsch, 2012). Hultman added aggressive resistance to the existing framework that can be created against multiple level in an organization such as towards external organizations, superiors, peers and subordinates.

Research synthesize previous findings on resistance to change and found that the measurement can be divided into three factors which are personal factors (employees' attitudes, fear of the unknown, fear of failure, disruption of routine, lack of rewards, increase workload and etc.), organizational factors (poor leadership, dysfunctional organizational culture, organizational size and rigidity, lack of management support for change, organizational politics, internal conflict and resources and etc.) and factors from change itself (poor content and lack of planning for implementation) (Rosenberg & Joseph, 2011).

3. Methodology

The current study was conducted through a review of secondary data sources from academic journals identified through word searches on "organizational change", "change management" and "resistance to change". The articles identified were then screened for titles, abstracts, keywords, frameworks as well as headings and sub headings. In order to gain better comprehension of the phenomenon, relevant journals are selected since the first published reference on resistance to change since 1948 until present 2016. The relevancy of previous studies and credentials of the authors have become the selection criteria for this study. As such, all of the journals were taken from ProQuest, Scopus, Emerald Insight and Science Direct. Criteria for concept paper was given emphasize based on recommendations from Gilson and Goldberg (2005) such as providing integrated framework, proposing new relationships among constructs, developing arguments for associations and broaden the scope of thinking.

4. Results

It was found that although there are rich amount of research addressing resistance to change (RTC), scholars are unanimously agreed that there is no single cause of resistance to happen (Werkman, 2009). While many factors or variables were identified to be the causes of resistance, the taxonomy itself is lacking and the variables are too dispersed to handle. Rather than dwelling into numerous complexities of resistance to change, this study proposed a model than can better assess resistance to change with wider perspective by dividing the

prevailing focus into three different taxonomies or dimensions which are believe can be inextricably related to one another. These relationships are depicted as Figure 1 below.

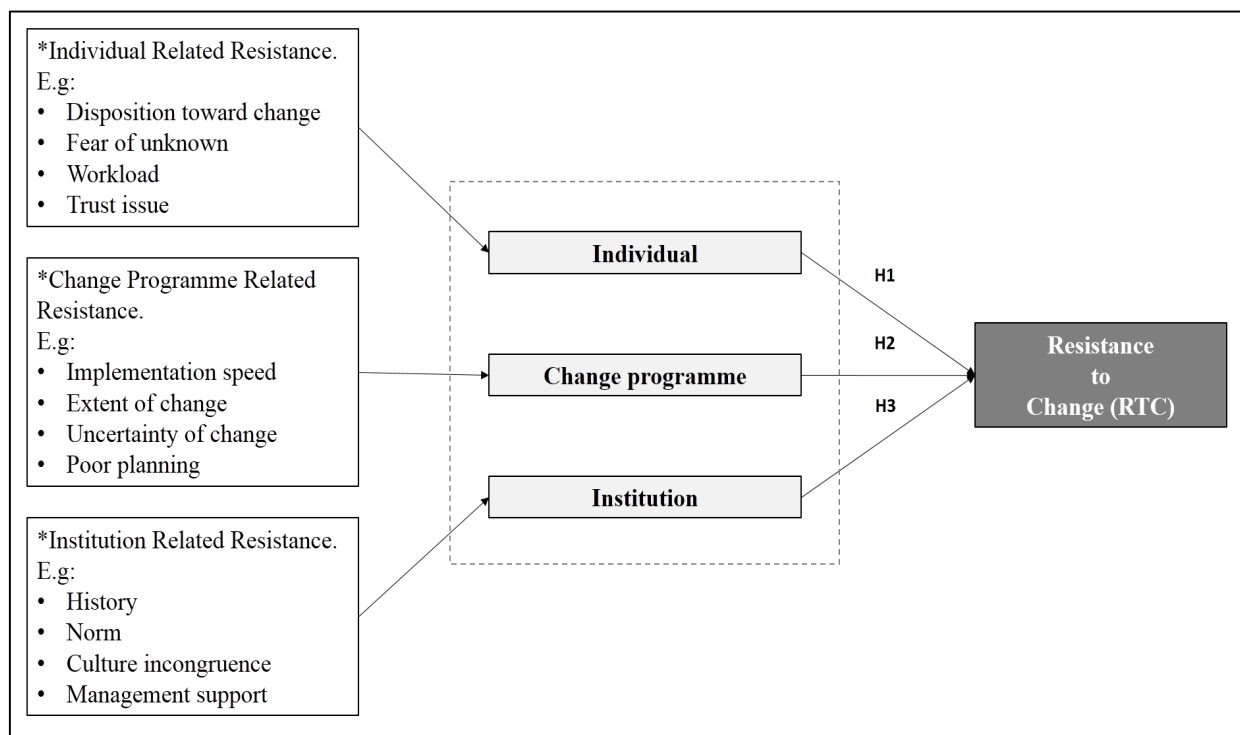


Figure 1. Proposed Taxonomy for Resistance to Change (RTC)

The proposed model calls for a different view in assessing resistance to change. It is different than 19 resistances to change factors made by Harvey and Broyles (2010) and different with research by Oreg (2006), a change expert which pioneered the measures of resistance to change by the subsets of routine seeking, emotional reaction, short-term focus and cognitive rigidity since there are dimensions in the proposed model. While Oreg's resistance to change focuses mainly on behavior side of resistance, this study will extend the grounded view by focusing on three different avenues of individual, change program and institution which believe can evaluate resistance to change holistically and systematically as many previous studies on RTC were more focus toward human aspect (van den Heuvel, Schalk, Freese & Timmerman, 2016). The factors or variables related to each dimension should not be fixed to several change initiatives, rather scholar should be flexible in identifying the most relevant factors contributing to each dimension for every study.

5. Discussion

The first proposed taxonomy (individual) deals with individual or human perspective. Individual in the context of organizational change can be referred to as condition or wellbeing of the person when the change takes place. This is parallel to the discoveries of previous research on the human aspect and resistance to change (Oreg, 2003). The area of individual and resistance to change is not something new but with many differing opinions (Rosenberg & Joseph, 2011). As such, there are many past research that have proven individual factors contribute to resistance to change. For example, past researches discovered that majority of the resistance to change factors came from the employees itself based on how the change program affecting them (Pieterse et al., 2012). Examples of individual related resistance are attitudes and disposition towards change, fear of unknown, being critical, fault finding, procrastinating, manipulating, ridiculing, feigning ignorance, chaos, lack of recognition, suspicion, being indifference, reluctance in change of status quo, fear of poor outcome, disliking change, trust issue, increase in workload, reluctance to give up old habits and others.

The second proposed taxonomy (change program) addresses the change itself. Change program in the context of organizational change can be referred to as the change initiative or program to be applied in the organization. Poor content of change that is ill-conceived can be a source of resistance to change (Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009). In many common situations, employees resist change due to the fact that the change that is to be implemented challenged their status quo (Hernandez, 2016) and this will indirectly promote resistance to change among them (Fernandez, 2014). In addition, there are rich amount of research that indicates change program or change initiative as one of the prominent causes in resistance to change (Pieterse et al., 2012; Rosenberg & Joseph, 2011). Further examples change program related resistance are speed and time of change, extent of change, poor implementation planning, uncertainty of assessment, communication about the change program, competency in executing change program, work group breakup, change agent and others.

The third proposed taxonomy (institution) deals with the organization or institution itself. Institution in the context of organizational change can be referred to as the current state and wellbeing of institution or organization to carry out the change initiative. An institution needs to be healthy to run any change program. Aside from the dimensions of individual and change program, institution can also influence resistance to change (Hernandez, 2016; Harvey & Broyles, 2010). A study on resistance to change also revealed that this happen due to powerful organization's immune system, the same way in which immunities develop in human body to reject bacteria and viruses (Gilley, Godek & Gilley, 2009). Similarly, this immune system impedes any change initiatives from tempering with existing status quo. As such, organization will inflate barricades in the form of people, policies, procedures and cultures to resist change. Study by Brunninge (2009) explored that organization's history can influence resistance to change and it is one of critical part of devising change process. Rosemberg & Joseph (2011) further explained that history can serve as a powerful inertia to change as institution with a good change track record can promote change climate while a bad change track record will demote change climate. Further examples of institution related resistance are lack of infrastructure to embrace change, organizational history, norm incongruence, organizational size and rigidity, lack of management support, unwillingness of management to deal with resistance, lack of participation due to top-down steering, organizational politics and conflicts, resources issues, bureaucracy practice (Tan, 1998), miscommunication, lack of leadership skills and inertia (Harvey & Broyles, 2010).

6. Conclusion

The past studies put more weightage on individual reactions to change. Study believes that each individual has own unique defense mechanisms that protect them from the change which act as barrier from allowing the individual to adapt with the change. Resistance correlates with individual's mind reflecting one's willingness and receptiveness to change while being influences by one's thinking and behavior. Thus, evaluating resistance to change based on human aspect alone will produce dissimilarities in results. A proper attention should also be given to the change program itself whether it really fits to be carried out. Additionally, resistance should also be measured on institution whether or not an institution has the right climate for change. Nevertheless, study on change program and institution resistance are relatively scarce as compared to human aspect.

Acclimating change in today's environment can be a daunting challenge. This study believes that by knowing which factor contributed the most while breaking the traditional view of human aspect alone, better planning can be carried by the management to facilitate the change and subsequently enhancing the success rate of organizational change. In addition, the high failure rate of organization change implies a dire need of factors that can increase the probability of successful organization change while debatably imply that there is limited valid framework for organizational change (Rafferty, Jimmieson & Armenakis, 2013). Hence, there is a vital need of holistic view to manage change resistance that incorporates wider factors through the proposed concept. Nevertheless, future study is needed to validate the proposed framework.

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