

Human Reaction to Change

The Reality and Impact of Stress

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Abstract

Change has become dominant within organisations and many change approaches exist. However, the impact of change on the individual and the reality of elevated stress levels during periods of organisational change is often disregarded. Creating meaningful and sustainable change then becomes challenging. This study followed a qualitative research approach and adopted grounded theory methodology. Stress, fear and anxiety dominated the research data which indicated that individuals find it difficult to engage with change in a meaningful manner. Human reactions to change informed us that organisations have to regard an individual's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. Only when all these elements receive sufficient attention can there be coherence and meaningful individual contribution. Our research data indicated that heightened stress levels are often ignored as few organisational resources are available to support individuals through an organisational change process. Indeed, few organisations are able to effectively address elevated stress levels. The importance of leadership surfaced as leaders must help individuals to gain a sense of identity during change. Granting individuals proper guidance through the "nightmare" of uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos empowers employees to better engage with change. Offering individuals anxiety, stress and fear relievers, could provide them with new tools for emotional stability and creativity.

Keywords: Human reaction to change; leadership; organisational change; stress; transformation.

Introduction

Change has become all pervasive; our modern lifestyles are characterised by change. Taleb (2012, p. 13) speaks of membership in the extended disorder family: uncertainty, variability, imperfect and incomplete knowledge, change, chaos, volatility, disorder, entropy, time, the unknown, randomness, turmoil, stressor, error, dispersion of outcomes and un-knowledge. Extended disorder has become the norm within society and within organisations. The future is unpredictable, causing a sense of loss and/or anxiety for individuals, organisations and society.

The new economy ushered in huge opportunities and great turmoil arising from such an increasingly volatile environment, resulting in the constant state of change in which organisations have to operate. There are currently changes in virtually all dimensions of the

socioeconomic environment. Concerns focusing on issues such as business, government, politics, education, health and social care, religion, management, leading, investing, borrowing, buying, owning, working and innovating are permeating societies as never before.

Humans do not take kindly to change. Novel ideas scare people, they fill them with anxiety and doubt. Bloom (2010) reminds us that straying grotesquely from the beaten path makes humans fearful and even self-destructive.

In theory, most organisations accept that they must change or die. However, change remains difficult to achieve as organisations continue to struggle with effective change implementation (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Few organisations manage change effectively (Todnem-By, 2005). Globalisation, new technology, customer expectations and increased diversity accelerate change, generally with extreme unpredictability while contributing to the need for organisations to significantly modify the way they do things.

Change occurs on multiple concurrent paths for both the individual and the organisation. No or little respite may result in distrust, uncertainty and the reality of organisational change fatigue (Lewis, Romanaggi, & Chapple, 2010). Yesterday's practices and assumptions no longer work, therefore, the purpose of organisational change is to adapt to the environment, improve performance and change employees' behavioural patterns (Leana & Barry, 2000).

Given workforces with a greater degree of demographic diversity, technological change and increased international competition, coupled with the breath-taking changes foreseen in the business environment, leadership models are likely to become increasingly significant. Kotter (1995) underscores the importance of leadership to the organisational change process, because by definition, change requires the creation of a new system and then institutionalisation of the new approach.

Change compels employees to adapt to new circumstances, but retaining some stability enables employees to maintain a sense of identity and understanding (Huy, 1999). Because one of the main aspects of human nature is people's inherent need for predictability and order (Bloom, 2010), one should bear in mind that major organisational change may be experienced in ways that contradict this basic need and deplete employees' adaptive resources (Berneth, Walker, & Harris, 2011). Likewise, research showed that an overemphasis on organisational change may come at the expense of other important organisational factors such as commitment or satisfaction (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

Huy (2002) indicated that the potential for negative outcomes is particularly heightened when the rate of change is perceived as too frequent. When change is perceived as a discrete event with a beginning and an end, employees are better able to predict and adjust their behaviour accordingly (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). When an organisation is in a state of continuous flux, employees are unable to align their thoughts and actions with the expectations of organisational leaders. Marks (2003) proposed a saturation effect such that employees can handle only so much disruption. Berneth, et al. (2011) implicitly suggest there may be a moment where change becomes too much. Exhaustion is the central mechanism through which change fatigue drives employees' affective reactions and behavioural intentions. Exhaustion is a feeling of being depleted or overextended beyond one's capacity to handle workplace demands. The energy to perform basic job tasks disappears and employees are left feeling drained (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Distinguishing acceptable stress from excessive stress has a significant impact on the success of organisational change (Chen, 2011). The overwhelming effect of stress can be devastating with enormous organisational costs (Corbitt, 2005) and detrimental consequences

such as higher absenteeism, lower productivity, lower job satisfaction and low morale (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999).

Various organisational change models such as Lewin (1951), Kotter (1996) and Tushman and Romanelli (1985) can be found in literature. Sirkin, Keenan and Jackson (2005) argued that organisations must pay equal attention to hard and soft aspects during organisational change. Sirken et al. (2005) concluded that duration, integrity, commitment and effort determine the outcome of any change initiative.

Scharmer (2007) developed the U-process which leads people through three core movements that allow them to connect to an emerging future. The U-process positions the individual within the change process, transitioning from organisational change models to the individual. "Prototyping in the U-process builds on the two movements that allow one to break through habitual patterns of the past: sensing the emerging whole and establishing a connection to the source or authentic self" (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2010, p. 27). Theory-U informs that there are three inner voices of resistance that keep us from hearing the emerging future. The voice of judgement is resistance to an open mind which stifles creativity; the voice of cynicism is resistance to an open heart because we are entertaining the companions of arrogance and callousness; the voice of fear is resistance to an open will. Managing all three voices appropriately, can take us from fearful to fearless. These inner voices are change obstacles. Once these are conquered, a space can be born where a high energy, generative system can move through to collectively connect and generate a new emerging vision with new rules. "To lead profound change is to shift the inner place from which a system operates" (Scharmer, 2007, p. 377).

Kübler-Ross (1963) contributed to the understanding of emotional experiences when she defined human reactions to change during the process of loss. This model is still applicable in organisations today because the model normalises the emotions relating to change while describing the normal behavioural patterns of both individuals and organisations.

Viljoen-Terblanche (2008) developed an integrated model which describes the human reactions to change through an adaptation of the work of Hopson and Adams (1966), Kübler-Ross (1963), and Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2004). This model depicts specific emotions as experienced during the different phases. The letting go phase includes emotions such as denial and resistance, which are accompanied by feelings such as shock, disbelief, anger, insecurity, blame, anxiety, happiness, fear, threat, guilt and depression, while the letting come phase consists of acceptance, the making sense of, the understanding of, and ultimately, the integration of the change. This phase is accompanied by the relevant emotions of commitment, optimism and engagement.

Dahl's (2009) research examined the effect of organisational change on the likelihood that individual employees leave the organisation or receive stress-related medication, and found that employees of organisations with large degrees of change have a significantly higher risk of experiencing stress and/or leaving the organisation. He further argued that organisational change can lead to employee frustration and uncertainty as organisational change threatens the identity and implicit contract of the organisation with its employees. Furthermore, increased frustration, uncertainty, fear and the instability induced by organisational change increases employee stress and the risk of employee turnover.

Fischer (2006) developed the transition curve which analyses the way individuals deal with personal change. This model explains that individual anxiety will arise when confronted with change. This will be followed by happiness, which, in turn, will lead to either denial or fear.

Fear will lead to threat and then to guilt which may turn into hostility or into gradual acceptance. Once change is accepted an individual can move forward.

Unfortunately, if we seek security in today's organisations it may only heighten our anxieties. The security we seek, and inherently know, was provided by early groups no longer readily existing in the culture of groups that support our survival today. This causes confusion and mistrust while planting questions of trustworthiness (Grady & Grady, 2011).

Organisational ecologists (Hannan & Freeman, 1989) argued that organisational change and transformation are rarely positive experiences, especially when the core features and identities of the organisation are subject to change. They argue that there are substantial obstacles to fundamental structural changes in organisations because changes can fuel undesirable effects on employees such as increased uncertainty, fear, frustration and stress.

Dated exploration of the degree to which individuals perceive that they are specifically stressed by organisational change was revealing. During the anticipation stage of organisational change, high levels of uncertainty were prevalent (Isabella, 1990) which increased stress perceptions (Schabracq & Cooper, 1998).

Organisations are built on trust and reliability, where employees are loyal and committed toward the organisation and the implicit contract they have with it. Changes threaten these values (Dahl, 2009) as well as organisational identity (Hannan, Baron, Hsu, & Koçak, 2006). Changes that deeply influence the self, may lead to frustration, confusion and even a loss of identity. A destabilisation process follows, which involves the significant costs of reshaping operations and realigning the organisation (Péli, Pólós, & Hannan, 2000). Corbitt (2005) confirms this, stating that the overwhelming effect of stress can be devastating to employees, and the cost to the organisation enormous. Furthermore, a disruption in the social environment affects individual's higher-order thinking (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002).

Ineffective leadership, morale problems, a high turnover of capable people, absenteeism, labour problems, increased political behaviour in the organisation and turf fights (Kets De Vries, 2001) result due to internal pressures. Instead of minimising workplace stress levels, organisations are encouraged to manage stress to optimal levels (Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003). The concept of optimal stress arose from the Yerkes Dodson Law (Certo, 2003). Here, common management practice assumes, through the application of the Yerkes Dodson Law, that a reasonable amount of pressure, anxiety or fear in the environment leads to higher performance than if stress is not present (Certo, 2003). Yet, research reports revealed that employees who experience large-scale change report higher levels of stress, more anxiety and increased feelings of uncertainty (Jones, Watson, Hobman, Bordia, Gallois, & Callan, 2008).

Whilst all of these models are relevant, the impact and reality of stress in the individual change process is repeatedly omitted. Yet, stress comes in many shapes and disguises; internal or external, and can be experienced at an individual, organisational and societal level. However, the effects of stress are likely to be detrimental and costly to the wellbeing of the individual, the organisation and larger society.

Todnem-By (2005) expressed the need to conduct exploratory research to increase the current body of knowledge of organisational change management while Smollan, Matheny & Sayers (2010) asked for further research to understand emotional experiences during change.

The researchers thus conducted exploratory research in an effort to increase the current body of knowledge on organisational change whilst attempting to understand the related emotional experiences. It seems as though many of the negative outcomes of organisational change could be mitigated through successful change. Reducing negative outcomes such as

resistance, stress and insecurity may then positively impact individuals, groups and organisations.

Method

A qualitative research approach was followed and grounded theory methodology adopted. The purpose of this study was to create emerging theory through the collected data, themes and constructs; concepts were discovered in the collected data. Observations and interviews initially covered a broad range of concepts which were narrowed down as themes and concepts emerged. A literature review was conducted to inform the interview questions. The researchers used open, axial and selective coding combined with constant data comparison.

Population and Sampling

Theoretical sampling was used to collect, code and analyse the data in order to decide where to sample next in accordance with emerging codes and categories and to inform the saturation of categories, which was understood to mean that additional information no longer provided new insights into the subject matter. Sample participants were selected for relevance to the breadth of the issue and not how well they represent the target population. Sampling stopped once the body of knowledge no longer expanded.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through a case study, in-depth interviews, focus group sessions, solicited data, field notes and observations. The case study comprised three case elements. The aim of the case study was to facilitate exploration of the organisational change and leadership phenomena. Eight in-depth interviews and four focus group sessions averaging seven employees per session, comprised further samples. In-depth interviews were conducted with subject matter experts throughout South Africa. These subject matter experts consisted of two CEOs, two ex-CEOs, three senior leaders and one divisional head from various industries. These industries included chemical (alcohol, food ingredients, rubber and fertiliser), motor manufacturing, hospitality, technology and education (leadership training). The four focus group sessions comprised a combination of middle and senior management from within the manufacturing industry. Table 1 outlines the research steps and methodology, data collection phases, sample groups and objective of each step of the process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through theoretical coding, theoretical memoranda and theoretical sorting. In this study, interview questions were refined throughout the process to ensure that data analysis started to build a tentative theory. Theoretical coding conceptualised the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators in the data. The key ideas became a guide for further collection and data analysis. Open, axial and selective coding were utilised.

During open coding, the data was broken into discrete parts and compared for similarities and dissimilarities. Open coding was utilised to categorise segments of data with a short name, summarising and accounting for each data piece. Each word, line or segment was named. Thereafter, focused selection commenced where the most frequent or significant codes were sorted, synthesised, integrated and organised. Through this process of naming and categorising phenomena the researcher's own assumptions about phenomena were questioned and explored.

Table 1a: *Description and Purpose of Research Steps and Methodology*

Research step	Purpose of research step	Data collection method	Industry	Interview duration
Solicited data	Provides research context	Case study	Motor Manufacturing	-
Three senior (regional) leaders	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change as viewed by senior management who were involved in the strategic change initiatives	In-depth interviews	Technology, Hospitality and Leadership training	±90 minutes
Two ex-CEOs (important shareholders)	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective	In-depth interviews	Chemical (Rubber and Fertiliser)	±120 minutes
Two CEOs	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective	In-depth interviews	Chemical (Food Ingredients and Alcohol)	±90 minutes
One divisional head	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective	In-depth interviews	Chemical (Fertiliser)	±75 minutes
Senior managers	To understand the impact of organisational change initiatives on individuals and leaders	Focus groups	Manufacturing	±90 minutes
Middle managers	To explore the impact of organisational change on middle management and understand their role in implementation	Focus groups	Manufacturing	± 80 minutes
Minutes, project work	To contextualise the impact of organisational change	Solicited data	Manufacturing	
Personal notes	To contextualise the impact of organisational change	Field notes	Across all above industries	During interviews and discussions
Behavioural and non-behavioural observations	To understand individual engagement in and reactions to organisational change	Observations	Across all above industries	During interviews and discussions

Through axial coding the data was assembled in new ways after open coding. A coding paradigm was developed which (1) identified a central phenomenon, (2) explored causal conditions, (3) identified the context and intervening conditions, (4) specified strategies, and (5) delineated the consequences. Axial coding was used to sort, synthesise and organise sets of data. Axial coding was then used to reassembled the data in new ways. Using questions such as when, where, why, who, how, what and with what, helped the researcher to convert the text into concepts. The process of axial coding promoted the emergence of a conceptual framework to contain these newly developed concepts.

Selective coding was employed to combine categories and their interrelationships to form interlinked connections relating to organisational change and leadership. Through selective coding, data was integrated by reducing raw data into different concepts which were linked

through relational statements to explain the phenomena of organisational change and leadership. Through selective coding, a core category was established. This core category was related to other categories and validated their relationships. During selective coding, categories were enhanced which needed deeper refinement. The result of this process of data collection and analysis was probably a substantive-level theory relevant to the topic of organisational change and leadership.

Table 1b: *Description of Data Analysis and Quality Data*

Research step	Data analysis	How to ensure quality data
Solicited data	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility
Three senior (regional) leaders	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
Two ex-CEOs (important share-holders)	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
Two CEOs	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
One divisional head	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
Senior managers	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
Middle managers	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiability and workability
Minutes, project work	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility
Personal notes	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility
Behavioural and non-behavioural observations	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility

Results

Case Study Data

Numerous similarities emerged from the three case elements which comprised the case study. Stress, anxiety and fear were dominant themes as change was perceived from a fear perspective, inevitably leading to resistance. Individuals appeared to have a deep need to understand the rationale for organisational change. A lack of understanding increased stress and anxiety.

Recurring themes were the importance of participation, communication, feedback and discussions, and leadership. Further, concerns related to the lack of organisational competency to handle change and to understand the impact of stress on the individual were repeatedly voiced.

Prevalent was the lack of change management skills and the non-existent integration between change management, leadership and management. Throughout the different change initiatives, the inability of the organisation and leadership to address the increased stress levels arising from the change initiative was evident.

The importance of participation and inclusivity during periods of organisational change was repeated. Radical changes had a huge impact on individuals and they generally reacted with resistance. Emotions such as stress, anxiety and fear were very real.

Our research data indicated that challenges surface when a mechanistic project management approach is followed. Projects that impact and/or change individuals and their job roles or functions need to include a change management element. The change and project management functions must present a unified change proposition. Through a stronger change management case, early inclusion and discussion involvement can be ensured. Such joint co-operation will also contribute positively toward the change management perception. The earlier in the project such a unified proposition can be presented, the sooner and perhaps more easily, successful change might be achieved.

Technically, this requires that a project management approach develop and deliver a comprehensive solution that addresses change function design, processes, and human elements. From an individual change perspective, such a solution will manifest through behaviours, resistance, processes and daily functions. To effectively alter behaviours, reduce resistance and modify daily activities, requires that the designed solution must be widely accepted, approved and implemented by those individuals and/or groups impacted by the change and the suggested solution. This implies effective communication, participation and inclusivity.

The different change initiatives mentioned in this case study failed to realise their full benefits, despite well-developed and planned technical solutions. It would seem that cost and time overruns remain unless organisations include individual participation, inclusivity and behavioural change as well as effective stress reduction methods concurrently.

In-Depth Interviews

The data consistently revealed a lack of methodology when organisations undertake change. Many leaders acknowledged that they are not influenced by any model and acknowledged that they did not know any model names. One leader stated that there is no model that he believes in and admitted to being model agnostic. In all instances, change was undertaken using little or no methodology, almost to a point of being model agnostic throughout. In addition, it was obvious that change occurs regardless of whether or not a model is followed, as constant change in organisations remains a reality.

Despite the above, leaders recognised that good models include the people and that the right way is inclusive change. All respondents agreed that the design of the new organisation, where the new organisation represents a post-change state, should come from the people. The new organisation should be designed by the people with management participating in a supervisory capacity only. Handling change incorrectly will result in painful, unplanned and unpredictable change.

All the respondents raised a management concern. The traditional management functions of planning, preparation and control are hugely lacking during normal operations, even more so when the organisation is in turmoil. Such management is identified by a lack of planning, lack of preparation, lack of control, not spending time on change or on employees, lack of awareness of employee stress and a short-term view. Furthermore, the data indicated that such a management philosophy generally embarks upon change for the wrong reasons, namely egos, own benefit and quick profits.

One leader commented that business operates on very short term cycles and therefore instant gratification precludes a long term vision. According to this leader, business therefore

needs immediate gratification. Although respondents agreed on the inevitability of change, many respondents agreed that instant gratification is an increasing problem, which is amplified by the rapid advances in technology and profit fixation.

Trust and sacrifice were presented as vital leadership characteristics as the importance of trust was repeatedly highlighted. It was generally accepted that management must show that they trust their employees. Similarly, leadership must be trusted. All respondents agreed that poor communication jeopardises trust, but also that there can be no change without trust.

Paradoxically, the data was unequivocal in stating that a leader cannot assign trust onto himself or herself, and that sacrifice implies giving something up. All respondents agreed that leaders have to discard their egos in order to be successful. Power games and ego should be replaced by empathy, ethical behaviour and honest, open conversations. Poor treatment of employees was noted as one of the main reasons for change failure.

Leadership entails ownership, tenure and leading by example. All the respondents agreed that leadership is not management. Leadership emerged as a non-negotiable factor for successful change.

One respondent concluded that change is chaotic and organisations which are not strong in change planning will likely have a low success rate. Because organisations are not strong in planning, thoughts about future actions, needs, expectations and anticipations should be on the agenda more frequently.

The detailed collected data was further broken down into positive, neutral and negative categories. The big “four-letter-word” of business was revealed as TIME. However, communication, leadership, trust and ethics also featured prominently in every discussion.

The data generally indicated that individuals and teams struggle to make sense of the high frequency of change and the related stress which results. A short-term view, survival, instant gratification and misalignment were identified as elements which will result in change failure.

The data also revealed that organisations are unable to deal with the stress responses of individuals engaged in the change process. The respondents agreed that for as long as emotions such as fear, guilt, mistrust, rejection, false expectations, scepticism and feelings of exclusions are predominant and prevalent, individuals cannot optimally participate in the change effort.

Some respondents agreed that many organisations have become large and impersonal and as a result, no longer understand their employees. According to the collected data, leaders lose their intuitive ability to communicate, engage and speak to their followers as a result of increased workload and time pressures. This results in a disconnect between leader and follower.

Uncertainty creates fear which is perpetuated through different messages. When organisations embark upon change, fear becomes the standard. All the respondents acknowledged that it becomes irrelevant whether fear is rational or irrational.

The respondents concurred on the importance of acknowledging the heightened stress levels of employees. They further agreed that their organisation was unable to effectively cope with these stress levels, not having effective methods in place to reduce stress levels. The respondents stated that regular stress checks and a keen awareness of individual stress are required because of the modern, fast-paced business environment. Unmanaged or uncontrolled stress renders the individual unable to engage in the required change initiative.

Focus Group Sessions

The main themes that emerged from the focus group sessions were leadership tasks, leadership characteristics, senior management, change types, change frequency, the lack of methodology and translated strategy and personal emotions.

Respondents reported increased feelings of stress, fear, anxiety and even trauma whilst involved in some form of organisational change. Respondents stated that there was no help available, that they felt stressed because of the uncertainty, that lots of confusion was experienced as people did not understand the assignment of roles and responsibilities. One respondent stated that she did not want to come to work as people expected answers from her, yet she was unable to provide them. Respondents in all focus groups admitted that change was difficult and resulted in anxiety. Many respondents stated that they were unable to function as a result of the required changes. Other respondents admitted to the highly stressful impact of structural changes.

The respondents admitted to being resistant to the change process. The loss of autonomy, uncertainty, a lack of understanding, poor past experiences, a high change frequency and scepticism were advanced as the primary reasons for resistance. One respondent said that she resisted change because she does not understand the change. This respondent continued to state that there are always changes happening. Respondents often perceived the social engineering of change to be unethical as change was seen as a euphemism for job losses.

All the emotions that were shared in relation to organisational change were negative. The main emotions were stress, resistance, anxiety and feeling despondent and unequipped. Instability, confusion, no autonomy, unsuitable training, disempowerment, non-involvement and the difficulty of change were also mentioned. Respondents expressed feelings of fear, unhappiness, scepticism and uncertainty. Further, many respondents indicated that they prayed a lot in an attempt to mitigate their internal conflict and the damage they observed.

Owing to the fact that the leaders were not calm, not available, and failed to display presence and sensitivity, the data related to emotions revealed an insecure attachment. Many respondents complained that their leadership is reactive and does not explain the rationale behind the required change. A further complaint was that leadership does not show the direction. Negative methods such as alcohol and irrationality were used to mitigate overwhelming feelings of negativity and to provide relief from stress.

The data revealed an utter lack of organisational change knowledge, coupled with the use of hardly any change principles. No change methodology was followed and change was undertaken in a rudimentary fashion with precious little internal knowledge and support. Current change models do not seem to resonate with organisations' management and therefore, no theoretical change methodology is being followed. No methodology influences change and change generally only becomes a key topic once the situation is already detrimental. Hence, change is generally a "mess".

A respondent stated that she never saw the bigger picture. She continued to say that you must know where you are, where you want to go and how to get there. However, according to this person, the change strategy is not communicated which worsens the process.

Strategy does not encompass change and change generally does not form part of strategy. There again, success factors are autonomy, communication, permissible decision making, change enablement, inclusivity, leadership, ensuring a common understanding by all, and empowerment. The reasons for change failure point to reactive and ineffective leadership, inefficient management, the importance of profit above people, no strength in leading change, lack of

knowledge, vague explanations, lack of communication, and the implementation of solutions that fail to address the real problems.

Leadership was considered important regardless of a stable or changing business landscape. Significant leadership characteristics were identified as ethics, honesty, integrity, respect, trustworthiness, being proactive and authentic and living the organisation's values. Key leadership tasks were indicated as change guidance, reasoning the change, mobilising people's willingness and ability, sharing vision, solving real problems, encouraging people to buy in and explaining the change. Employees expect leadership to communicate, value the importance of employees and convey intentions truthfully.

The data showed management styles to be inconsistent which could result in negative output. One respondent experienced management as archaic. Another respondent stated that change managers are clueless and ineffective. Yet another stated that management is unable to do change and change is therefore a "mess". Senior management were not perceived to empower employees, were always changing something and spent a lot of time on damage control. Within the context of change, respondents experienced poor planning and poor translation of strategy, as well as poor communication by senior management, as disempowering. Management was seen to be playing power games, building empires and changing haphazardly without consultation, explanation or support for employees.

Damage control results in consultants being called in to fix the resultant mess. Consultants stay on, becoming long-term advisers. Crisis management depicted the general management style. Management was also accused of not understanding employees, not being transparent and not allowing employees any decision making power or inclusivity in the change processes.

Employees felt bombarded by a too high frequency of change which contributed to failure. Employees also felt their feelings and emotions were not taken into consideration which worsened during periods of change. Employees want and need to understand and engage in the change and expect senior management to be aware of their unique challenges. Engagement at an employee level means empowerment, participation, understanding, decision making powers and inclusivity.

Modernity requires inclusivity and participation at all organisational levels, coupled with planning, communication, control and clear schedules. Organisations require trust from employees. Modern employees require trust from their organisations. The modern organisation might be able to sustain daily practices of crisis management with inclusion and by effectively dealing with individual stress.

Reactive, nebulous leadership, who place profit above people, will probably result in change failure. Ineffective planning and communication hamper successful change. Only if leaders are followed, can successful organisational change become a reality. Employees expect leadership and guidance throughout the change process. Displaying empathy with the various challenges experienced by employees, being mindful of employee emotions and enabling employees are all vital elements in the achievement of successful change.

Discussion

Congruent with Taleb (2012), our data indicated a very high change frequency. Employees struggled to cope with the high rate of change and negative outcomes were prevalent.

Resistance then resulted due to the unknown, habit, self-interest, economic insecurity, failure to recognise the need for change, distrust, perceptions and scepticism.

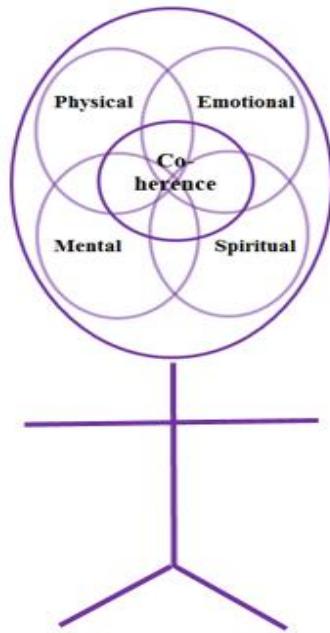


Figure 1: *Basic Elements of the Whole Person*

The data indicated that organisational change results in fear, stress and anxiety which could stem from the individual, groups, community, the organisation, leadership, management or a combination of these. As Bloom (2010) rightly mentioned, unpredictability results in fear and depletes our adaptive resources. Our data confirmed structural and cultural inertia, threats to power relationships, expertise and resource allocation, as well as scepticism about previous unsuccessful change efforts and poor planning as organisational factors standing in the way of successful organisational change.

In terms of Viljoen-Terblance's (2008) adaptation of Scharmer's (2007) U-process there was no mourning. Respondents still seemed in a state of shock and/or disbelief. The processes of discarding and realisation, or clarify, crystallise and change, had apparently not started.

The data further confirmed that all of these factors are influenced by increased stress levels which resulted in stress-related behaviours, coupled with decreased cognitive capacity. Certain change models acknowledge emotions and their role, yet the impact of stress appears to be ignored. It seems possible that such elevated stress levels could hamper individual movement towards change acceptance.

Human reactions related to change and the reality of increased stress levels, led us to consolidate figure 1, indicating that individuals comprise physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. When these elements are balanced there is coherence. The whole individual should be considered to ensure cohesion, optimal functioning and minimal resistance.

The data reported feelings of stress, fear, anxiety, reduced autonomy and ability, and even total shutdown. Unfortunately, in the South African context, poverty, migrant labour, energy supply challenges, public anger, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence, to name a few, are added stressors (these statistics are readily available through Statistics South Africa). It then seems unlikely that individuals can function optimally. Further, that unrelieved stress, fear and

anxiety may become a vicious cycle that will influence organisational change efforts negatively. This concurs with Dahl (2009) who stated that the average organisation is unable to control the process of change without significant negative consequences. It seems unlikely that many individuals would remain unaffected by the above. Equally, it seems likely that there could then be a moment when change becomes overwhelming.

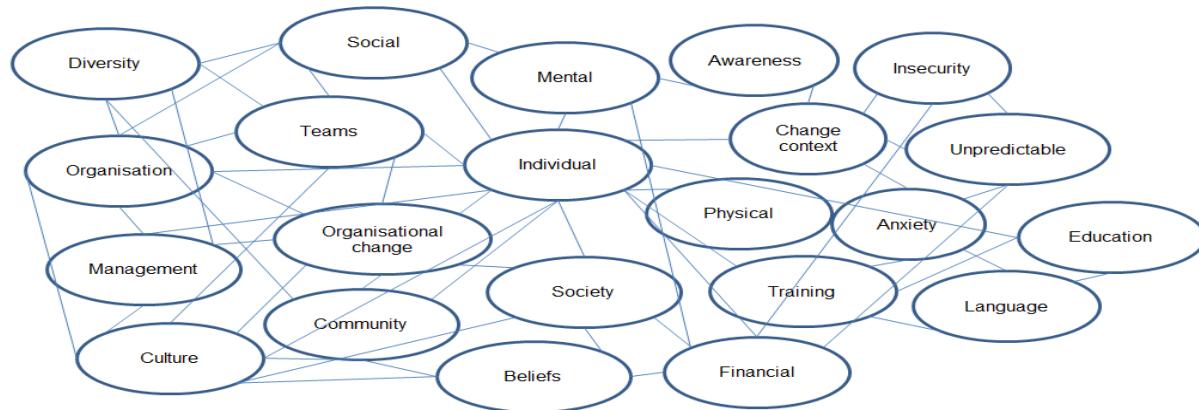


Figure 2: An Example of the Interconnectivity of Organisational Change

It seems reasonable to propose that sustainable change can only be achieved through the attainment of individual vicissitude. Yet, organisational change is a web of interconnectivity. If links are continuously stressed, the implications become unpredictable and may even weaken and/or damage the web. This principle is displayed in figure 2, which also indicates stress variables involved at an individual level. Clearly, the additional stress caused by organisational changes creates huge challenges for leadership and organisations.

The impact of stress and the importance of lowering individual stress levels is indicated in figure 3 which we developed from the research findings and emergent data realities. With high stress levels, it becomes difficult to change behaviour and create new meaning. Individuals with high stress levels will most probably revert back to old, wrong habits because all their available capacity and energy is required for survival, perhaps merely to function, as stress reduces the individual's window of tolerance and/or range of effective functioning. Figure 3 illustrates the split second in which an unconscious decision is made. Change is unpredictable and uncertain, resulting in fear as the primary emotion. Instinct kicks in which will most often result in impaired decision making which is then utilised as the base from which information is processed. Thoughts become repetitive, falling back to known memories and perceptions. Increased stress results. A vicious circle ensues. Each individual's emotional tolerance window will depend on the quality of choice which arises.

A low emotional tolerance window will result in the individual falling back into habits which are comfortable and known. A high emotional tolerance window will allow new behaviour to be explored and actioned which in turn can result in newly created meaning. Figure 3 displays the importance of lowering individual stress levels in meaningful and sustainable ways to enable organisations to achieve successful organisational change.

Within the context of organisational change, leadership's awareness of the brain's survival responses of fight, flight or freeze may provide a starting point from which diversity and

inclusivity can be acknowledged. Only when leadership is able to mitigate the fear response in individuals, can meaning and successful change become possible.

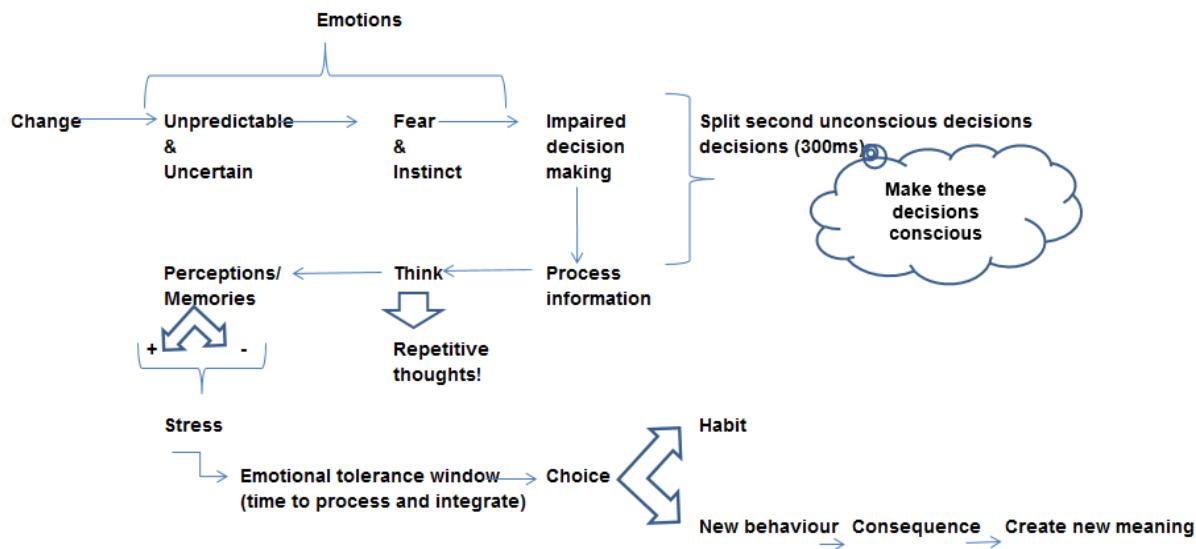


Figure 3: Individual Reactions to Change

Conclusion

Stress has become an integral part of individuals' daily lives. Organisational change results in elevated stress levels as well as increased anxiety and distress. Leadership, as an extension of the individual, is equally faced with the reality of stress in their own lives as well as in the lives of subordinates and team members.

Human reaction to change was displayed through negative behaviours which included violence, alcohol and medication as outlets for heightened stress experiences. Much has been written about negative behaviours. However, it seems as though little is available in traditional literature on the management of stress and negative behaviours in an organisational context.

In contrast to the Yerkes Dodson Law (Certo, 2003), our data indicated no optimal stress level after which performance declined. Soon after stress entered the picture, performance was reduced. Pressure, anxiety or fear in the environment quickly led to shutdown, regression, demotivation and distress. Limbic responses (fight, flight and freeze) then become reality.

Organisations struggle to manage elevated stress levels. The importance of the human element in creating successful organisational change seems clear. Today's successful leaders require methods which can facilitate successful collaboration, which only becomes possible if stress levels are within normal ranges. Unfortunately, traditional organisational literature fails to present applicable stress reduction methods, congruent with this multifaceted dilemma.

This research was done within a South African context, however, seemingly equally, applicable given a global context, is the fourfold organisational stress dilemma. Firstly, organisations and leadership require a deep awareness of stress, its impact on productivity and its effect on relationships and general interactions. Secondly, organisational change will increase stress if not managed and implemented responsibly. Thirdly, traditional stress and anxiety interventions seem limited in their ability to provide long-term resolutions. And fourth, it is necessary to find novel, applicable interventions to reduce stress to acceptable levels.

Stress is a key element in modern organisations. The study underscored the impact of a lack of leadership, guidance and poor management. Many individual struggles with organisational change are perpetuated through poor leadership qualities. Leaders who are unable to regulate their own behaviour and emotions create further stress in an already stressed system. Lack of guidance perpetuates uncertainty which, in turn, increases fear. Leaders who fail to understand and lead according to different thinking systems, will continually fail to extract positive emotions and goodwill from employees.

As long as individuals function on the basis of anxiety, stress and fear, no real change can occur. Individuals must be released from anxiety and fear, if they are to engage successfully in a change initiative. Only by being in a reassured and calm state can organisational change be applied for the betterment of individuals and their teams, organisations, and society at large.

The data indicated that organisations are unable to handle or support increased stress levels. All the individuals interviewed indicated that they had sought support outside of the organisation. It has been argued that once a situation has been appraised as stressful, an individual determines which coping response to enact to reduce his or her levels of stress. This judgement about what to do is evaluated, in part, in the context of available support resources.

The huge responsibility and accountability required of leadership and management within an organisational change context are often underestimated. Yet, leadership and/or management actions can endanger a change initiative. Therefore, an imperative requirement of leadership and management in the modern organisation is to acknowledge the high incidence of stress. A further requirement seems to be the bold step to acknowledge the inadequate organisational resources to support the stress dilemma. Then, alternative stress reduction programs can be evaluated and considered for implementation.

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English Abstract

Human Reaction to Change

The Reality and Impact of Stress

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Abstract

Change has become dominant within organisations and many change approaches exist. However, the impact of change on the individual and the reality of elevated stress levels during periods of organisational change is often disregarded. Creating meaningful and sustainable change then becomes challenging. This study followed a qualitative research approach and adopted grounded theory methodology. Stress, fear and anxiety dominated the research data which indicated that individuals find it difficult to engage with change in a meaningful manner. Human reactions to change informed us that organisations have to regard an individual's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. Only when all these elements receive sufficient attention can there be coherence and meaningful individual contribution. Our research data indicated that heightened stress levels are often ignored as few organisational resources are available to support individuals through an organisational change process. Indeed, few organisations are able to effectively address elevated stress levels. The importance of leadership surfaced as leaders must help individuals to gain a sense of identity during change. Granting individuals proper guidance through the "nightmare" of uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos empowers employees to better engage with change. Offering individuals anxiety, stress and fear relievers, could provide them with new tools for emotional stability and creativity.

Keywords: Human reaction to change; leadership; organisational change; stress; transformation

French abstract*

Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

La réaction humaine au changement

La réalité et l'impact du stress

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Résumé

Le changement est devenu dominant au sein des organisations et de nombreuses approches du changement existent. Cependant, l'impact du changement sur l'individu et la réalité des niveaux de stress élevés, pendant des périodes de changement organisationnel, sont souvent négligés. Créer des changements durables ayant du sens devient alors un défi. Cette étude adopte une approche de recherche qualitative et une méthodologie basée sur la théorie ancrée. Les données récoltées dans le cadre de cette recherche montrent des termes comme le stress, la peur et l'anxiété, et indiquent que les individus ont du mal à s'engager dans le changement d'une manière significative. Face aux réactions humaines au changement, les organisations devraient considérer des caractéristiques physiques, émotionnelles, mentales et spirituelles d'une personne. Ce n'est que lorsque tous ces éléments sont suffisamment pris en compte, qu'il peut y avoir une cohérence et des contributions individuelles significatives. Nos données de recherche indiquent qu'on ignore souvent l'accroissement des niveaux de stress, car pour soutenir les individus dans le cadre d'un processus de changement organisationnel, il y a peu de ressources organisationnelles. En effet, peu d'organisations sont capables de s'attaquer efficacement aux niveaux élevés de stress. L'importance du leadership a émergé de notre recherche. Au cours du changement, les dirigeants doivent aider les employés à acquérir un sentiment d'identité. Il doivent donner une orientation adéquate, à travers le « cauchemar » de l'incertitude, de l'imprévisibilité et du chaos, ce qui permet aux employés de mieux s'engager dans le changement. Offrir de l'assistance aux personnes qui souffrent d'anxiété, de stress et de peur, pourrait leur donner de nouveaux outils de stabilité émotionnelle et de créativité.

Mots-clés: Réaction humaine au changement; leadership; changement organisationnel; stress; transformation

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German abstract*

Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

Menschliche Reaktion auf Veränderung

Die Realität und Auswirkung von Stress

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Kurzfassung

Veränderung hat innerhalb von Organisationen eine dominierende Stellung erreicht und viele Veränderungsansätze existieren. Die Auswirkung von Veränderungen auf das Individuum und die Realität von erhöhten Stressleveln in Zeiten organisatorischer Veränderung wird jedoch oftmals missachtet. Sinnvolle und nachhaltige Veränderungen herbei zu führen wird so zur Herausforderung. Diese Studie folgte einem qualitativen Forschungsansatz und übernahm Grounded Theory Methodologie. Stress, Angst, und Furcht dominierten die Forschungsdaten, was darauf hinwies, dass es Individuen schwer fällt sich mit Veränderung sinnvoll auseinander zu setzen. Menschliche Reaktionen auf Veränderung informierten uns, dass Organisationen die physischen, emotionalen, mentalen und spirituellen Elemente eines Individuums berücksichtigen müssen. Nur wenn all diese Elemente ausreichend Aufmerksamkeit erfahren, kann es Stimmigkeit und einen sinnvollen individuellen Beitrag geben. Unsere Forschungsergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass erhöhte Stresslevel oftmals ignoriert werden, da nur wenige organisatorische Ressourcen verfügbar sind, um Individuen während eines organisatorischen Veränderungsprozesses zu unterstützen. In der Tat sind nur wenige Organisationen in der Lage sich effizient mit erhöhten Stressleveln zu befassen. Die Bedeutung von Führung wurde deutlich, da Führungskräfte den Individuen helfen müssen während der Veränderung ein Identitätsbewusstsein zu erlangen. Individuen während dem "Albtraum" der Unsicherheit, Unberechenbarkeit und Chaos richtig an zu leiten, ermöglicht es den Angestellten sich besser auf Veränderung ein zu lassen. Individuen Mittel zur Linderung von Angst, Stress und Furcht an zu bieten, kann sie mit neuem Rüstzeug für emotionale Stabilität und Kreativität ausstatten.

Keywords: Menschliche Reaktion auf Veränderung; Führung; organisatorische Veränderung; Stress; Transformation

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Spanish abstract*

Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

Reacción Humana al Cambio

La Realidad y el Impacto del Estrés

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Resumen

El cambio se ha vuelto dominante en las organizaciones y existen muchos enfoques de cambio. Sin embargo, el impacto del cambio en el individuo y la realidad de niveles elevados de estrés durante los períodos de cambio organizacional es a menudo ignorado. Este estudio siguió un enfoque de investigación cualitativa y adoptó la metodología de la teoría fundamentada. El estrés, el miedo y la ansiedad dominaron los datos de la investigación, lo que indicó que a los individuos les resulta difícil relacionarse con el cambio de manera significativa. Como resultados nos muestra que las organizaciones tienen que considerar los elementos físicos, emocionales, mentales y espirituales de una persona. Sólo cuando todos estos elementos reciben suficiente atención puede haber coherencia y una contribución individual significativa. Nuestros datos de investigación indicaron que los niveles de estrés aumentados son a menudo ignorados ya que pocos recursos de la organización están disponibles para apoyar a las personas a través de un proceso de cambio organizacional. De hecho, pocas organizaciones son capaces de abordar con eficacia niveles elevados de estrés. La importancia del liderazgo muestra como los líderes deben ayudar a los individuos a obtener un sentido de identidad durante el cambio. Conceder a las personas una guía adecuada a través de la "pesadilla" de la incertidumbre, la imprevisibilidad y el caos les permite a los empleados comprometerse mejor con el cambio. Ofrecer a los individuos mitigadores de la ansiedad, el estrés y el miedo, podría proporcionarles nuevas herramientas para la estabilidad emocional y la creatividad.

Keywords: Reacción humana al cambio; liderazgo; cambio organizacional; estrés; transformación

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Italian abstract*

Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

La Reazione Umana al Cambiamento

Realtà e Impatto dello Stress

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Abstract

Il cambiamento è divenuto dominante nelle organizzazioni ed esistono molti approcci al cambiamento. Comunque, l'impatto del cambiamento sull'individuo e la realtà degli elevati livelli di stress che comporta durante periodi di riorganizzazione aziendale, spesso non viene considerato. In relazione a questo il creare un cambiamento che abbia un vero significato e duri nel tempo diviene una sfida. Questo studio si è sviluppato attorno ad una ricerca qualitativa e ha adottato una metodologia radicata. Lo stress, la paura e l'ansietà si sono evidenziati nei dati ricercati che hanno indicato che le persone hanno difficoltà ad essere coinvolte nel cambiamento in un modo significativo. La reazione umana al cambiamento ci hanno messo in evidenza quanto organizzazioni debbano fare attenzione agli aspetti individuali fisici, emozionali, mentali e spirituali. Soltanto quando tutti questi elementi ricevono attenzione si può generare un senso di coerenza e significativo contributo. I dati della ricerca evidenzia anche che i livelli di stress sono spesso ignorati poiché solo poche organizzazioni sono disponibili a dare supporto alle persone nel contesto di un processo di cambiamento. Infatti, poche organizzazioni sono pronte a gestire in modo efficace contesti di elevato stress. E' emersa l'importanza della leadership in quanto i leader devono aiutare le persone a conquistare un senso di identità nel corso del cambiamento. Dare alle persone un senso di guida attraverso gli 'incubi' dell'incertezza, imprevedibilità e anche caos da forza alle persone per confrontarsi con il cambiamento. L'offrire sollievo a ansietà, stress e paure individuali può portare le persone ad conseguire nuovi strumenti per avere una stabilità emotiva e anche un maggior senso creativo.

Keywords: reazioni umane al cambiamento; leadership; cambiamento organizzativo; stress; trasformazione

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Chinese abstract*
Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

人类对变化的反映 现实和压力的影响

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摘要

变化在组织内部占据主导地位，并且存在许多变化的方式。然而，在组织变革期间，变化对个人的影响和带来的不断加剧的压力常常被忽略。由此，创造有意义和可持续的变化变得很有挑战性。本研究基于扎根理论，采用定性的研究方法。研究数据结果充满压力、恐惧和焦虑，这表明个人很难以有意义的方式参与变革。人类对变化的反应告诉我们，组织必须关注个人的身体、情感、精神和心灵等因素。只有当所有这些因素得到足够的重视，才能得到个人一致的有意义的对组织的贡献。我们的研究数据表明，由于在组织变革过程中，很少有组织资源用来支持个人，压力水平的提高往往被忽略。事实上，一小部分企业可以有效的处理压力水平上升的情况。由于领导必须在变革中帮助个人获得认同感，领导力的重要性便浮出水面。通过给个人提供适当的指导，可帮助员工度过不确定性，不可预测性和混乱的“噩梦”，能够更好地参与变革。向个人提供焦虑，压力和恐惧的缓解方法，可以为员工情绪稳定和创造力提供新的工具。

Keywords: 关键词，人类对变化的反映，领导力，组织变革，压力，改革

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