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“We don’t have the choice to speak out”: Change recipients’ cognitive approach towards major organizational changes.

Title: “We have no choice to speak out”: Change recipients’ cognitive approach towards major organizational changes.

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Developmental plan: For this developmental paper theoretical and methodological insight is expected from the discussants at conference. Currently, it is a work-in-progress, based on six quantitative interviews and four themes. The initial interviews were part of pilot testing. They helped to understand the contextual factors that affect the participants’ emotional response to major organizational changes. For future, it is planned to conduct face to face interviews with other potential respondents. So, that we can finally conclude with aggregate dimensions based upon systematic data analysis and expand on the themes. This will help to elaborate the conceptual framework with specific sub-dimensions of concepts that are more general, currently. In the meantime, we have revised the interview protocol to get more enriched data in future. However, subject to the difficulty of participants in understanding the specific terms that can be adopted from literature for interview questions, the interview questions are designed open ended, while ensuring that they are jargon free. Lastly, academic scholarship will be critically reviewed, which is already in process. (This paper is a brief description of the whole study, subject to the word limit of developmental paper.)

Abstract: The study is aimed at exploring the cognitive approach of change recipients (employees) followed by certain behavioral reactions towards major organizational changes, intended to bring reforms in education sector of Pakistan. It will investigate that ‘when new changes are introduced, why change recipients behave so differently?’, ‘how they cognitively appraise the factors associated with change and assess change agent’s approach?’. Keeping in view the process nature of change, the initial implementation stage is considered, where employees are required to adapt to the new policies, procedures, and processes. This will help to get an overview of change recipients’ behavioral responses to major organizational changes that should be addressed by the policy makers timely for successful and strategic implementation of major changes.

Key Words

organizational change, cognitive appraisal, change recipients’ behaviors, education sector employees

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Introduction and brief literature review

Change is a process; its success depends upon taking on board important stakeholders and carefully planning and integrating each stage (Stouten et al., 2018). Nowadays, organizations are faced with rapid transformation, challenges to make change efforts successful and sustainable. Likewise, globalization, market competition and technological advancements are some of the common factors that instigate change and changing workforce (Burnes, 2004; By,2005; Kotter,1996). These changes bring about stress for employees dealing with them (Dahl, 2011). The way employees process the change information and react is expected to influence the fate of change outcomes. Therefore, this study proposes to explore the behavioral responses of change recipients in school education department of Punjab, Pakistan, where frequency of change is observed to be extremely high for meeting the SDG’s (Sustainable Developmental Goals, 2030) in the recent decade. And these changes are in early transformational stage with respect to e-surveillance, curriculum re-orientation and change in HR policies.

Change recipient’s behavioral responses

Change recipient’s behavioral reactions are associated with degree of activation and valence of human emotions (Bartunek et al., 2006). The emotional segregation of human behaviors has been defined in the change context by Oreg et al. (2018), as a circumplex of resistance, proactiveness, disengagement, and acceptance. Resistance, as one of the predominant outcome studied in response to change is the negatively active response expressed in terms of anger and stress (Barrett and Russell, 1998). Proactiveness, is reflected in terms of positive activation of emotions when employees’ show enthusiasm and keen interest towards change (ibid.).Disengagement is a negative deactivated state when employees are in depression and feel detached from work (Barrett and Russell, 1998). Acceptance is rather a passive behavior that falls into a positive deactivated phase (ibid.). The expression of these behaviors is channeled through the cognitive appraisal by employees, of the situational factors associated with change. That may result in decrease of their psychological distance with change, increase support or control over the changing context, and lastly their evaluation about whether the organization or change agent is considering employees’ interests or not (Oreg et al., 2018).

So, the conceptual model is framed as following:

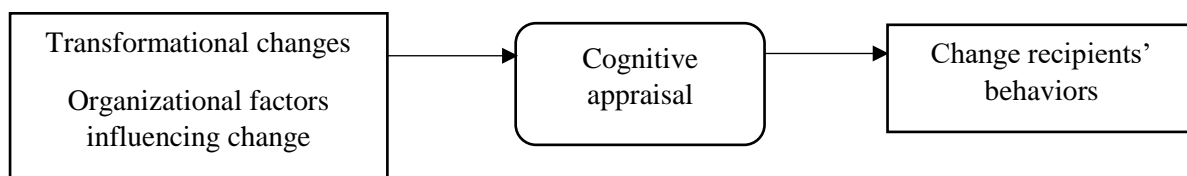


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Participants and procedures

Background

It is observed that the government school education department has went through some rigorous changes in last decade. The sentiments of employees who are at the receiving end of policy changes and the final implementers were previously observed very closely by the researcher. It is witnessed that the policy changes for betterment of department were adapted from the best practices in the world but were creating a strain in the local context due to the

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contextual uncertainties. This strain makes the implementation of change to some extent but could not make the policy implementation as fruitful as it could be. So, this research was designed to dig down the sentiments of change recipients, what hurdles they face, and how the circumstances effect their organizational behavior towards the implementation of change.

Methodology

This research is exploratory in nature. It follows inductive approach that enables to map the pathways of emotional behaviors, through cognitive thought process about workplace factors. Qualitative research method helped to investigate the research questions deeply (Quinn, 2002). It helped to complement the existing research in this domain through rigorous scientific inquiry (Padgett, 2004). Contextual factors that were not highlighted in the literature before and supposed to affect the emotional arousal of recipients towards change in the local context are identified. Semi-structured interview questions were designed for the pilot study that slightly got evolved with new insight from subsequent interviews as it is open for in depth probes with participants (Dickson et al., 2007).

The target population involves change recipient employees working in the school education department of Punjab, Pakistan. The first participant was approached through former contacts, rest were selected through snowball sampling i.e. the referrals of subsequent participants. There was job position diversity among the participants that provided with uniqueness and counter confirmation of the related patterns coming out of the data (Quinn, 2002). Data collection was made through initial pilot study of six participants. Telephonic interviews were conducted. This technique was adopted to make the pilot study cost effective and to minimize the physical access issues with the interviewee, who were dispersed. Bryman (2015), discussed the benefits of telephonic interviews and found them to be as beneficial as face to face interviews in public policy topics and does not contain any quality repercussions as feared usually.

Thematic analysis was carried out to identify the recurring patterns of behaviors. This method facilitated to cluster alike concepts into themes. Based upon the data, new themes were formulated that were found to be in congruence with the literature review but also turned to be different in certain dimensions. Coding was done periodically, to find consistent, coherent and broader themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Themes were formed, grounded upon first order codes, on the bases of terms used by the participants. We went back and forth between the initial interviews’ transcriptions to find the similarities and differences between responses. All this was done through a graphical representation of initial codes that were matched into manageable second order themes (Gioia et al. 2013). From the initial coding of six interviews, it was first extracted that participants talked about some transformational changes that are at the verge of implementation, and their non-compatibility with the grass root level realities. Employees show passive acceptance/self-induced silence for multiple self-stakes that is innately a resistant behavior evidenced in existing literature. Following is the brief description of the initial four themes:

Transformational changes

It has been observed that all the participants were of the common viewpoint that transformational changes are taking place in school education department that are either in the initial stages or about to take place. Although, both the frequency and impact of change is increasing, however, when they were asked about the organizational changes in their department they said:

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“In my age fellow group 23 to 35 yrs. employees are enthusiastic for changes. They are very frequent for last few years. Although in government sector things are not easy. Environment is not conducive to implement policy changes.” P1 (AEO: Assistant Education officer)

“Now young AEO’s are being hired for surveillance. Modifications in curriculum and school administrative system are taking place.” P2 (AEO)

Cognitive appraisal-coping potential

It is observed that employees are unable to cope with the changes fully due to the perceived gap between policy, resources, lack of coordination between stake holders and lack of social support from organization. As observed in the following narratives:

“Yes, meetings take place, but they give us instructions and rebuke us... So why should I speak and make them my enemy”. P4 (AEO)

“Hierarchy is very rigid. The messages from secretariat take too long to reach bottom line. And then we are forced to implement them over night. Sometimes we are required to do window dressing, I know it is wrong but what can we do?” P2 (AEO)

Passive acceptance of change

Employees show silent attitude towards change process either through quiescence and acquiesce or through defensive silence, when they are unable to cope with the management threats and circumstances (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). As observed through these narratives, when they face critical situations, they choose to remain quiet, reluctantly accept the orders, go with the flow or wait for the things to work out themselves:

“In the room full of trumpeters, who will pay heed to the voice of weak? So, let the things be as they are happening.” P3(TEACHER)

“There is centralization here ... When you say a lot, you are forced to leave the station, or risk ... and being a female it’s the biggest threat for all of us.” P1(AEO)

“Look we must implement the orders of superiors by hook or by crook, we can’t ensure the actual output, but we can satisfy the people on the top through books (records). The new entrants like me when join the organization are enthusiastic but once they accept the norms, they find it better to obey the orders” P5 (DEO: Deputy Education Officer)

Behavioral circumplex

Based on personal traits and experience employees have different attitude towards change. Some are passive showing disengagement or acceptance and some are still hopeful and proactive towards future change success. Gender and job security are amongst the important personal factors that determine employees’ behavior towards change. As, most of the employees in school education sector are females. As depicted in these narratives:

“We don’t have the choice to speak out. If government itself is not acting logically in bringing irrelevant changes that have no compatibility with stakeholders, how can we act logically in front of a big fish? They are permanent employees they don’t let us take any initiative. But they can fire us by making any excuse in case of discourse over change implementation”. P4 (AEO: A contractual employee)

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“Education sector is considered to be the most suitable profession for females in our country, we being young with 18 years of qualification can and want to do a lot to serve the county, but we have our own reservations we cannot bring forth the realities in meetings to make the clerks our enemy, you know this chauvinistic society (explained a bad experience with a male administrator)”. AEO P6

Discussion on emerging themes

Through the initial pilot interviews, mixed behavioral reactions are observed amongst employees towards transformational changes. The expression of acceptance is somehow notable amongst all participants. The apparent reasons are their reservations for job security as females (five out of six participants are female), centralized administration and a fear to abide by the orders. Respondents were found to be innately proactive for betterment of the education sector and resistant towards impractical changes, but they show official acceptance of the policies to cope with the circumstances enforced upon them. This non-confrontational resistance is observed to be jeopardizing the purpose of educational sector reforms, and the productivity of employees at work. It is an alarming situation for the policy makers and change agents, as this will hinder the strategic success of transformational changes. Further, this research emphasizes the need of employees’ involvement in the formulation of major changes that can optimize the strategic output and proactive solutions to the problems at grassroot level.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide (Pilot testing)

- To what extent you think changes happen here?
- What type of changes are more frequent?
- Which change is happening or going to happen soon that you think will have an impact upon your routine work here?
- How you give your opinion to the management for change that can be helpful for improvement here?
- Do you think that the management really listen to your suggestions and include them in their new endeavors?
- What do you think to what extent this change will affect your work routine?
- If you don’t feel good about a change news, do you let the others know about it so that it can be stopped?
- What if, you share your experience or with others and do you think it will have impact upon the management?
- How do you define your goals and organizational goals, do they have any common grounds?
- What if you don’t like the change news, but it’s an order how will you make it possible?
- What suggestions would you like to give to the management that will be helpful for the change implementation?