Reframing Resistance to Change

by

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Introduction

Change has become ubiquitous in a world seeming to spin at faster and faster rates of complex technological speed. Not only is change a natural force inherent in all aspects and phases of life, but so has it become a devised activity presumed to accelerate or change the course of human affairs. Organizational life has become a special arena for planned change efforts as business navigates increasingly uncertain and dynamic global waters.

Organizations face various types of internal and external challenges, often reshaping their structure, workforce names and numbers, culture, marketing strategies, and identity, all in efforts to manage those challenges, whether perceived as threats or opportunities. When the likely outcomes of change efforts can affect market share, employee morale, productivity, innovation, community opinion, and the very continued existence of these organizations, much is at stake. Yet various estimates put the failure rate of change efforts overall as between 60 and 90%.

Embarking upon change efforts inevitably invokes risk.

Embedded within organizations are the individuals who comprise the “organization”, those various people who demand change, seek to facilitate it, and bear the brunt of the price exacted by efforts to change. Much has been studied and written about how to design and manage successful change efforts and yet the problems of implementing change continue on a significant scale. Dealing with the inevitable human component – often reduced to and labeled as “resistance” – is invariably addressed to some extent, but from widely divergent perspectives. Yet, those analyses and exhortations to specific practices have not yet successfully reduced the overall failure rates. Something seems to be missing.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many members experience an appreciable measure of discontent and suffering during organizational change efforts. How might such a strong
emotional context affect the success of the overall organizational change efforts? How well does any individual function when swamped with negative emotions? Brain research amply demonstrates how strong emotions can seriously constrain access to our more advanced cognitive functions that, when used, offer many more options than the fight or flight reactions associated with the older limbic system. Are there ways to work with natural human emotions in a manner that might be better for people and that would also more effectively facilitate the desired changes? What missing analyses or perspectives might illuminate the full range of human dimensions involved in change, and thus offer a truly effective methodology for creating sustainable change for individuals and organizations both?

The context of this study utilizes case histories of a situation in which an individual made a successful personal change that allowed them to embrace or implement an organizational change. The purpose is to assess what principles or practices were most instrumental for these individuals to effectively work with their own natural resistance in ways that supported organizational changes. A further hope is to contribute to collegial dialogue in assessing how similar constructive influences might provide a more robust and promising future roadmap for change agents in organizations. At stake is money, time, energy, organizational sustainability, and the very welfare of people – the most valuable and precious asset for any organization.

Literature Review

What follows in this section of project proposal is a profile of the general inquiries or lenses through which other researchers have approached the topic of change resistance and the potential for working with resistance to support organizational change. After having developed an analysis from the gathered study data, this researcher may broaden the literature review to include additional findings and include them appropriately in the Masters project document.
An array of differing perspectives inform the topical arenas of change resistance and what it takes to create sustainable change. While many authors agree that resistance is a natural phenomenon and can be utilized for positive benefit of the organizational change efforts, there are significant distinctions in the tone and direction that such specialists have taken.

**Change Resistance**

Two faculty members of Spain’s University of Valencia undertook a literature review and an empirical quantitative study on the topic of resistance to change. While essentially ascribing to Rumelt’s (1995) basic theory of five categories of sources that create resistance, Pardo del Val and Martinez Fuentes (2003) also modified his original work by adding other authors’ ideas along with their own (¶ 8). These blended ideas are described and occasionally quoted below directly from the work of Pardo del Val and Martinez Fuentes.

They termed the first category generally as “a wrong initial perception” of the need for change, precipitated by “distorted perception, interpretation barriers, and vague strategic priorities” (¶ 9). A second category of barriers to change involves “a low motivation for change” (¶ 10). They referenced Rumelt (1995) when detailing such causes as dissatisfaction with trade-off costs and one change compensating for the lack of another, such that it “brings losses” in some part of the system. Additionally the authors mentioned Lorenzo’s (2000) notion of “past failures” as a source of diminished motivation, ….and Waddell and Sohal’s (1998) work describing “different interests among employees and management”(¶ 10). The “lack of a creative response” is their third category whose causes are prompted by factors such as “fast and complex environmental changes” – a perspective taken by both Ansoff (1990) and Rumelt (1995) – by a “reactive mind-set” (Rumelt, 1995), as well as “inadequate strategic vision or lack of clear
commitment of top management to changes”, insights developed by Rumelt (1995) and by the team of Waddell and Sohal (1998) (¶ 11).

Their fourth category comprises various forms of “resistance and inertia” during implementation (¶ 12). Such difficulties can involve cultural, political, and social dynamics affecting acceptance of the changes, as well as disagreements about what constitutes the problem and appropriate solutions, and non-alignment of new change values with the existing organizational values. Pardo del Val and Martinez Fuentes drew on the work of numerous other authors in addition to Rumelt when they collated aggregated the various causes that belong in this fifth category of Rumelt’s categories of barriers to change. Beer and Eisenstat (1996), Burdett (1999), Hutt, Walker, and Frankwick (1995), Kanter (1989), Kruger (1996), Maurer (1996), and Rumelt (1995) all made mention of some form of “leadership inaction” as inhibiting change efforts. This category is made even more robust by contributions from Hannan and Freeman (1984), Rumelt (1995), Greve, and Hedberg (1978) when with these authors pointing to “embedded routines” as a large deterrent to the possibility of change taking root. Rumelt (1995) writes further that “collective action problems” and a “capabilities gap” erode implementation of change, while Maurer (1996) and Reichers, Wanous, and Austin (1997) cited “cynicism” as a significant force (¶ 13).

The authors identified the first three groups-categories as forms of resistance likely to occur in earlier stages of change efforts, while the last two groups-categories present barriers when the change efforts have rolled out. Their subsequent quantitative study attempted to link observations with this theoretical framework.

Patrick (2001) identified six layers of resistance to change and provided process models to facilitate forward movement through the phases of change. Each of these layers of resistance to
change arises in the context of three questions addressed in sequence throughout the change efforts. The initial assessment and analysis provokes the question – “what to change” – along with the corresponding layer of resistance described as “lack of agreement on the problem”. Visioning and final decisions require answers to an inquiry – “what to change to” – and may surface three layers of resistance at this stage: “lack of agreement on a possible direction for a solution….lack of agreement that the solution will truly address the problem…. [and] concern that the solution will lead to new undesirable side effects”. The implementation stage prompts one to ask: “How to make the change happen?” Two layers of resistance usually occur at this phase: “Lack of a clear path around obstacles blocking the solution…. [and] lack of follow-through after agreement to proceed with the solution” (first table). These processes are designed to help surface conflict and to make creative use of the inevitable resistance by generating improvements in the objectives or implementation of change strategies (¶ 10). Patrick is not alone in perceiving the usefulness of “resistance” in paving ways toward more sustainable change options.

Eschewing linear, mechanistic thinking and radically reconstructing our paradigms by applying principles from systems, chaos, and complexity theories is the portal through which Peterson (2004) advocated that we reconsider our change efforts. He lauded Cooperrider’s post-modern practice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) that dramatically challenged the Lewin’s Action-Research paradigm (¶ 15). By asserting that energy is generated when people engage in the process of discerning and accelerating what is already positively working, Cooperrider devised a natural alternative to change resistance. Change processes can offer a “focused space within which self-organization flourishes and enables a project or change to develop and grow
effectiveness” (¶ 20). It is within the context of “emergent processes” that that we will “thrive”, Peterson believes (¶ 30).

Another assertion of AI’s power to unleash “a generative frame seeking and finding images of the possible rather than scenes of disaster and despair” appeared in this quote by J. M. Watkins appearing alongside a dynamic model named The Appreciative Inquiry 5D Spiral of Development (as cited in Voyle, n.d.). Vanson (n.d.) correlated similar core approaches of two different fields when she wrote that “AI and NLP [Neuro-Linguistic Programming] do not focus on changing people, rather these schools of thought invite people to engage in building the kinds of organizations they want to live in…” (¶ 14).

Bader’s (2004) dissertation inquiry into employee resistance focused on individual differences and perceptions of fairness (abstract), while Choi and Price (2005) conducted a quantitative study looking at how values and abilities might correspond with commitment to change and actual implementation behavior in change efforts (abstract). Participation in change strategies was pursued with an eye on its various potential affects on resistance, distinguishing between input on process matters and decision control in the form of veto power, in Lines’ (2004) quantitative study and subsequent journal article (abstract and ¶ 6).

Atkinson (2005) insisted that “the wall of resistance could be knocked down and the benefits of change realized quickly” if only the drivers of the change efforts chose to do so (¶ 6). While change agents would be well advised, he noted, to initially discover a resistant individual’s reasons and speak to such concerns (¶ 10), he judged this as a “time and resource hungry” tactic (¶ 12). He stressed that “persuasion is the mode for change” as he instructs the practitioner to “sell the benefits” (¶ 12, 10).
“Explain[ing] why people should want to change” (final ¶) is similarly espoused by Palmer (2004) amidst a context of addressing readiness questions and building agreement to change (final ¶). He maintained that organizational change should only be undertaken if the assessed possibility for success is 85% or higher (¶ 5). Balestracci (2003) exhibited influences from Juran and Deming, which posit a ratio of 85/15 or 96/4 [respectively] likelihood of problems being caused by organizational factors compared to individual responsibility (¶ 20). Yet he also ascribed to a strong concept of “victim behavior” that he claimed causes “much of the resistance encountered in change efforts” (abstract).

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) formulated a Six Change Approaches model. According to their analysis, reasons for resistance include: “parochial self-interest, misunderstanding, low tolerance to change, and different assessments of the situation” (¶ 1). They offered six approaches that might reflect a wide range on a continuum, one end being calling for “education and communication” and while the other end being escalates to “explicit and implicit coercion” (¶ 2).

The change leadership focus in Folaron’s feature article seeks to address readiness for change and building in behavioral consequences (abstract). His models assist leaders in assessing and moving people through the different phases of change (¶ 12, graphic). Working with peoples’ emotional responses and needs is critical (¶ 15) and sustainable change is best achieved through creating and using the right motivational strategies (¶ 23).

Reframing Resistance to Change

Anderson and Anderson (2002, April) perceived resistance as much more than a good, natural, and healthy hard-wired response of a healthy system in fighting disease to maintain
They believe that, “Working with resistance competently will always lead to increased results. You should never try to overcome resistance; instead you should learn to nurture it, use it and benefit from it” (¶ 2). Various core psychological issues can be involved in peoples’ resistance, including: “power/control….competency….inclusion….justice….being liked….[and] safety” and declared that it is leaders’ responsibility to help people through those issues (2002, May, ¶ 11, 13).

Gestalt principles offer a unique framing of “resistance” as a “response that keeps the system from moving forward because something is not being taken into account” (Spector, personal communication, February 14, 2005). Within a similar mindset, Kegan and Lahey (2001) posited that we create a certain “immunity to change” when we hold implicit competing commitments, unable to move forward because of this internal conflict. It is our “Big assumptions” are invariably unspoken and unchallenged, yet that hold us in a stuck state until we learn to surface them and work to disprove them with counter-examples and through our own experimentation.

Piderit (2000) bolstered the case for “retiring the phrase ‘resistance to change’” as other authors have likewise argued, and noted illustrated—a significant philosophical stance taken by critical theorists and labor scholars when they “argue that the interests of managers should not be privileged over the interests of workers when studying organizational change” (¶ 3). Resistance is a mechanistic concept borrowed from physics and was used as a construct by Lewin (1952) in a time before the new sciences proved that living systems function in non-linear, dynamic ways (¶ 7). The term “resistance” has come to mean anything that managers want it to mean, is frequently used to obscure “valid employee concerns”, and it negates the very real struggles of people “to act in accordance with their own ethical principles” and internal values (¶ 15, 8, 12).
Further, Piderit claimed that “disagreement and disconfirmation of expectations” are critical facilitators of new organizational learning (¶ 46).

Like Piderit, Manki also critiqued Lewin’s “normative description of workers’ seemingly natural tendency to resist” a reductionist position that, in focusing on the individual, ignores power issues and historical labor dynamics (¶ 1). Manki approached the topic of resistance from a decidedly postmodern lens with strong traditions of Foucault in analyzing power, privilege, and discourse. In this view, “resistance” serves a managerialist agenda rife with simplistic assumptions and presumes a static state of pejorative practices on the part of employees (¶ 1, 3). This construct also restricts deeper inquiry and denies workers the notion of their own rightful agency in work affairs (¶ 2, 5). This was a complex philosophical treatise combined with a qualitative study.

Jarrett (2004), Bast (2004), and Vanson (n.d.) all shared a significant theme when asserting that part of the problem with resistance resides with the change consultant. Jarrett (2004) posed the issue as the need to manage counter-resistance or counter-transference during the change process (abstract). He suggested solutions that involve using a psychodynamic perspective that seeks to “extend the consultant’s bandwidth” with the “capacity for self-reflection, emotional intelligence, stamina and competence” (abstract, ¶ 40). Causes of resistance include: leadership failures, individual reasons, political and inter-group dynamics, environmental factors, and primitive anxiety and fear (¶ 4-6, 8). Accepting resistance as “another truth” will begin a radical and essential reframing of this misused concept (¶ 42).

Vanson viewed the change consultant as vulnerable to the “expert ego state”, apt to listen just long enough to wrap the client issues into a neatly prescribed model, and to use the requisite skills to inform the client about the right fix (¶ 8). Also a Lewin critic, Bast presented resistance
as an ideological and biased means of maintaining privileges for a particular group (¶ 1). She viewed resistance as residing on both sides of the coach-consultant relationship and urged coaches to a “system of mutual influence” (final ¶, ¶ 5). Assuming the observer role of an anthropologist would help us see and listen into another’s perceptions and values, marking out our own views as different and not to be projected onto the client (¶ 12). It is mutual collaboration for generative “learning to learn” that is the goal, rather than some preoccupation with a one-sided construct that presents a false barrier to real change.

Dilts (1996) offered a compelling model for change drawn from the anthropologist sensibilities of Gregory Bateson. Dilts’ Neuro-Logical levels provides a set of “nested processes” in which “our brain structure, language, and social systems form natural hierarchies or levels of processes” (¶ 8, 17). “Clearly, each level of change involves progressively more of the system…” (¶ 17). This model has special implications for those situations in which employees are deemed to be resisting certain changes and are approached at a lower level of behavioral adaptation. If the issue is simply a lack of knowledge of effective behavior, such an approach may work fine. But if the concern involves an internal conflict among higher levels of values, beliefs, or identity, then continued attempts at behavioral change will force the individual into a distressing state of internal incongruence. For change to be sustainable, Dilts maintained that issues need to be initially addressed at the highest level at which they appear before further changes can be effected at the lower levels.

It is particularly fitting to close this literature review with Freud. Attributed as the originator of the term “resistance”, it appears that he created this notion as a concept to express his frustration with his patients when they did not answer his questions or tell him everything. He posited that this was a conscious act of “resistance”. It was only in his later work that he drew a
radically different conclusion. He later acknowledged that “ego defenses were unconscious, outside the patient’s awareness…[and] resistance was now understood to be not an obstacle to treatment, but an extremely important pathway to the patient’s unconscious” (Starr, 1994, p. 92).

With so many differing approaches, contextual frameworks, and philosophical theses in play, is it any wonder that the application of effective change management in the matter of resistance has been so spotty? Vast distances separate those whose fundamental advice is to knock down people’s resistance from those who choose to befriend it and utilize it for the powerful key they claim it to be. This study intends to explore six specific examples of successful work with resistance, to excavate potential gems of wisdom.

Method

The purpose of this study is to assess what principles or practices have been most instrumental in facilitating personal, sustainable change in individuals’ work situations by working with resistance. The phenomena of successful personal change methods within organizational mandates will be studied from a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory utilizes a unique approach that blends both observational and interpretative tools. The researcher seeks to “gain a dense conceptual analysis about the empirical problem” being studied. A benefit of conducting research in this manner is that the process of “synthesizing, analysing [sic], and conceptualizing qualitative data to construct theory” is generated from the data itself (Charmaz, 2003, p. 82).

This qualitative research method is especially appropriate for this particular study since it offers a holistic blend of both “positivist and interpretive elements” as a lens through which new insights about this phenomenon may be gained (p. 85). Systematic procedures, hermeneutic traditions, and recognition of the ubiquitous reality of researcher influence and interpretation,
together form a nexus from which to understand the subjective experience of an organizational member who has successfully made personal changes in response to organizational needs. This specific arena of change is one in which contradictory theories and practices exist, suggesting that current research has yet to provide adequate illumination of the full range of relevant issues and a practical basis for more feasible methods. There is great need to obtain better insights – directly from those involved – that may offer a contribution to the creation of more meaningful, effective, and sustainable organizational change practices.

The qualitative research design will consist of a formal semi-structured interview process in which the researcher will ask six selected participants to answer certain pre-defined questions. True to the form of the grounded theory approach, it is anticipated that both interview dynamics and emerging data will prompt additional clarifying questions to the participant. The interview may itself be modified to fit the participant’s unique experiences and to follow various informative threads that may emerge.

*Data analysis*

Participants will be interviewed individually. Each interview will be recorded in its entirety, with the permission of the participant, and will be transcribed by the researcher or a third party transcriber. The researcher will review the data, develop codes, and define emerging themes and relevant categories. The researcher will pay particular attention to patterns that may develop and apply additional codes and categories accordingly, if applicable. In all cases the researcher will deeply listen to and focus on the emerging data.

Data and field notes from each interview will be coded and categorized. Each interview will be analyzed separately. Three interviews will be conducted initially and then analyzed. If in
this process it is also determined that additional questions might improve the quality of the data for the remaining three interviews, some questions may be added or changed.

Upon completion of all six interviews, they will be cross-analyzed. Each of the participants will be described and quotes taken from their interviews will be applied to illustrate common themes and responses. Data will be compared and contrasted, potentially allowing conclusions to be drawn and a hypothesis to be formed for later evaluation.

*Site*

The site(s) of the interviews for this study will be at a location suitable for the participant. This may possibly be at their office, or at the researcher’s office. Another feasible option might be by telephone with the participant and the researcher in their respective offices or homes.

*Sample*

The sample will be six individuals, not necessarily from the same organization, who have recently gone through significant organizational change in which they were able to successfully effect their own personal changes. The criteria for the participants will include: they must have completed a phase of significant organizational change at least six months ago; perceive a personal change they made that is still in practice; and be able to speak about their change with some degree of self-awareness and impressions of what may have helped them make this change. These criteria, as stated, are necessary so that the topic of sustainable personal change can be adequately and richly explored.

*Access and Sample Selection*

Participants will be sought through colleagues with whom I am familiar or through their networks. To date, one Senior HR colleague has offered to assist me in finding research participants and I have made similar recent requests of other colleagues. I will accept inquiries
for participation directly from referred individuals as well as from my colleagues and their
associates, via my email address or home office phone. I will confirm that each individual meets
the criteria for this study and place those who do on a selection list. Those who do not meet the
criteria will be advised accordingly and thanked for their inquiry.

Informed Consent

Human participants will be protected in accordance with the ethical standards taken from
the APA Code of Conduct (1992). Informed consent documents emphasizing confidentiality will
be given to each participant and discussed in detail prior to the interview. The researcher will
give the participant time to read such documents, will verify that the participant understands the
documents and the research process, and will allow time to sign the consent forms. The
researcher will assign pseudonyms (participant numbers) to each participant to insure
confidentiality and anonymity. All code notes and participant identifications will remain
anonymous. (Refer to Appendix B.)

Interviews

Data collection will consist of in-depth semi-structured interviews with six individuals who
have successfully effected their own personal changes during recent significant organizational
change. Each participant will be interviewed once with the possibility of a follow up phone call
for clarification or expansion of a thought or view expressed by the participant. All questions
will be open-ended and will be asked in a non-leading neutral manner that allows the participants
to express themselves in their own words. (See Appendix C for an outline of the primary and
possible follow up questions.)

In the interviews, the participants will be asked to describe their personal change
experience during the organizational change efforts. They will be asked to reflect on what
specific change practices they encountered and of those, which ones supported them and which ones did not work for them. What motivated them to make their personal change and how they were able to accomplish that. They will also be asked what was most significant about their personal change efforts and how their personal experience affected their relationship to the broader organizational change efforts. They will be asked to give concrete examples and stories that illustrate their perceptions and evidence of changes.

Each interview will be recorded, with the written permission of the participant and will be transcribed by the researcher or a third party transcriber. Field notes will be recorded at the end of each interview.

*Researcher Bias*

This researcher has a bias toward organizational change efforts that utilize data from employees’ responses to improve the change process for both individuals and the organization. Meaningful research requires an attitude of openness during the work to elicit the highest quality data and the most authentic findings. This particular grounded theory methodology offers the opportunity to begin the work from an explicitly acknowledged set of “sensitizing concepts” that are present for any researcher, regardless of the method chosen (Charmaz, 2003, p. 85). This method’s process demands an astute ability and intention to perceive the participant’s experience from the inside out, constantly evaluating the “fit between their initial research interests and the emerging data”, and adjusting the process to follow new themes deemed crucial by the participants themselves (p. 87). This researcher is steeped in traditions of discerning another person’s lifeworld with extensive experience in mediation, facilitation, consulting, training, and coaching, and will naturally continue such practice in this study.
Discussion

As with any research, various limits to this study exist. The sample size and procedures for participant selection are appropriate for qualitative research. The six individuals will not constitute a statistically valid sample nor will they be chosen in a manner that is representative of any particular group of people. The findings from this study will likely comprise a rich conceptual analysis that may or may not lead to future theory creation, but by itself will not result in a developed theory (p.109).

Conclusion

It is the hope of the researcher that by gathering and analyzing data from those who have successfully made personal changes in the context of organizational needs and change efforts, new insights can be gained that will be of value to organizations, individuals and change agents.
Purpose and Method

This study assessed what motivates and sustains people when they must entertain taking
difficult actions to implement or comply with an organizational mandate with which they
disagree or have concerns. It also assessed what principles or practices have been most
instrumental in addressing personal resistance in order to allow effective and sustainable change.
Six participants who had such an experience were interviewed.

Each of the six main questions, along with its own group of related sub-questions, forms a
“set” that follows a natural sequence or arc of inquiry. This chronological arc begins with a
macro inquiry about the early stage of the mandate effort [Q1] and proceeds to drill down more
closely into participant experiences [Q2], and motivations and efforts [Q3]. The last three
questions then provide a natural transition into a more macro analysis of future change needs
[Q4], significance of the change effort [Q5], and conclude with asking advice for people facing
their own personal change needs and for those leading change mandates [Q6].
**Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant code + demographic</th>
<th>Organizational title/position</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Time since change</th>
<th>Situational Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1 – White female</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>Hi-tech</td>
<td>2+ years</td>
<td>Long-time organizational member charged to help implement forced bottom 10% performance ranking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 – White female</td>
<td>Learning Expert</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>18 year organizational veteran newly promoted, then position eliminated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 – White female</td>
<td>Clinic Physician</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>2+ years</td>
<td>Successful specialist faculty member moving into clinical practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4 – White male</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Co-principal with retiring partner, facing succession issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 – African American male</td>
<td>Sr. Mgr Internal Communications</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>1+ year</td>
<td>Newly hired into previous subsidiary now divested as independent entity. New slate of execs and leaders restructuring for financial viability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 – African American female</td>
<td>Mgr Physician Education</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Charged to additionally serve recently acquired fourth hospital campus and cut total budget by 20%.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Three major categories surfaced from the aggregated data results related to the central research question. What were the requirements for sustainable personal change as a resourceful response when resistance to an organizational change mandate is an issue? Two of these categories represent specific contexts for the varied complex situational factors that each research participant faced. The first of these identifies the initial manner in which the change mandate was announced as well as how these initial efforts were launched. The second identifies the culture of that change environment and the profound affects that each participant experienced as they confronted their own resistance and sought a path through their difficulties. The third and final category identifies the unique journey that each participant devised as both an inner and an external response to the organizational mandated change.

These categories formed the ground from which six germane themes gradually appeared to assist in understanding the aggregated results. Like filters, they caused particular aspects to come into high relief or awareness. The themes correspond to various stages of the change mandate as each participant lived through it and grappled with their own feelings and responses. These themes emerged in answers to the six primary questions along with their corresponding structured sub-questions. Each theme is therefore tracked and presented in this results section wherever it was evoked by its relevant question set.

The emergent themes are:

- Participants experienced a **sudden shift due to an organizational change mandate**, with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.
• Participants experienced **little to no internal support** to enact relevant and necessary personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

• Participants confronted their situation by **facing the realities** of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons; acknowledging the aspect of choice; considering trade-offs; and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

• A **commitment to continuous learning** fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

• **Role clarification and boundaries** provided a protective tool for navigating difficult interpersonal and business transactions.

• **Valuing authenticity** allowed participants to take a genuine stance, exercise honesty rather than game-playing, and affirm these values by their behavior.

Reported below are the various themes that emerged. Both the main question [for example: Q1] and its sub-questions [for example: 1-1] are listed in each mini-section for easy reference. A brief introduction follows each list of main question and sub-questions, followed by a report of thematic results emerging from that particular set of main and sub-questions.
Q1 Tell me about the context of your organization’s change efforts and about your own personal change experience.

- 1-1: What were the main goals for this organizational change effort?
- 1-2: How were you and your role at that time affected by this organizational mandate?
- 1-3: When and how did you first become aware of the need to make personal changes within this larger effort?
- 1-4: What were your responses to this perceived need to make personal changes?

Introduction and context for participant stories

Various similarities and differences exist among the diverse participants’ experience. Some mandate goals were unclear, while others focused on financial viability, preserving the cultural status quo, or unraveling years of existing but non-aligned ways of doing things.

Four participants [P1, P4, P5, and P6] were put in the role of implementing a change mandate with which they either strongly disagreed or had major concerns. These individuals found unique ways to navigate their dilemmas. The other two participants [P2 and P3] lost status through the mandated change; P2, because her new role was suddenly eliminated, and P3 in a migration from a familial culture to one of strictly business. Of these, P2 stuck to her values of continuous learning and found the courage to pursue a new path as an entrepreneur consultant. P3 had to “suck it up” to abide the organizational culture while she tried to create what she wanted. All participants expressed shock, surprise, or a sense of daunting challenge when becoming aware of the personal changes they would need to enact in order to survive the mandated one. Initial responses to this need ran the gamut of negativity, loss, paranoia, insecurity, denial, confusion, vulnerability, and dispiritedness.
Most experienced little if any internal support as they began to confront the personal and organizational challenges. Only one person [P4] was in a formalized leadership position and uniquely able to consciously construct a supportive and effective organizational climate in which to work his personal changes as part of the overall mandate. Thematically, all participants but one [P4] experienced a sudden shift brought on by an organizational mandate, although for P4 it was emerging issues and his recognition of the need that created the mandate. For two participants [P5 and P6] some planning was involved. In only one case [P4] was there early attention to planning, needs assessment, possible ramifications, resources, and stakeholder conversations with buy-in.

Theme: Participants experienced a sudden shift due to organizational change mandate with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.

P1 and P2 reported the suddenness of the organizational change effort being announced, while P3 underwent a sudden shift in culture when she left academia for a much more business environment and discovered an implicit form of mandate. In the case of P1, “It was pretty much sprung on people at the eleventh hour. There wasn’t a plan in place.” There were no stated goals or problems to be solved through this new performance forced ranking system, which concerned this HR Manager. Leadership announced this new method a few months before the annual reviews, with no apparent assessment of how it would work or the ramifications of such short notice before implementation. P1 believed it was wrong for the culture and wrongly implemented.
P2’s position as a newly promoted Learning Expert was declared not needed by one superintendent, as he eliminated such newly created positions in his area, effectively reversing recent restructuring efforts. Mixed perspectives, confusion, and legal considerations stalemated resolution on this issue for six weeks until these employees were finally let go with severance pay.

Likewise affected by a sudden shift, P3 had migrated from a specialist faculty position in “familial” academia into a “male-dominated” healthcare clinic where “everyone did that kind of practice regardless of specialty training or not.” Once there, she was “back to being the bottom rung…” and being checked out as a temporary employee. She acknowledged that she was “not even on the partner track, and asking to do things differently than they were used to doing” when she asked to work part-time in order to start a family. The de facto organizational mandate in this culture was to maintain the status quo. She reported that she was told, “Shut up. Be quiet. Uh, look, you know, this group has never, you know, this group needs more female members’, and this was a man who called, and said, ‘you know, you’re not going to make it easy for them to get more.’ ” Even though P3 felt scared and scolded, she also realized that this group member was trying to do her a favor by orienting her to this new culture, albeit in a manner that she did not appreciate as being supportive.

The thematic aspect of little to no planning differed somewhat in the experiences of P5 and P6. Each of these participants was asked to implement organizational mandates that started with sudden disruptions of existing conditions with little to no advance notice to the workforce at large. But such mandates involved more idea generation and/or planning efforts than for P1-P3.

In P5’s case he had been hired to serve as the senior internal communications manager for a previous subsidiary, newly divested, which needed to transform itself “into being financially
viable for the first time in about a decade.” The “new executive team devised a new strategy…. bolstering revenues and, you know, paring down expenses…. I mean like to the bone.” In order to accomplish a mandated $100M cut in operating expenses – for a $3 billion company with 10% profits – this team put in place a new policy that limited benefits to full-time employees. Next they “revised the stature of approximately 80% of the employees who were hourly to make them part-time…. almost sleight-of-hand” to deny them benefits and save money. Quite atypical for retail, this workforce comprised many with 20+ years service. “So a lot took umbrage in particular to both the decision and the way that it came about, because they felt, after their exhibition of such loyalty for such a long time...” that such actions were “take-aways” and a “slap in the face”. Having been recruited pre-mandate into a company touted as “people-centric”, P5 witnessed a huge cultural shift during these initial change actions. He saw these actions as a broken covenant and began to feel uncomfortable, guarded, and vulnerable himself. He began to look for other work, although he actually remained in this role for the rest of the year.

P6 encountered an abrupt role shift six months after her healthcare organization acquired its fourth campus, which expanded her job across all campuses even as she was told to cut her entire budget by 20%. The management staff began to merge but not the medical staff, creating a nightmare due to lack of structure, different P&Ps and standards, duplication of committees, and the fact that some medical personnel at the fourth campus were not even board certified. Additional challenges like low morale at this acquired campus, bad press, and public bashing of the parent hospital turned her job into twelve hour-days of constant efforts to strategically prioritize every action. After two years she reported, “I cannot maintain the present level of work. I’ve been so overwhelmed for so long and there’s no light at the end of the tunnel.” A
major factor in the resulting overwork and stress was the fact that, “There was no conversation about additional staff, even interim.”

Only P4 benefited from a different initiation and pacing of the mandate that organically arose when he and his business partner began succession planning for their small construction firm. Forced to hear feedback on his unsuitability to helm the business, he brought in external resources to guide the unraveling of old ways of doing things. Gradually he faced his own blind spots and sought coaching help. “We could bring in someone to run me or I could look at my disruptive behavior.”

Q2 What kinds of change practices did you encounter within the organizational change efforts? Which practices supported you in your individual change efforts and which did not work for you?

- 2-1 How were you approached by people in charge of leading the change efforts?
- 2-2 How were you approached by people to whom you reported regarding these change efforts?
- 2-3 What kind of approaches or change practices supported you to make those personal changes?
- 2-4 Which approaches did not support you? What was missing for you? What did you need? What would have supported you better?

Introduction

To a large extent all but one of the participants [P4] experienced a dearth of organizational support. Virtually non-existent were any helpful or even preexisting change management practices, facilitative consultant help, plans that acknowledged the human factors in any change
process, adequate resources to get through the extra change efforts, or conversations that assisted
the participant in navigating the formal mandate or their own inner process. The usual manner of
announcing the mandate was a memo or email from “corporate” – the CEO or an upper level
executive – declaring that the change will happen or is already under way. Stakeholder
collection, input, or buy-in appears not to have been sought and was reported not to have
occurred. Conversations that did occur – with noted exceptions – were held in groups and not 1:1
with any intent to offer personal support. P4’s formal position and personal inclination allowed
him to drive his firm’s change efforts with multiple sources of support which he actively
solicited.

Theme: Participants experienced little to no internal support to enact relevant and necessary
personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

P3 recalls being approached by someone in her new clinic group, a man whom she had
known “quite well” as “a good friend from academia” and thought that “he would actually
facilitate my entry into the group much more than he actually did.” Puzzled and wondering if she
had misread the nature of their friendship, she goes on to say that, “…he actually, by stepping
back so far to my mind [to present himself as impartial], to some extent gave me more rope to
screw myself up a bit… I think his silence spoke volumes for folks.” She repeated her earlier
assertion about the feedback she kept getting from everyone, “…look, just keep your mouth shut
and work and just say yes to everything and just do everything they want… and it’s not that they
want or don’t want you, like or dislike you. It’s not important. It’s more they just want people
they can work with.” When queried about internal support, P3’s only reply was, “Hhmm.” She
later summarized this culture by stating, “You got to be a robot once you come to work.”
The pressure to just go along was also reflected when P1 reported that the few group discussions about the mandate weren’t “…so much about how we thought about it personally, it was more focused on our roles, how we were going to help the organization implement it.” But, “There were a lot of water cooler discussions… a lot of negative discussions.” Trust issues surfaced in this organization as the forced bottom 10% performance ranking mandate created competition and tensions among team members. Shortly after this mandate was implemented a layoff occurred in which many of the bottom 10% employees were, in fact, let go. Regarding change practices, she reported, “I think there were some tools and some practices that were given to managers… probably speaking notes and some semblance of a change management plan.” She wishes the leaders “had just spent some time talking about whether or not this was the right thing to do… involving the right people to figure [it] out… ensuring that we could answer why we’re doing this, how it’s going to benefit the company, what problem we’re trying to solve…” and to involve the workers “in the design.”

P2 faced two tiers of non-support, the first of which “set up a sense of conflict” and “loss of communication”. After a recognizable 18-year track record in her organization, she was hired into a specialist position in a different area with no supervising team leader in place. After one was hired, this new person told P2 that she didn’t want P2 and would not have hired her into this higher position. Despite colleagues attempting to clarify what P2 “could offer to the organization…” in this more demanding position, the team lead remained adamant that she would not give P2 the increased income. The lead would not distinguish between P2’s former role and her promoted role and did not recognize that P2 possessed “significant[ly] more education” than other team members. P2 experienced these actions as “a breakdown of a change effort.” Her resistance emerged “as soon as I felt that I was being contained at having to be a
very good little girl.” The lead was able to circumvent HR policies. It was after this that P2 was further told that these advanced positions would be eliminated by a higher level person over this area, likewise circumventing the recent change mandate. Missing for her in this situation was working in a culture where she would be “recognized and appreciated”, allowed to “participate… and take action on something.”

Repeating to the question about approaches or change practices, P5 reported, “Well, they brought in lots of ideas.” Then he laughed and went on to elucidate, “I won’t call them practices. There’s not necessarily methodologies with them…but lots of very strident ideas about what needed to take place…” P5 realized that cultural change takes time, but he noted that the timeline for the leaders “was the next quarter’s results.” Regarding the organization’s change approach, he said, “It was actually a very… demanding situation, very stressful… without even a nod toward a realistic perspective…” Despite some good outcomes of this change effort – like more communication, openness, and transparency – “it wasn’t the most supportive environment in which to work. It was actually just the opposite.” At that time he searched for but did not ultimately find a coach, but found external support from colleagues, his girlfriend, and his professional schooling studies. Someone who might have been an internal source of simpatico support was not even seen as accessible by P5 until his exit. Queried about how he overlooked this option, he confessed to feeling guarded about relationships and holding a belief that he had to be self-sustaining. From this experience he had a quantum learning insight when he was later able to realize that this belief reflected a negative inner voice that was not serving him. His current work with a coach is helping him revise this tendency.

Most significantly missing for P6 was any early conversation about resources to manage the mandate and efforts to take the pulse of the employees before and during the mandate’s roll-
out. She complained that top management only recognized the extent of the problems after this year’s organizational survey gave the “lowest scores in history”. When asked about the existence of any form of support or helpful change practices, P6 stated, “I would say absolutely not, absolutely not.” Her ongoing coping strategy was to “really prioritize every single day” in order “to keep my sanity” and “have conversations with my boss…about what I have on my plate.”

P4 reported that in his construction firm there were “No change practices. Nada.” But his experience was clearly the exception as he went on to solicit help in creating a pathway to explore what needed to change, including his own behavior. External consultants helped with project management, site supervision, and coaching. Meetings were held with staff and their input was solicited. Changes soon “ripped through the organization.”

Theme: Participants confronted their situation by facing the realities of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance, personal values, what’s important, weighing pros and cons, acknowledging the aspect of choice, considering trade-offs, and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

P5 wrestled with his acute sense of discomfort when witnessing his new executive team applying a narrow “near ruthless” focus to cost-cut with no regard for the people affected. He spoke about “reconfiguring my thinking… because there were certain aspects of the broader initiative of change of this major transformation that were, in fact, appealing and… I was, in fact, engaged with. So it was sort of like accepting the good with the bad because there were lots of elements as far as driving the culture to be more accountability-based, more high performing.” He acknowledged elements of that other “dark side” that did not fit “my own particular values or ideologies” and affirmed that, “My job is to advocate for the employees and the rank and file…”
keep in mind that we are, in fact, talking about humans here.” Weighing the various factors, he concluded that, “They’re just business people, and hence they have this, you know, singular focus, but that doesn’t necessarily make them evil.”

Most useful to P4 was working with a particular coach who taught him to “take pause and then reengage…”, a process that built a new, higher level of self-awareness. He solicited feedback from his staff and took time in the morning to ask himself, “Who am I willing to be today?” Summarizing, he said, “Everything that I tried worked!”

*Theme:* A commitment to continuous learning fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

P5’s journey marked him as someone willing to undergo personal sacrifice in the service of a greater good, both for the organization and for his own growth. He believed that “all change and all opportunities in all of my employment is, I regard it as a learning opportunity…” which he intended to “incorporate into my knowledge bank…” Drawing from Nietzsche, he quipped that, “…if I can survive under these circumstances, I can survive under many other difficult circumstances…”

*Theme* Participants experienced a sudden shift due to an organizational change mandate, with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.

“Actually, my boss sat down and talked with us and we talked about it…it was that same feeling of, oh, don’t worry about it. You’re not going to need to be over there [fourth campus]
every day [P6].” The message of “not much more work” was the rote response given to expressed concerns, that is until employee survey results surfaced so many serious problems that the VPs could no longer afford to ignore the evidence.

**Q3 What was particularly motivating for you as you pursued your personal change efforts?**

**How were you able to accomplish these changes?**

- 3-1 What changes were the most challenging or difficult for you to undertake? The easiest? Tell me more about that.
- 3-2 How did you deal with these difficulties?
- 3-3 What kept you going when it became difficult, for whatever reasons?
- 3-4 To what do you attribute your success in making these personal changes?

**Introduction**

P1 and P6 found that using role clarification provided an effective strategy to deal with the implementation difficulties. Learning proved to be a compelling draw for P2, P4, and P5, while the other participants chose more personal reasons for hanging in through the tough times. Many had profoundly revelatory experiences when facing the challenges of working their own changes. The power to change one’s circumstances and make conscious choices appeared explicitly in the reports of P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. Sucking it up for the greater good was the sacrifice made by P5, while for P2 it got her the dream life she wanted, and P1 specifically claimed that she did not have to “suck it up”. Most participants found their support systems outside the organization, although P1 and P6 mentioned that the support they received from their immediate boss made a positive difference. The sole example of a different kind of shift, P3 found increased internal support after making her own personal changes.
Theme **Role clarification and boundaries** provided a protective tool for navigating difficult interpersonal and business transactions.

“...when you’ve got hundreds of people coming up to you saying what a ridiculous thing we’re doing, it gets a little old and I personally didn’t want to have to take responsibility or accountability for other peoples’ decisions.” Tired of being scapegoated for this mandate, P1 made clear that she was the messenger for the mandate and one of its implementers, and offered another path of escalation to leadership for those who had strong reactions or suggestions. P6 also experienced animosity directed at her in her role as someone expected to implement a wildly unpopular mandate. She reported, “I try not to take it personally when I’m sitting in a meeting...I don’t respond, and I think sometimes they may be waiting to get some sort of a rise out of me, and they see that isn’t going to happen….we aren’t the ones making the decision, you know, that’s above me….I’m the messenger, you know. I’m really not the person who has mandated any of this.”

**Theme: A commitment to continuous learning** fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

P2 declared, “I have a very high need to learn….What keeps me going through it, I think also is that I can, I think that’s really it, just what I’m learning and what I’m experiencing and I always learnt that ultimately because of the age difference, I learnt it on my own again and...everything I do is to keep it so that I am self-sustained.” Being able to map across to any
area of her life what she had learned in a corporate context also offered tremendous appeal and value for P2.

P4 acknowledged that he is “driven because of my need for competence.” He thought that he sold himself short by not attending to his growth needs. “I have to believe that things happen for a reason. They can set the stage.” Similarly, P5 expressed a “sort of an existential approach….there is meaning to all of this. I have that belief….it’s just a matter for me to realize what that meaning is.”

Theme: Participants confronted their situation by facing the realities of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons; acknowledging the aspect of choice; considering trade-offs; and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

P2’s response to this third set and subsequent sets of questions was intriguing. She rarely gave direct answers but rather offered a great deal of information about the numerous challenging transitions she had recently undergone in her personal life. These included a late first marriage in her fifties, learning to live with a man, caring for her husband through two health crises, caring for her elderly father, being assaulted in New Mexico, living part-time in the US and in her Canadian home, managing migration issues each time she crossed the Canada-US border, and the various pro bono professional work dynamics she encountered. This researcher found it difficult to keep her on track throughout the interview and yet found her story and change management knowledge fascinating. She did say that, “The reason I’m telling you is that I always look at the big picture of what is happening...” This same participant later offered a
well-thought out and very cogent change and transition philosophy, in addition to astute recommendations for change agents.

P1 faced the fact that in her HR Manager role she had no choice but to help implement the mandate. While she had personal issues with implementing – not to mention advocating for – “something that I didn’t believe in…”, she found a measure of peace when she acknowledged that she was never going to like it. “Eventually [I] knew that they would come to their senses and realize this was the wrong thing to do.” In fact, the mandate fizzled out over the next two years and finally disappeared. She believed that “…if something is happening in my life that I don’t agree with, that I have the option to change that…always knowing that I have that power, so I could have left, I could have done only part of this, I’m going to look elsewhere. I think knowing that those options come from within is always a good thing too.” Her own awareness “of what’s important” and working from that fulcrum of “having a good sense of balance” helped her know that, “…the things that happen at work are not the end all or the be all; it’s just one small aspect of my life.”

P6 discovered it was in her interest to grow a thicker skin, ignore organizational politics, and stick to the business at hand when involved in heated meetings with angry employees. Given the many negative ways in which her job had changed over the last two years, she reported that she did her best to leave work by 5 PM on a Friday and used her downtime to replenish herself after long work days. Despite the increased demands she found satisfaction working with the doctors and felt immense pride for having built a solid Continuing Medical Education program.

Ashamed of her fertility problems and the related circumstances that directly impacted her new work position, P3 at first “sucked it up” to navigate through cultural expectations and gradually create the life she wanted. Once into her first successful pregnancy and with the
support of her husband and a coach, she devised a strategy of finding out what mattered to this clinical group and delivering it. Having built good will through her focus on the group’s needs, P3 reported that they became more inclined to consider hers and eventually [unwittingly?] joined with her in a very successful win-win strategy. Part of her path entailed owning up to her own contribution to the problems and changing her behavior – mainly being less emotional, or as she puts it, “no oozing” – but also asking honestly for what she needed to safeguard her health during the two successful pregnancies. When asked what one nugget drove her ability to navigate this very difficult experience, she reflected in silence. Finally she said, “Knowledge that this wasn’t my only option….wasn’t something that absolutely had to work….it wasn’t eat or not eat. Um, um, honestly though, I think what gave me the most, that nugget of real strength, honestly, was success in fertility….Feeling more personally whole….” When asked what else helped her get through this period of time, she declared, correcting one of this researcher’s previous summations, “Just hanging in.”

P5 had to likewise “suck it up” to deal with his difficulties. “I exhausted all the alternatives, so it was sort of the only thing that was left to do was adopt these, these new ways of thinking and working. So it wasn’t like, I didn’t feel like I had a choice….my back was against the wall and…I feel like I’m under water all the time….barely treading water….felt like I was drowning.” Adopting new ways meant shifting his thinking “in its entirety”, lowering his high performance expectations “to get things done”, and facing his discomfort in seeking guidance and help. His “own personal sense of self” and survival was on the line even as he engaged what he called his quantum shift. The mandate “achieved financial success that it [the organization] hadn’t seen in 10 years and…gave fuel to…going forward with this….whatever I had to do personally…around my cognitive dissonance …[I did it as a] sacrifice for the greater good.”
P4’s “construct of self was gone” and it felt “scary”. He also worked with a “crafty” coach who helped him gain such perspective that he could sit in the coach’s garden, look up at the sky, and take in his coach’s assurances, “These things happen, the universe goes on. It’s ok.” He faced the fact that it was his own internal “pig-headedness” that refused him the option of needing someone else to run his company. He accepted the personal challenge to change his “disruptive behaviors”, seeking to stop the pain that had been permeating his life. His criteria was simple; he would make a choice and ask, “How do I feel?” He was driven to take these steps because he “wanted to be a whole person.”

**Theme:** Participants experienced little to no internal support to enact relevant and necessary personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

P6 acknowledged that her husband was “a real boost to what I do at work”, supporting her by accepting that “nothing’s [exhibited work stress] meant to be personal toward him.” She also cited her boss as being supportive.

Initially P3 did not feel supported by her clinical partners but relied on her husband’s emotional caring and sage advice of “neutrality of tone and clarity of content” as well as her work with a coach. Her team relationships changed dramatically after she demonstrated behavior shifts, so that by the time she again asked to explore working half-time, this time as a partner, the outcome was very different. Their new-found trust in her openness, directness, intentions, and desires allowed her to move forward with an experiment that ultimately gave her and them what everyone wanted.

P2 relied on a combination of support from her husband, Canadian friends, and the learning from her professional leadership and adult education programs. While she had found no personal
support within her organization, the company had unwittingly played a role in the creation of her own change management firm. The variety of work experiences inspired and built her professional capacity, and when she reflected on her choices prior to being let go, she was able to acknowledge her own desire to help people navigate this often bumpy road. For P2, “It’s really knowing how to see the big picture.” For P1, support showed up as the “…respect and trust of my manager”. This contributed to what she was getting in her position [as core work needs] that allowed her to get through the two years of mandate implementation.

Q4 As a result of this personal change experience, how do you see any need to make more personal changes in the future?

- 4-1 Is your perspective the same or different now about making personal changes?
- 4-2 How did this successful experience prepare you to manage future change needs?
- 4-3 How might you change your own process of making personal changes, based on your previous experience?

Introduction

Three participants [P1, P2, and P6] would, in the future, make different specific choices about how they planned to more assertively confront challenges connected to an organizational mandate. P2, P4, and P5 expressed that their changes were always in process and they expected to embrace future changes as a continuous process, or even, for P5, as the new paradigm.

Theme Participants confronted their situation by facing the realities of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons;
P1 recognized that although she made the right decision to stay and help implement the mandate that so many organizational people judged as wrong, she would devise a different strategy of more vocal push-back for the future. She would still assess whether she was getting those critical things in her job, like flexibility [for life-work balance], a good manager relationship, and other interesting work. Buttressed by her recent Masters and Six Sigma programs, she was able to express new appreciation for the benefits of field-driven data. She said she would plan to present a case with benchmarking data to leadership, which would back up her concerns about negative ramifications associated with a mandate. She would then be willing to “….see where that went.”

After the very difficult trials of dealing with personal infertility issues while working in her clinic’s emotionless culture, P3 made powerful internal discoveries. There’s always another side to a problem, we always contribute to that problem, and there may be ways to make it better that we have not taken advantage of. “You are never powerless in a work situation, no matter how bad it is…. If you’re staying, you’re choosing to stay, so why are you choosing to stay? It must be doing something for you…serving some needs….things don’t have to be a zero sum game.”

Being crystal clear about what she cared about was essential for P2. Had she been more certain of those essential desires she might not have put up with “…some of the things I endured…” because “…my own sense of self-worth could have been different,” she asserted. Participating in a strong leadership program helped her notice some of her less effective behaviors and also ask tough questions. “When I have somebody or different people constantly
bombarding me, how do I stay true to the core but acknowledge to other people that yes, I hear what you’re saying?”

P5 is no stranger to personal change, but his travels through both good and dark sides of his organization’s mandate efforts delivered what he termed “quantum learning” concerning an old pattern of changing jobs frequently. His usual operating mode had been to feel impelled to leave less comfortable or appealing jobs by changing his situation. Distinguishing between impelling and compelling forces he said, “I’m trying to get away from,” and laughed. “I attribute this situation, during this retail organizational employment, as a catalyst for me ….I actually came to grips with that [leaving to get away from] as a realization… [and] began to reflect on the reasons for my changes.” Since his recent work with a coach, he has been able to acknowledge that, “…what it is that I have been doing…hasn’t served me optimally…I have to adapt new approaches in a different mindset going forward in order to change that.”

P6 decreed that “I would probably be a lot more vocal about the resources that I need. I think in typically [name deleted]-fashion, you know. I just thought that the answer was just to increase the amount of work hours in my day to get it all done….when I put it down on paper, I think my boss was blown away by exactly what I had on my plate...”

Theme: A commitment to continuous learning fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

“P2 saw her situation as offering “opportunities to make personal changes; it’s certainly never to stagnate, certainly never to feel sorry for myself. To always seek wherever I can make an offer. And to capture that and keep the best of myself because then with time I will be good.
That’s not to say that I don’t know myself to be abused by a situation. I choose my situations extremely carefully. But I also locate what comes and I don’t worry about what it might have to offer me. I just go into that moment.”

Making mistakes and learning from them became a practice for P4, as he managed to stop the pain and come alive to his whole self in his personal change efforts. Repeating his previous denial, he joked, “Why would I want to do that [make future changes]? Things are fine now.” He laughed, his whole face lighting up. “Now it’s about being aware, to keep the energy going, always changing.”

**Q5 What was most significant for you about this successful personal change experience?**

- 5-1 What aspects of your personal change experience are most meaningful for you?
- 5-2 What are you most proud about?
- 5-3 What shifted the most? The least?
- 5-4 What other affects did this experience provide for you?

*Introduction*

Building more capacity [P4], moving forward after an epiphany [P5], feeling more self-worth [P2 and P3], confirming personal priorities [P1], and identifying a big learning edge [P6] were the varied outcomes of having successfully accomplished personal changes.
Theme: Participants experienced **little to no internal support** to enact relevant and necessary personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

P3 clearly articulated that “I will resist when I feel that I am being pushed. Okay?...when I’m fearful I’m not good enough…when I feel that I’m being criticized….when people say something about my thinking.”

Theme: **Role clarification and boundaries** provided a protective tool for navigating difficult interpersonal and business transactions.

P1 chose to not join some of her colleagues in frequent negative conversations about the mandate. She prided herself in that she did “not fall into groupthink” and instead traveled a path that clearly demarcated her implementation role from whatever personal opinions she held about the mandate. She essentially chose to communicate that she was not the designer of the mandate but was charged with implementing it. Whatever additional interpretation that people made was inferred from reading between the lines of P1’s transparent but tactful demeanor.

Theme: Participants confronted their situation by **facing the realities** of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons; acknowledging the aspect of choice; considering trade-offs; and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

P2 followed up our interview with an email wherein she offered an additional statement to further elucidate her major change philosophy. “In my opinion, resistance is inherent when building a new future. The resistance will be noticed and/or felt during the neutral or in-between zone of endings and new beginnings….When consulting, I need to recognize those indicators of
personal resistance and coach leaders to different actions to declare a new future with an empowering change.”

For P3, growing her sense of self-worth with successful pregnancies and achieving the balanced life that she wanted grew her capacity to say no to a work director role she had originally wanted but that now no longer appealed to her. “I feel even more comfortable with my priorities.” If the director role is there when her children are older, that might interest her, but if not, “that’s ok too.”

What shifted the least for P6 was her capacity to respond to her supervisor’s performance review comment. Told that she had to learn to sometimes give “B” rather than “A” work, she expressed continuing discomfort. “That’s not right.” What shifted the most for her was developing a new feeling of being disheartened with her organization. Amidst the unrelenting and excessive workload, she was considering moving on while still on a high [successful] note.

**Theme:** Valuing authenticity allowed participants to take a genuine stance, exercise honesty rather than game-playing, and affirm these values by their behavior.

What shifted the least for P1 was her “…philosophy that I have, which is to be genuine, not try to sell something I don’t believe in….because I would do it the same way again.”

**Theme:** Participants experienced a sudden shift due to an organizational change mandate, with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.

“With some good planning and…just even a little extra in the way of resources, then it can get done,” reflected P6. Her personal point of surprise and pride was recognizing the wonderful
things happening in the community at the fourth campus, such that she now feels differently about the people there. Queried about what affects this experience provided for her, P1 asserted that, “I would say, probably the most important thing is that you have to be able to share with an organization the business need for the change or the problem you’re trying to solve or the opportunity. If you’ve got to get people onboard and get the stakeholders involved, you’ve got to be able to articulate those things.”

**Theme:** A commitment to continuous learning fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

Building the capacity to “deal with lots of crappy things” showed up as a major outcome for P4. Starting with initial denial he was later able to appreciate the value in seeing things multi-dimensionally and in dealing with them. Having been rooted in a painful place, he reported that he now feels “more calm.” Having “stuck it out”, the fact that he “toughed it out” is his proudest accomplishment.

P6 discovered that making subtle changes, such that people aren’t even aware of them, allowed them to stick. Learning that she cannot use a “heavy-handed approach” and get a good outcome has allowed her to improve efficiency and build trust with her most difficult former critics.

P5 reported that “…the most meaningful aspect of my personal change experience is…the realization that there was a need for change, and then the amenability to that change.” His status as a “lifelong learner” allowed him to work his own quantum shift and begin to “embrace more compelling changes as opposed to [reacting to] impelling change….This is the norm, the new
paradigm has changed…that’s how we have to operate.” That he, too, survived the change mandate and gained such a personal gift of an “epiphany” makes P5 very proud.

Q6 How did your success in making personal changes affect your relationship to the broader organizational change efforts?

- 6-1 Tell me how your change work and that of the organization intersected or connected.
- 6-2 What lets you know that your personal change work was successful?
- 6-3 What affects happened between you and the organization when you conducted your own change work?
- 6-4 How did you perceive the organizational change efforts before you began your own personal work?
- 6-5 How did you perceive these efforts during and after your own successful changes?
- 6-6 What suggestions might you have for people making their own personal changes?
- 6-7 What suggestions might you have for people facilitating organizational change?

Introduction

By this stage of the interview, some participants had already offered inferential information that touched on some of these final questions. I made various choices in-the-moment, but always retained what I considered to be three key inquiries – evidence of successful personal change, advice to others for their own change efforts, and advice to change agents.
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Theme: **Valuing authenticity** allowed participants to take a genuine stance, exercise honesty rather than game-playing, and affirm these values by their behavior.

P1 found the way through her dilemma by authentically but tactfully responding rather than trying to appear like an advocate for the mandate. She discovered that, “it’s ok for me to disagree with something that we're doing in the organization as long as I’m comfortable with being able to stay in that position.” Furthermore, once her client manager and the line folks understood that “I did not represent the decision behind the change…” she was seen more multi-dimensionally as being honest and truthful. Avoiding groupthink was another feat she accomplished in maintaining her own voice. Looking forward to a similar situation, she acknowledged that she would be more vocal, gather more data, and “try to sway the decision makers to think about a different approach.” P1 advised people undergoing personal change “to be true to themselves. They have to be genuine…. to acknowledge their tolerance…. to understand that they have choices to make.”

Theme: Participants confronted their situation by **facing the realities** of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons; acknowledging the aspect of choice; considering trade-offs; and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

Her numerous attempts to understand and fit into the culture of her new group ultimately surprised P3. “I think I tapped into flexibility I didn’t recognize they had….I made them come up with it….I found a way to make it work but it was also beneficial to them, you know, by [my] taking a boatload of undesirable [weekend] call, you know.” P3 traded taking call for being
accepted and ultimately was awarded partner status, after which she felt she could stop taking so much call.

P2’s evidence for her successful personal change efforts is both external and internal. She received more compliments and accomplished more things, while her group participated with more accountability. Her body has also served as the barometer of her success. She noticed that her overall “stress would be lower than the [stress of the] change if [my] health is better.”

P5 expressed a clear sense of knowing when his own personal change work has been successful. “Intuitively I know when I’m on the right track…when I’m doing the right thing…when I’m achieving….doing something of import….I’m basically firing on all cylinders. I’m in the zone…”

Asked to advise people facing their own personal change work, P2 said that it’s critical to distinguish change from transition. “Acknowledge feelings, take baby action steps, live in the present and do anything to manage the difficult feelings, but build [action steps] into the future while being true to yourself.”

P3 recognized the need to change as the first step. She urged people to take the stance that, “I think it will help me….being at peace with the changes you make.” She discouraged twisting yourself into a pretzel, into something that “isn’t real for you.” Get help and lots of different views.

P5 suggested that people should “engage their own dialogue, their own inner dialogue about the situation…suspend judgment and…their own agenda….weigh both sides of the issue….come to a level of comfort around whatever it is that one decides to do.” His ultimate litmus test is that, “We have to live with ourselves past whatever the initiative is.” Looking at the
positive aspects of his organization’s changes – more accountability and higher performance – as well as the “dark side”, P5 decided to stay and work for what he named the “greater good.”

**Theme:** Participants experienced little to no internal support to enact relevant and necessary personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

P1 recommended that people facilitating change must, “Understand, accept the change management principles and tools, and transfer your knowledge if there is any chance you can.”

P2’s biggest suggestion was to “be really able to look at the human side of what change is meaning to the employees.” According to P2, change agents must also consider what change means to them in order to serve as effective models for others in how to make the necessary changes. She lists three actions that help to navigate this very human space. Identify what’s ending, recognize all feelings and how to move forward, identify the new beginning and what’s necessary to build to be successful. Understanding one’s own grieving process is important for a change agent to be able to help others through this transition.

P6 urged others to “…talk about it and maybe at different levels of the organization…at least with an immediate supervisor about how the changes are impacting, because what’s on paper is just meaningless.” Having lived through two years of this change initiative, she said, “You’ve got to be taking the pulse of your employees all the time….This is a really good case of people making decisions without involving all of the stakeholders…”

P4 recommended that management not judge the pacing and time it takes. Be supportive and be open to giving feedback.

P5 didn’t believe the “conventional understanding” that people are naturally resistant to change. “I think people are resistant and fearful of the unknown, and that’s basically a survival
mechanism.” A communications expert, he exhorted organizations to impart information about what’s on the other side of the change in terms of the end or desired state and help people realize the individual impact of change early on in the process. He believed that when people know what’s coming, they can better understand it and get onboard, take some ownership. “You can’t foist things on people…” That’s what people resist. “Allow people to be part of the change not the recipient of it.”

P6’s advice was clearly simple. “Communicate, communicate, communicate!”

Theme: Participants experienced a sudden shift due to an organizational change mandate, with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.

Identifying and involving the key stakeholders is critical, claimed P1. P2 specified the importance to “Delineate the steps of that change… what are the ramifications… and distinguish very clearly between transition and change…. Change is an external event over which I have no control…. The transition is the things that are going to happen that will touch on the psychological part of all of the employees.” She stresses the importance of creating an open and hopeful future.

P5’s one year stint created powerful learning along broad parallel lines between himself and his organization. “Change is not something to be undertaken lightly, that there’s significant repercussions that one probably doesn’t realize.” He recommended finding the low-hanging fruit, celebrating small victories, and capitalizing on those to move forward. And when first contemplating an initiation of a mandate, he suggested sending a heads-up.
In addition to communicating early and often, P6 recommended that change drivers give people resources. Undermined by a serious lack of resources across four campuses, she asked, “…give us the skills, now because also, you’re also talking about a group of people who may have absolutely no experience in organizational change. How do you expect us to implement all these things?” She spoke of needing early conversations, resource assessment, buy-in, and mandated meetings. She considered one four-hour change training for managers to be woefully insufficient. During the first year and a half at least one upper level manager left the organization each week. She laughed and said, “I think we’re really a work in progress. …I think we’re one of the organizations that every, every student of organizational development [she laughed again] could study. We could do the model.”

Theme: A commitment to continuous learning fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever done,” claimed P4. “Don’t give up too soon; it takes time. You can’t rush it….I have a wish for everyone to do this. Just stop and see the benefits.” P4, enormously enjoyed developing the capacity to step up to helm his firm and the organic, facilitated process of reinventing his organization.

Summary of Results

In summation, six striking similarities – or themes – emerged from the interview data. Nearly all the organizations set contexts that foisted changes upon their people without engaging them in consideration of the issues and what to do about them. All but one of the participants
experienced a change mandate being sprung on them or suddenly announced with little or no upfront assessment of what this might mean to employees and the organization as a whole. In all but one case, virtually no consideration was given to whether additional resources would be needed nor were relevant stakeholders brought in for input or buy-in. Participants mostly found personal support outside of the organization as they struggled with their feelings of resistance and made efforts to get onboard with the mandate requirements.

Participants faced their personal dilemmas buttressed by strongly held values, willingness to self reflect, and determination to do the hard work of changing themselves to meet the needs of the change mandate. Acknowledging personal learning edges and stepping up to those challenges typified most participants. Stepping into the shoes of the other parties and radically changing ones thinking and behavior showed up strongly with two participants. A few discovered that maintaining clear boundaries afforded them some protection and understanding from their colleagues and clients. Many expressed themselves as voracious learners, willing to take any situation as grist for continued practice and development that would serve them in future situations. Many sought their own place by bringing their authentic selves along with a strategic method of navigating the change waters. Five of the six participants experienced change the hard way, not nearly in the manner that much of the change management literature advocates that it be done. These individuals created their own change journeys and managed to rediscover, recreate, or maintain their own congruence as they responded to external demands.
Discussion

In this section the researcher reflects and comments on the six themes extracted from the data as they relate to the change literature. The first portion will consider each individual theme, one by one. In the next portion a more aggregated examination will be undertaken in which all the themes are discussed as they relate together in the context of the literature and researcher commentary. Considering all of these perspectives together as a whole offers a broader context to study the arena of personal and organizational change. Awareness, familiarity, and discourse about theory and the actual practice of change management varies greatly among those employees expected to create change, OD practitioners, and organizations. It is from such revealed arenas of thought and implementation that grounded theory methodology seeks – through constant iterative research – to bring forth something that may in time begin to cohere as a useful “theory”.

This particular study has simply scratched the surface to explore which principles and practices were most instrumental for these six individuals to effectively work with their own resistance in ways that supported mandated organizational changes. The intended project goal is to offer new insights for change agents as well as for people facing the need to make such changes themselves.

Overall the data findings support many of the studies and perspectives from the change literature, while also surfacing various issues that merit more empirical research and broader dialogue. Some of the referenced authors in this study do indeed address these intriguing areas, but their presence in the literature appears to be more infrequent. Issues such as employee participation in change planning and process, which perspectives are privileged by OD change
literature, the relevance of Lewin’s resistance construct in today’s world, and mental models derived from living systems are all fertile ground for rigorous exploration.

Introduction

These first two themes sketch the overall change context discovered in the participants’ organizations. The first of these themes correlates with much of the literature specifying sources that typically create resistance, while the second correlates with the topic of support relevant to making and sustaining change. Given the robust range of factors articulated in these context-setting themes, extensive discussion will be given to these two. The remaining four themes reflect the various ways in which the study participants assessed and responded to the need for personal change to create their own unique, sustainable journey.

Theme: Participants experienced a sudden shift due to an organizational change mandate, with little to no planning; assessment of needs; consideration of resulting change ramifications; allocation of additional resources; early stakeholder conversation, input, or buy-in.

The many underlying factors revealed in this study indicate how these sudden, stressful disruptions presented major provoking reasons for resistance among participants. These data-derived factors are among those reasons that numerous authors theorized, as compiled by Pardo de Val and Martinez Fuentes [2003] in their resistance research and quantitative study. Among these reasons that fit for this study’s participants are: “distorted perception” [because of missing organizational information – P1-3]; “vague strategic priorities” [P1 and 2]; “past failures” [other similar mergers within the same industry – P6]; “different interests among employees and management” [P1-3, 5, 6]; “reactive mind-set” [P2-5]; inadequate strategic vision” [P1 and 2]; “leadership inaction” [accountability issue in P2’s case; initial lack of resources for P6];
“embedded routines” [P3, 4, 6]; “collective action problems” [from non-involvement of employees in change process – P1, 2, 5, 6]; and “capabilities gap” [P3 and 4 – gradually overcome; P6 stretched too far].

The complex factors of “cultural, political, and social dynamics” are so encompassing that they affected all participants. P1 continually reported that she and many others believed their mandate was “not right for our organization” in content or implementation. P2 suffered a stalemate with nothing to do, while management navigated messy system and legal issues, provoking even more pain, loss, and resistance for her. P3 faced cultural and social displacement in her migration to private practice and bid to work part-time. As a co-principal P4 answered pervasive criticism from his staff with denial until he could marshal new resources to acknowledge his disruptive behavior. P5 was recruited by the cultural snapshot of his new organization, but lost this perception and trust when he witnessed actions “very akin to ruthless” executed by the executive team towards its workforce. Meeting hostility and anger from newly merged staff while straddling her roles as both manager and as implementer for decisions she had no say in, P6 found herself needing to “grow a thicker skin” to survive. It is most likely always true that such essential human dynamics involving culture, politics, and society would emerge – explicitly or implicitly – as factors influencing responses to change that could range anywhere along a continuum from aligned to opposed.

It was expected that such broadly influencing factors would show up in the data. If indeed the presence of any such common factors is strong enough to incline a person towards “resisting” aspects of a particular change mandate, it seems reasonable to view resistance as a likely option and therefore a reasonable response. As Jarrett (2004) claimed, resistance is simply “another truth” in need of reframing. Even Freud later acknowledged that his invented concept of
“resistance” was actually his projection onto a patient of his own frustration when he believed his patients consciously withheld information from him. He newly perceived such a response as indicating that something else existed beneath the patient’s words, in the patient’s unconscious (Starr, 1994). In an organizational sense this translates into the fact that presenting behavior may look like defensiveness or push-back but may actually obscure genuine needs that cannot yet be articulated. Similarly, H. Spector (2005, personal communication, February 14, 2005) noted that Gestalt principles frame resistance as “a response that keeps us from moving forward because something is not being taken into account”. How might organizational change efforts be radically different – and perhaps more successful – if such principles were broadly acknowledged and this arena more fully explored?

The mechanistic framing of “resistance” is problematic and outdated now that we understand the dynamic quality of living systems, Piderit (2002) argued. The term resides in a particular perspective and functions as a construct that privileges managers’ interests. She advocated more research to develop a model of change responses that would delineate a range of multidimensional attitudes across emotional, cognitive, and intentional aspects. Understanding employee “responses to change proposals that emerge from bottom-up, egalitarian processes” is critical and would offer significant balancing data to what mostly exists in the field. Labor process theory offers alternative perspectives that would greatly enrich the OD change literature. Piderit reminded us that as early as the 1920’s Mary Parker Follett observed that de facto change plans submitted to a workforce for “approval” offer few response options. Workers can either rubber-stamp or fight them. Bast (2004) also aligned with those who consider “resistance” as an expression of an embedded ideological bias. Considering such a factor as different employee and
manager interests is not one that often emerges in the change resistance literature. However, this particular factor did surface with a few authors referenced here, as well as in the study data.

Manki (2003) asserted this lack in the literature is because of the prevailing reductionist OD frame in which it is assumed that management has the right to unilaterally create and launch change mandates that serve their interests. From this superficial perspective – he argued – employee/worker responses that do not align with the desired changes are viewed as reactive, resistant, and “an irrational nuisance to be overcome” in order to accomplish the “managerialist” agenda. Piderit also noted that management typically views resistance as a form of disobedience. Manki contended that such views circumscribe a deeper inquiry into the inextricable interrelationships of power, resistance, and the human subject. This tends to be an unfamiliar or possibly even a disturbing frame for many organizations and change agents.

His post-modernistic philosophical approach – buttressed by a qualitative study of a school facing governmental reform initiatives – offers compelling rationale for data in this study. Loyal, long-term employees in P5’s organization – in a high-turnover industry – “took umbrage” at an 80% workforce restructuring effort designed to greatly reduce benefits and a subsequent major layoff – done without regard for the drastic affects on them and with no access for their input. Managers, HR consultants, and staff in P1’s company complained of having no voice in a forced bottom 10% ranking mandate, some of whose effects were soon felt in a subsequent layoff that included many such ranked members. P6’s request for adequate management training to navigate a difficult merger went unheeded; her plea for additional resources to manage a huge workload increase was dismissed for months. P3’s initial efforts to attain part-time work for family reasons were perceived to be an obstacle to the partners’ need to preserve ease in their private practice. Concerns expressed by P2 and her colleagues about her 18-year track record of contributions had
no effect on the leader who rescinded an earlier restructuring change and laid off P2 along with the other new “learning experts”.

After their various concerns about negative change effects were dismissed or not even heard, five of six participants in this study found themselves initially unable/unwilling to support the mandate. The sixth held the role of co-principal in his firm – a factor explored later in this discussion concerning differences in the data related to power and role. More research studying the relationships among power, agency, subject/object, and response would certainly further illuminate this challenging arena of “resistance”.

Upfront assessment of the readiness for change is a principle that appears in OD textbooks and the change literature, but to what extent does it appear as a priority in pre-planning work done before a mandate launch? It was not mentioned once in the study data as an action that had been taken. An assessment for change is something that may have been addressed in P4’s firm in some form, possibly implicitly. Palmer (2004) espoused readiness factors and building agreement to change, stating the importance of “explaining why people should change.” Within the context of high failure rates for change efforts in the corporate sector, he urged organizations to conduct change only if the assessed potential success is at least 85%. The mismatched change fizzled out and ultimately failed in P1’s organization, while high stress continues two years into the change effort for P6. P5’s organization achieved tremendous financial solvency that also involved big losses for its workforce. Part of any initial change assessment should include what Anderson and Anderson (May, 2002) called core psychological issues, which might underlie some resistance. Participants in this study faced such issues as “power/control [P1-6], competency [P2-4, 6], inclusion [P1-6], justice [P2, 3, 5, 6] being liked [P3, 6], and safety [P2, 3, 5].”
Patrick’s (2001) notion of “resistance layers” correlates to most of these participants’ experience. Unasked or unresolved questions concerning what needs to be changed, what the new change needs to be, how to get there, and what bad effects could happen, can all evoke a sense of resistance. Implicit in his work are both content and process aspects, namely the importance of addressing such questions and the necessity for eventual agreement on and commitment to needed changes. Regarding the content aspect, study participants expressed a lack of organizational disclosure of the “problem to be solved” by the mandate [P1 and 2] and a difference of opinion about aspects of the mandate as the proper resolution [P1-3, 5, 6]. Patrick’s process models created to navigate such issues presuppose an organizational willingness to allow employees to explicitly surface “their conflict” and to further engage them in improving both change objectives and implementation strategies. As this particular study theme reflects, such active involvement of employees did not occur except for P4 – as co-principal of his firm – and to some extent for P5 who, because of his senior communications role working with the change team, was able to mitigate some of the negative fall-out.

Pertinent to this study is the work of Lines (2004), who explored organizational learning through a main focus of “reactions to change and the links between these reactions and successful implementation of change.” Little research has been done to determine whether participation in change strategies has any relationship with resistance and post-change organizational commitment, declared Lines. In pursuit of such participation-outcome questions, he conducted a quantitative study in a large European telecom organization confronting complete deregulation of the European Telecommunications industry by January 1, 1998. With high shared recognition of the imminent need for change, the organization engaged employees at
different participation levels and with different prevue regarding process and decision control – a critical distinction, as we shall see.

Overall Lines’ research “provided support for a positive relationship between participation and a number of outcome variables relevant for judging the success of implementing strategic change.” Specific findings indicated that resistance is strongly negatively related to participation in change strategies, goal achievement was positively affected by participation, and there was no significant relationship between veto control and resistance but a “detrimental effect on implementation success”. Prevue for decision control – as opposed to process control, i.e., meaningful participation – was apparently not a factor that caused employees to feel aligned with or resistant to a change mandate. However, both findings on veto control – no correlation to resistance but a detrimental effect on implementation – raise an issue of trust that one’s leaders will appreciatively take their employees’ positions into account when those leaders make decisions. According to Folger and Konovsky (1989), quoted in the Lines study, “Trust in turn is related to the use of authentic participative processes in which solutions are developed in a collaborative manner with genuine consideration of each participant’s input, values, and views” (p. 11). Lines also found that participation-outcome links are stronger with a high perceived need for change. Interestingly, when the cultural fit of the change is low, the effects of participation are higher than when that compatibility is high, making participation even more critical when the change is perceived as a mismatch.

Given this research data in the literature, it is not surprising that strong resistance surfaced for all the participants in this study, mediated in degree by the availability to participate in the process of change. A noticeable to subtle difference in the tone of the overall change process and the kinds of affects on the participants resulted in large part from the power of role and authority.
whether formal or informal. Five participants [P1-3, 5-6] worked for various organizations as staff members who were recipients of the mandate announcement. In their cases the change mandate was announced with little to no prior assessment, planning, and employee input. Without the formal power to ultimately decide to launch a change mandate that would so significantly affect them, the experiences of these five differed significantly from that of the sixth participant.

The sixth [P4] was a co-principal in a small firm whose succession planning efforts with the other co-principal surfaced numerous organizational issues, including his own behavior. One pivotal piece of feedback P4 heard from his staff was that they experienced him as too emotional to step up and lead the firm. While he likewise experienced a sudden and stressful disruption of business as usual with such surprising revelations, his formal role positioned him on the decision-making end of a continuum, essentially privileging him. What actions and changes he had to endure came largely through his own growing awareness that new ways of doing things would serve his firm. It was his decision to change that created the mandate. Interestingly enough, although he owned the formal power, he ultimately allowed himself to be influenced by others in his firm and by the professional change agents whom he hired to help facilitate the needed changes.

Another distinction must be made among these participants, one that extends the notion of a true continuum along which each can be situated relevant to the power and influence they were able to wield in their organizations – both formally and informally. To the extent that any of the other five participants had the power to participate in conversations about the change or influence decisions affecting them, their experiences differed in some degree from those of the other participants.
A final distinction concerns the relative privilege that each of these upper management professionals possessed in relation/contrast to the general workforce. It is presupposed that they possessed at least some of the needed competencies by education and/or training to qualify them to perform at their organizational levels. Yet this does not mean that they have the change management experience to know what to do and how to do it, evidenced by P6’s plea to provide managers more than four hours of training on this topic. If change is a difficult arena for managers, how readily equipped might be the average front-line person to make their own needed changes? This relates to the need to provide change resources and support.

Of these five who did not lead organizations, three [P1, 5, 6] were in formal roles requiring them to implement the change mandate. After P1 clearly distanced her personal self from the role of implementer – but not as decider – she was able to personally reestablish the trust she had built with her internal clients and suffered less professionally. P5 described his role as “directly interfacing with execs to enact their collective voice to employees.” As a partner to these executives he was able to influence some decisions toward better outcomes for employees. But within that formal partnering role he also wrestled with his own ethical questions as he perceived good improvements achieved by the mandate efforts but likewise the dark side of that agenda. Not “feeling particularly valued or respected” when the executives ignored his input – which was much of the time – his feeling was “even more acute” when he received a similar response from his workgroup and peer managers. Although P6 strove to ignore the hostility she faced as an implementer without decision power, a combination of excessive overwork and personal costs have taken their toll. Even as she recounted her recent successes with part of the merged group, she admitted that she was very close to leaving.
The other two participants had yet different experiences. P3 dutifully worked her way into her group as a formal partner and was then able to use her new status and carefully built personal credibility to create the kind of life-work balance that she had sought. While P2 suffered the loss of promotion income, job, and status through a division leader’s overriding a previous change mandate, she exhibited tremendous personal power and influence over her own future career. Rather than succumb to victimhood, she framed her difficult circumstances and previous organizational successes as comprising next steps to becoming an entrepreneur.

On the surface it might seem that the non-leader participants would have similar experiences of resistance. With deeper inquiry it can be seen that the individual capacity to engage the organizational change process influentially did create various participation-outcomes, as Lines confirmed.

If it is indeed true, as Peterson (2004) would have us believe, that “energy is generated when people engage in the process of discerning and accelerating what is already positively working”, this alternative input mechanism was missing for most or all of these participants. Affirming the value of Cooperrider’s Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to change, Peterson posited that it is “self-organization and emergent processes” that allow us to “thrive”. These are ways that engage people rather than exclude them. The very act of exclusion may provoke a form of resistance when one’s voice is avoided or ignored. Vanson (n.d.) similarly lauded this positive engagement approach as espoused in the fields of AI and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), as methodologies that establish space for people to co-create the kind of organizations in which they’d like to work.
Theme: Participants experienced little to no internal support to enact relevant and necessary personal changes to align with and navigate the organizational change mandate.

This second theme completes setting the context for the organizational mandates these study participants experienced. Reiterating the dismal record for cultural change initiatives failure at 90% and for merger and acquisitions at 56-70%, Atkinson (2005) insisted that change drivers could do much better. Discovering the reasons for resistance and addressing those concerns could allow “the benefits of change to be realized quickly.” Despite this insight, he judged this kind of effort to be a “time and resource-hungry” tactic. Might a front-end requisition of adequate support for people to make the needed changes offset further costs incurred when employee non-alignment causes serious negative consequences or even the ultimate cost of another failed change initiative?

Several authors have recognized resistance as a natural and positive response. While advocating a similar reframe, Atkinson’s methodology utilizes resistance as a tool for understanding how to “sell the benefits” of the organizational change. Much of Atkinson’s “support” translates to one-way persuasion. The “learning” he posited as valuable to the organization is not the same learning that Lines witnessed in participative processes, nor what Piderit and Manki might envision if workforce responses, needs, and recommendations were considered as critical data and incorporated into the change process.

Piderit specifically concluded that research on strategic change processes indicates “that disagreement can play a key role in supporting organization renewal.” Implied in such research, she expounded, is the idea that for organizations to truly develop the capacity for adaptive change, they must not short-circuit discussion about issues and concerns. Indeed, Anderson and Anderson opined that in some cases, “Perhaps the change IS wrong. Perhaps the resistors know...
something that the change leaders don’t know” (April, 2002, p. 2). These expressions can lead to innovative improvements in the change process or content and contribute greatly to organizational learning. Referencing Pratt and Barnett (1997), Piderit recommended fostering initial ambivalence about the change, “to stimulate unlearning (the discarding of obsolete and misleading information), which is a necessary precursor to change” (p. 7).

Atkinson (2005) likewise recognized that people need time to think things over and specifically advocated honestly addressing anticipated issues, potential affects, timeframes, actions, and resources before launching any change initiative. Thinking things over may not be all that is needed. Piderit suggested that “employees find it more difficult to express negative emotions than negative beliefs”, referring to the work of Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) in which she notes that this idea is implicit (p. 6). Given the profound affect of feeling responses to change, time is also needed to surface and address the emotional aspects of change. Anderson and Anderson (Date) shed intriguing light on this matter, once again relevant to issues of power and influence. They noted that senior executives frequently spend “weeks or months” of intense deliberations to “work through their own resistance” before presenting a single front to their employees with a change mandate (pp. #). Not so for most employees. The sudden mandate announcements that five of the six participants faced, disallowed time to reflect and deal with feelings before they were thrust into the extra work of change with no additional resources. Atkinson advocated that the organization solicit and manage input while expecting buy-in, but with no examination of the existing mental model of “resistance” much less use of the kind of participatory processes that Lines and Piderit might support.

Both Atkinson and the team of Kegan and Lahey (2001) acknowledged the fact that internal conflicts represent competing commitments for people. Kegan and Lahey defined this as
a phenomenon that cultivated a certain “immunity to change”. The study data proved the existence of such internal barriers and the difficulty thus posed for people mandated to change, especially without adequate organizational support. For these participants, support came mainly outside their organizations. P5 struggled with his sense of responsibility to a workforce upon whom radical changes were “foisted”, the responsibilities of his role, his own insecurities related to feeling expendable in that environment, and his ethical compass. He was able to confide in no one within his organization. P3 felt scared, intimidated, and overwhelmed for months as she attempted to navigate the emotion-free zone of her new organization during a highly emotional time when she was also trying to resolve her own fertility problems. Shaken by what she described as an angry, abrupt phone call from a board member about her impolitic email, she sought support from her husband and eventually hired her own coach. P2 turned to family and friends for support, as did P5 and P6. P1 expressed appreciation for a good boss, yet still needed to internally balance her own priorities. P4 hired consultants to support his firm’s change efforts and worked with a coach on his change issues. When lacking adequate support to recognize and test the assumptions that underlie such competing commitments, employees are unlikely to be able to move beyond these barriers without experiencing more internal strife.

“Employee resistance is energy waiting to be unleashed”, affirmed D. Hallstein (cited by Anderson and Anderson, April, 2002, p. 5). Inspired by their colleague and drawing on their own extensive change work, Anderson and Anderson have proposed a few simple principles to support people during the change process:

- Recognize that the human system is organized to maintain homeostasis, so change presents a developmental challenge for anyone.
• Proactively talk to resisting employees and ask them how to make the change effort better. Better yet, involve employees on change project and advisory teams and reap tremendous ROI for your change strategies.
• Provide places of familiarity where the past is honored and select things are done in the “old way”.
• Provide some small incremental change steps with respites along the way. Speak frankly about your own change fears to foster an open climate for discussion and resolution.
• Plan to minimize psychological concerns that could derail employees, but if core issues do come up, remember that it’s your job to help people get through them.
• “Provide employees with the same type of opportunity the senior managers had, to resolve their own resistance… to discuss and challenge the change issues and be asked for their input” (April 2002, p. 4).

By following these principles organizations can attune to the human factors of change and achieve much more than they might otherwise. In fact, they claimed that, “Working competently with resistance will always lead to increased results” (April, 2002, p. 1).

Kotter and Schlesinger’s (1979) six approaches for dealing with resistance to change offered good overall methods for supporting employees, depending on varying results from their needs assessments. However, upon closer examination it is evident that this needs assessment is actually targeted for benefit of the organization, towards developing methods that enable it to “combat and overcome resistance”. Two approaches are advocated when all else has failed, namely “manipulation and co-optation”, with the option for escalation to “explicit and implicit coercion”. Such approaches reveal a basic premise that management knows best, is the expert,
holds the absolute prevue to determine mandates, and rightfully decides if/when/how to invite input from employee stakeholders. How does this frame increase the potential for change success? How do potentially valid employee concerns (Piderit) get heard? How does this presumed management privilege engender truly authentic support for the organizational change? Escalated approaches typically escalate human emotions, potentially triggering fight or flight reactions. How can such extreme limbic reactions offer the mandated responses, when their very existence precludes higher brain functioning? Perhaps most significantly, how does selective exclusion of diverse thinking and operational expertise foster the kind of agile, innovative, and adaptive capacity critically demanded in today’s fast-paced business climate?

What might be new in Folaron’s (2005) offer is a reasonable assessment of the practical factors that may trigger resistance and his employee-centered approach. His version of support included addressing emotional needs by recognizing the importance of emotional readiness and helping people navigate – and here he referenced Bridges (date) – the endings, neutral zone, and beginnings. It also means focusing on the process, rather than on the individual – which frequently fosters blame and defensiveness. This notion is supported by Balestracci (2003) when he maintained that problems are more likely caused by organizational factors than by individual responsibility by a ratio of 85/15 per Juran and 96/4 per Deming. It was Deming who, as the originator of the Quality movement, memorably insisted that management: “Drive out fear!” (pg.

Maintaining oneself in a resourceful state is required as a precursor for quality learning and change efforts.

While Folaron regarded motivation as the driver for sustainable change, he astutely perceived its potential misuse as a fault-finding tactic. “People listed as being less supportive [of the change] than required will often acknowledge the gap in support once the reason for the
resistance is explained as something other than motivation. This agreement can lead to cooperation in developing a sustainable and mutually beneficial solution” (p. 4). Rather than totally relying on front-end approaches (antecedents) such as training, new procedures, and management change sponsorship, Folaron stressed that consequences are more powerful drivers to sustain change. From each employee’s perspective, the most positive and beneficial consequences must be found, leveraged, and/or built to create the ongoing desire to use the new behaviors. It is when employees can see the positive outcomes available to them that they can feel drawn to making the requisite changes.

Dilts (2003) would agree. His model of Neuro-logical Levels reflects an insightful depiction of the varying degrees of neuro-physiological complexity used in various kinds of processing and offers a methodology of how to support people at each level. When interventions are introduced at the incorrect level for the true source of the issue, results cannot prove effective, through no fault of the people expected to succeed in making changes. For example if training (behavioral level) is expected to enable people to make mandated changes and the true source of the issues resides at a higher level – perhaps with beliefs/values or identity – the desired behaviors are unlikely to appear or to stick. Such failures are often interpreted to reflect evidence of “employee resistance” (you don’t need quote marks here). However, that responsibility cannot properly be attributed to those whose true needs were not correctly assessed or addressed.

Guiding and caretaking, coaching, teaching, mentoring, sponsoring, and awakening comprise the various appropriate ways at different levels to support someone in the process of change. Nothing about these ways is coercive or meant to be used without the express consent of the individual. To do otherwise would go against core NLP principles that respect each person’s
integrity, personal congruence, and the right to say yes or no in matters related to adding new choices and possibilities. Supporting another person to maintain their own resourcefulness is a key to any effective change strategy.

Vanson (n.d.) ascribed to NLP the power to foster influential outcome thinking in a generative and collaborative way. “If we enable organizations to capture their dreams and operationalize them, we help them drive change in an individual and self-directed way which gives a sense of focus” (p. 2). This is a prescription not only to help individuals manage their own changes, but to support a new level of innovation and revisioning. Drawing from ancient wisdom revealed in the “new sciences” Vanson observed that – consciously or unwittingly – we function according to the principles of all living systems. “An emergent and creative whole comes together when separate parts come together to do a task and are given a few rules and freedom to act (open space, white space, and generative collaboration)” (p. 3). Having issued this call to organizations, she also issued a challenge to the typical OD consultant to detach from the ego state of “expert” that excels at putting things into neat little OD models and “fixing” problems. Her plea has been to listen for where the energy lives, to help people achieve dreams in a systemic way.

Vanson is not the only voice calling for consultants to engage in their own personal work to fully support their client’s change work. Jarrett (2004) advocated for consultants to increase their bandwidth by using psychodynamics as an essential tool to illuminate their own internal landscape and to inform their client interventions. Several authors cited in this discussion agreed on the importance of really listening to the employees, getting their lived experience and perspectives to be able to understand “the deeper meaning of resistance.”
Jarrett (2004) defined resistance as the use of counter-transference, a process that reflects the presence of critical information not yet available to conscious awareness. The consultant serves as a container for projection and must be able to resourcefully fulfill this role by sensitively and constructively taking a position outside the system, as a third party observer. It is only from this place that the consultant can offer the kind of insights and information to the client that can allow new perspectives and the possibility for change.

Another critic of Lewin’s force-field analysis, Bast (2004) saw it as a biased and inaccurate model. She contended that it codified the notion that “forces for change” occurs solely on one side of the force field and “forces for status quo maintenance” on the other. She refuted the implied inference that clients are the only source of resistance.

Believing that within any system there exists dynamic interactivity, she observed that resistance resides on both sides of the consultant/coach client relationship. “Where resistance exists, it cannot be a property solely of one individual in that system. It must have its counterpart in the other person” (p. 5). She urged consultants and coaches to “a system of mutual influence”, one that does not privilege one party over another.

Anyone – client or consultant – can fall into dysfunctional behaviors that signal deeper dynamics at work. Deep understanding of the various forms of projective identification is greatly needed by the consultant in order to support both process and people and not become enmeshed in a system swamp. The ability to understand and defuse collusive dynamics “requires the capacity for self-reflection, emotional intelligence, stamina, and competence by the consultant” (Jarrett, 2004, p. 6).

For the external consultant or coach the bar is set high for the possibility of change success. Likewise, this is true for leaders in the organization. Anderson and Anderson found that “an
Reframing Resistance

organization’s success at change is in direct correlation to the degree to which the senior leaders understand these human dynamics and are able to deal with them in themselves and others” (May, 2002, p. 4). To the extent that change leaders in organizations do not possess these essential competencies to support the change process and people, they need to bring in consultants who do. And those consultants need to work with all sectors of the organization to create the best environment for successful change. Of the participants’ organizations, only P4’s supported their change efforts with external specialists. The other five organizations concerned themselves with moving the change agenda forward, to the detriment of the people involved.

Introduction

These next four themes represent the various principles and methods that the participants used to create and navigate their own personal change process. Given the dearth of organizational support, for these individuals to remain in their organizations and align with the change initiative they had to take charge of providing their own resources to do so. In fact, many of their utilized methods correlate – sometimes uniquely so – to organizational practices promoted in the literature reviewed. As has been demonstrated in this study the organizations themselves – with the exception of P4 – appear not to have generally availed themselves of such expert knowledge. Certainly it was reported that five organizations did not utilize external consultants specialized in change processes.
Theme: Participants confronted their situation by facing the realities of one’s blind spots, need for a sense of balance; personal values; what’s important; weighing pros and cons; acknowledging the aspect of choice; considering trade-offs; and owning one’s own role and responsibility in any situation.

An idea previously noted as an appreciative approach relates to a participant method that involves seeking to find something positive that already existed for them and mapping it to a particular opportunity within the mandate. Peterson (2004) posited that positive energy is released and amplified when attention is put on what is already working with the intention to cultivate more of the same. Also relevant to these efforts is the question that Choi and Price (2005) explored regarding values and abilities playing a role in commitment to change and enacting new behaviors. P5 rediscovered his desire to protect a workforce bearing the brunt of harsh changes, his personal values of withstanding the fires of intense challenge, and his openness to self-reflect on his own developmental edges. He scrutinized his own perspectives while seeking to understand his employers’. On balance he awakened in himself the willingness to participate in the mandate because of the many positive results that could be won.

All participants faced the problem of competing commitments (Kegan and Lahey, 2001). They gradually developed the capacity to deconstruct the various ways they felt pulled, evaluate the most important, and choose that as their commitment. P4’s former sense of self was in jeopardy in the early stages of his firm’s change, as evidenced by his denial that his behavior was any kind of problem. Eventually, guided by a coach who helped him find an internal oasis of stability and quiet reflection, he jettisoned the outdated self image and befriended his “pig-headed” need for competency and desire to helm his firm. With these serving as newly aligned commitments he was able to focus his actions and move toward the changes he needed to make.
Pregnant and needing limited health risk exposure in clinical medical practice, P3 felt trapped by the constraints of a male-dominated business climate. It was only when she tested her assumptions from a new centeredness of “clarity of content and neutrality of tone” that she was able to connect with others in that culture to find common feelings and experiences, as well as the chance to get what she needed. P6 wrestled with her own personal limits and her professional pride and loyalty to her organization. Increasing her capacity to strategically focus on the most critical three things to do on any overwhelming day, she had defaulted to her usual assumption that she could simply increase her work hours to get all the extra work done. Two years of living that assumption have disabused her of that notion and engendered a new question – how sustainable is her deeply held expectation that she do whatever it takes to get the job done and not stop to count the personal cost?

Creating the most favorable positive and beneficial consequences (Folaron, 2005) as outcomes for making a personal change assisted several participants to undertake and fulfill that work. P2 knew that anything she encountered could make her a stronger person, while her difficult change process itself was honing her capacity to guide others. When it became clear that she had no control over being forced to leave her organization, she began to move through the change steps she knew were necessary. After acknowledging her feelings and mourning the many things that were lost to her, she focused on creating a strong and compelling future for herself and lived into that new place. The ritual aspect of these classic steps and the compelling energy she sensed when looking ahead to her future generated an undeniable commitment to step into this new life.

Being the new kid on the block after a privileged tenure in teaching, P3 underwent huge waves of discomfort and fear in learning a new organizational culture and how to fit in. Coached
into savvy tactical expertise she shifted her behavior and put up with much that she initially would have refused. Sights on her ultimate outcome, she eventually won the group’s trust and was able to create stable part-time professional security alongside her first priority to her family.

Many authors referenced here urged organizations to engage the feelings of their members and support people through the often painful process of changing from what is familiar to something new with unknown ramifications. These six participants spent time with their feelings, whether instinctively [P6], because of their own change knowledge [P1, 2, 5], or with the support and assistance of a consultant or coach [P3 and 4]. Acknowledging the emotional waters they swam in allowed them to gradually move through the various stages of change – endings, the neutral zone, and into new beginnings.

Intending to act congruently with one’s own ethical principles and values (Piderit, 2000) provided two participants with the fortitude to stay the course in finding their unique resolution for the change dilemma. P1’s transparent manner of engaging her internal clients presented a dilemma for her role to implement a mandate that she believed was wrong and would fail. She could not ethically tell these organizational clients that she did not support the mandate, even though this was true for her. Acknowledging her priority for her life outside work, and appreciating the challenge and flexibility she enjoyed at this organization, she refocused her energy where it most mattered and let go of the change worry. She interacted as a cool and detached professional with her clients, never claiming to approve of the mandate, but managed to cleanly facilitate its implementation. Her ability to walk this gray line allowed client managers and their frontline people to infer the truth and hold her in respect and appreciation. Having witnessed the dark side of his organization’s change agenda, P5 continuously checked in with himself whether he could implement it. When the change mandate is over each of us has to live
with ourselves, he recognized. His choice was to embrace what he perceived as the greater organizational good of financial viability that he believed was overall served by the mandate.

**Theme:** A *commitment to continuous learning* fostered courageous personal sacrifices and enabled the capacity to realign one’s self with deeper aspects of the organizational change efforts.

Employee disagreements related to a change mandate and their resulting unfulfilled expectations facilitate new organizational learning (Piderit, 2000). This is true for the organization as a whole and for the business units, functions, groups, and individuals that comprise fractals of that larger system. Piderit’s words echoed the living systems principle that interprets challenge or threat as a trigger to the organism/system to make an adaptive response if it is to survive and self-organize at a higher level. Such need to change is inherent with living systems. These study participants faced the personal challenge to adapt if they were to remain within the larger system. While learning may seem to be a ubiquitous requirement, it is true that the commitment to actively learn must be made and there exist multiple levels at which learning may take place. For P2 the different challenge was to reorganize herself to grow into her next venture when people in her role were all let go from her organization.

Several participants exercised a form of what Manki (2003) called “rightful agency”, within environments that did not as such support this notion. Such actions required indirect tactical approaches. P1 walked a delicate line of discretely asserting her true lack of support for her organization’s mandate by never offering overt support, while successfully maintaining her formal implementation role. P6 discovered that she could short-circuit unproductive meeting behavior by “forgetting” to bring a distracting device, thereby setting a new context for an
action-oriented focus that prevailed in subsequent meetings. As P3 learned to communicate more clearly and neutrally on what mattered most to her, she also developed the hard-won capacity to step into the shoes of her clinic partners to truly understand their needs. In so doing she exploited an opportunity to match her needs for part-time work with another’s for part-time retirement, allowing them to share one Full Time Employee slot. This tactical solution fit the cultural mental model yet loosened the constrained framing to demonstrate more flexibility than anyone thought existed, suggesting the possibility for further rippling effects. P5 expressed himself as a life-long learner and sought to incorporate into his “knowledge bank” everything he could learn from his difficult mandate situation.

Essential skills in a consultant role – capacity for self-reflection, emotional intelligence, stamina, and competence (Jarrett, 2004) – such resources fostered these participants’ individual journeys through change. The single skill exerting the most impact for P4 was his new ability to pause in any given moment, to “go to the balcony”, and reflect on what was happening before he chose his response. No longer as emotionally disruptive, he voraciously consumed new learning challenges, and proudly reported that “everything that I tried worked.” Known for her workhorse attitude, P6 exuded stamina and competence. After two long years of overwork and managing numerous triggering situations, she has increasingly taken time to self-reflect on what is truly sustainable for her. Part of her change journey has been the frequent need to step back and ask what she needs now. As these participants stressed, you always have a choice – to stay or leave.

Seeking to find her place in a confusing new culture, P3 investigated its underlying dynamics by talking with “lots of people” in her organization. Assessing his willingness to work with executives who foisted “near ruthless” changes on their workforce, P5 faced cognitive dissonance regarding the apparent values conflict and recognized the need to reconfigure his
Reframing Resistance

thinking. He deeply inquired into the factors that drove the mandate, assessed the many necessary and positive end effects, and was able to reframe his initial pejorative judgment of the executives. He chose to stay onboard, perceiving the sacrifices that he and the workforce had to make were in service to achieve what he judged as the overall well-being of everyone.

This notion of a meta view of a situation is found in the literature, often phrased as “going to the balcony”. Employing such a meta view invariably requires taking on additional perspectives besides our own. It is when we think like an anthropologist to understand other perceptions and values that it becomes possible for mutual collaboration to allow generative learning to learn (Bast, 2004). It is not only new content or skills that must be learned. Generative learning requires a meta-level perspective from which one is able to recognize what needs to be learned in any situation, continuous discovery of the best ways to learn, and the practice of learning as a life-long process. Such learning to learn is fundamental to the work of Gregory Bateson, a main source for Dilts’ (1996) model of Neuro-logical levels. Further discussion of learning levels occurs under the next theme.

Theme: Role clarification and boundaries provided a protective tool for navigating difficult interpersonal and business transactions.

The research did not divulge specific information on the use of roles as related to change resistance, yet anecdotal stories surely abound. A careful re-reading of the referenced sources suggests its relationship to at least three authors’ work. Roles may represent a uniquely creative and powerful way of navigating different interests between employees and management (compiled sources by Pardo del Valle and Martinez Fuentes). As such, they may function as a true and savvy expression of worker agency (Manki). While treading a careful line between
siding with management and holding her own perceived interests and attitudes about the change mandate, the employee is yet able to do her required job with some degree of manageable risk of severe consequences. Playing one’s role skilfully may also bestow a certain creative distinction upon the person who seeks to refrain from becoming a cog in a mechanistic system or simply a rubber-stamping clone. The creative expression of individuality can foster a sense of internal congruence – a form of homeostasis – important to any living system.

Participant use of roles and boundaries in navigating their change efforts relates to a core principle within the framework of Dilts’ model of Neuro-logical levels (1996). His is a methodology for assessing the appropriate source level where an issue lives and finding resolution for it at a higher level of complexity. In addition to influences from Bateson, this theory shares sentiments from Einstein’s famous quote, “A problem cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created it.” It is from a higher level of consciousness – where more human neurophysiology is engaged in processing – that greater resources are truly available.

Levels of learning have also been defined by other authors, some naming them in increasing order of complexity as alpha, beta, and gamma changes. Alpha changes are simple “variations” of a present state (Golembiewski, Billingsley, and Yeager, 1976, as cited in Piderit, 2000, p. 6). Referencing Beer and Walton (1987), Piderit summarized their theory that “beta change involves developing a new understanding of what constitutes a shift on the reference dimension” (p. 6). Finally, Beer and Walton (1987) argued that gamma change comprises “a complete conceptual redefinition” (as cited in Piderit, 2000, p. 6).

Dilts (2003) offers a refined description of his model comprising four levels of learning starting from a baseline of zero. At the Behavior level, a response occurs within a specific
environment, with no learning involved. At the Capabilities level, “adjustment or enrichment of behaviors” is possible “due to a refinement of internal representation” – how one elementally pictures, hears, or feels the issues. At the Values/Beliefs level, “shifts in the overall behavioral approach” are possible “due to a reinterpretation of the issue context.” The Identity level represents “changes in an entire system of beliefs and values or a shift to another system.” The System/Spiritual level represents “getting outside the system into the ‘larger system of systems’ ” (p. 315).

Each participant considered their situation and exercised personal agency to step into a new role as the decision-maker for their personal change efforts. Without exception, each recognized the option of choice – whether, and if so, how, to reconfigure their sense of themselves, their thinking, their actions and behavior. Each chose the particular extent or level of change, selecting the personal boundaries that fit for them in their specific context.

P1 explicitly and emphatically constrained her role to implementing the mandate and with truthful congruence refused responsibility for decision-making. With this tactic she could live with herself and reclaim her focus on life beyond work. She expressed satisfaction with her value priorities and limited her change to a Capabilities level.

After swimming in a difficult sea of cultural change, P3 chose to consciously become an explorer in this new terrain with the intent to settle. Her successes in understanding the practice partners and finding her perfect window of opportunity – as half of an FTE – enabled her to ethically game the system for everyone’s benefit. Given the major ways she shifted beliefs and values to include her part in the problems and recognition of her new system’s needs, her change seems to have been at the transformational level of Identity.
P6 also truthfully distinguished herself to the merged staff as an implementer with no
decision control. Her change was similar to that of P1 in that she refined the way she saw her
expanded duties, but as more of the same dedication and selfless overwork. Her change likely
occurred at the Capabilities level.

P5 represented himself formally as “the collective voice of execs” in his senior
communications manager role and yet consciously functioned in a more clandestine role as an
advocate for the workforce. Not discernibly visible, he was “rarely [personally] known in the
broad workforce”. The formal cover seems to have been organizational protocol to minimize
personal attacks from angry employees; the informal role he took to himself allowed him to work
sub rosa for more humanitarian treatment. Managing the two roles in concert took him on a
change journey that involved a radical reassessment of the larger context that prompted
executives to enact “near ruthless” outcomes on their workforce. He managed a difficult
Values/Beliefs transformation.

When P4’s sense of himself was shockingly displaced, he could never again be the same. In
assuming responsibility for his firm’s viability at its helm, he chose to face realities and become
“whole”. P4 took the difficult path of Identity transformation. So did P2 also choose to become a
new person by reclaiming her self-worth, mapping current competencies into a new arena, and
reinventing herself as an entrepreneur. Changing vital aspects of her belief and values system
seems to reflect an Identity level transformation.
**Theme: Valuing authenticity** allowed participants to take a genuine stance, exercise honesty rather than game-playing, and affirm these values by their behavior.

This theme seems resonant with the Gestalt principle that perceives “resistance” as a “response that keeps the system from moving forward because something is not being taken into account” (H. Spector, personal communication, February 14, 2005). It seems reasonable to infer from this that every person who expresses a form of “resistance” has a core need for internal congruence. Otherwise it would pose no problem to go along with a mandate with which one has issues. It is probably generally true that people need a sense of internal congruence, likely related to the body’s predisposition to maintain homeostasis.

In the case of these study participants, each individual defended at least one particular value or position deemed critical to their well-being. P1 did not offer overt mandate support yet implemented the mandate in her formal role. As part of her value system, P2 chose not to socialize with her professional peers but paid the price of being misunderstood and ostracized. P3 inventively iterated her way into part-time work that was right for her, her family, and ultimately for the practice as well. Once P4 perceived his part in the firm’s problems, he could not cede power to another, but rather chose to change so he could recover his whole self and be proven competent to lead his firm. Feeling like he was under water most of the time, P5 would not be part of the dark side, but sought to make a positive difference. P6 maintained her dedication and loyalty to her organization despite what she now admits may be an unsustainable workload for anyone, including herself.
How do all these themes meet in the data, literature, and researcher perspectives?

Similar threads of the aggregated information in this Discussion section did occur, while unique or opposing perspectives also occurred. The following reflect some of what appear to be the more frequent and significant confluences.

There exists a range of choices for managing change, some more effective than others, some more appropriate for some contexts. Most organizational problems originate from the system itself rather than because of individual responsibility.

Change is a complex iterative process that involves many underlying factors. It takes skill, compassion, deep understanding of self and others, and patience to navigate change and to support others in doing so. Change is not business as usual and needs additional resources, competencies, and mental models that foster success.

A certain duality of vision related to change efforts exists within many organizations. The short term vision seeks to save money upfront and launches the change mandate. The long term vision seeks to save money and potential grief later by spending money now to effect the right kind of change effort and outcome. The default model of organizational change is that of looking for and “fixing problems” rather than looking for and sensing what is trying to emerge and helping it grow.

Dismissing or trying to overcome “resistance” is throwing away a powerful resource that could be harnessed for positive constructive purposes. The meanings that lie beneath the construct of “resistance” represent actual data. Discovering and working with such data is at least as important as utilizing any other form of data in order to assess, plan, and implement organizational and personal change. You have to pay attention and work with what exists. People
are capable of incredible hard work and commitment to change when they perceive it is in their interests and that it allows positive outcomes for them.

Evidence of such commitment to change can be seen in the table below, which depicts the supportive methods used for successful personal change efforts by the participants in this study. The motivation column represents the positive outcomes these participants chose to pursue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>What supported personal change</th>
<th>What motivated personal change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Experience in <strong>HR</strong> field</td>
<td>Life outside work as first priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role clarification &amp; boundaries</td>
<td>Flexibility &amp; challenge in work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Experience in <strong>change mgt</strong> field</td>
<td>Continuous learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Created compelling future</td>
<td>Be best self – professional/personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Clear, neutral communication</td>
<td>Family-work balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding other perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Pause, go to the balcony, reengage</td>
<td>Learning &amp; competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment to stop the pain</td>
<td>Become whole self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Reconfigured thinking</td>
<td>Continuous learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balanced means &amp; outcomes</td>
<td>Grow knowledge bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Prioritized three items daily</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developed thicker skin</td>
<td>Dedication and loyalty to organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resistance is like the tip of an iceberg in that:

- a greater proportion is below the surface
- nothing below can be clearly seen until conscious effort is made to see and assess
- it points to something deeper that is significant
- it signals that prompt attention is warranted
- ignoring or trying to overcome it is likely to sink the ship [of org change]

The term “resistance” is a cultural icon of its own era, and as such it represented the best thinking at that time. It’s a construct derived from an earlier period of time in which the world – congruent with its prevailing scientific theories – was seen as functioning in linear and mechanistic fashion. There are many who believe the time has come to retire, reframe, and/or truly understand what lay below the term/construct and its many contextual meanings.
The construct of “resistance” resides in an ideological frame that typically references the privileges management’s interests, often, but not always, to the exclusion of the workforce’s interests. The pejorative meaning typically ascribed to “resistance” does not do justice to the existing true breadth of potential meanings, options, and range of responses. The range of non-management responses related to change are [mostly] not represented in the OD change literature. They remain siloed within the labor, postmodernist, and critical theory literature. Why?

Participation in the change process matters – to the participants, for quality and innovation, for authentic buy-in, for organizational learning, for adaptive and nimble responses, and for the best chance of ultimate success in the change efforts. Engagement creates the kind of organizations people want to work in.

For change to be effective you have to pay attention to and work with:

- feelings and emotions
- concerns and issues
- issues of people’s agency
- core psychological issues that may be triggered during change efforts
- phases of denial, ambivalence, letting go, feeling lost, starting something new
- allowing enough time for people to make the changes – longer than you think
- providing extra resources to help people do the extra work that change requires
- supporting people in meaningful ways that fit their needs
- people’s energy, ideas, and capacity to co-create change
Executive Summary

Change is difficult for all of us and also a fact of life – organizational and personal. There exists a range of choices for managing organizational change, some more effective than others or more appropriate for some contexts. Research shows that most organizational problems originate from the system itself rather than because of individual responsibility.

Change is a complex process. It requires skill, compassion, deep understanding of self and others, and patience to navigate change and to support others in doing so. Change is not business as usual and requires additional resources, competencies, and mental models that foster success.

For change to be most effective you need to work with:

- emotions and issues
- concerns about people’s agency
- stages of change
- allowing adequate time for successful change work
- extra resources to help people do the extra work of change
- supporting people in meaningful ways that fit their needs
- people’s energy, ideas, and capacity to co-create change

The presence of “resistance” is actually good news. It represents energy that can be harnessed for positive constructive purposes in the change efforts. Participation in the change process matters – for quality and innovation, buy-in, organizational learning, and to improve the chances of ultimate successful change. Engaging your employees to co-create the change process creates the kind of organizations people want to work in. People are capable of hard work and commitment to change when they perceive it is in their interests and that it provides positive outcomes for them.
Recommendations

- Create teams of thinking partners across different functions and levels throughout the organization to explore and resolve issues that arise.
- When bigger issues seem to require a system-wide change, create X-functional change teams to discuss and widely solicit creative ideas that address the issues.
- Create a “skunk works” team of X-functional and X-level people to explore what is needed to grow the next innovation cycle of the organization. Provide resources and protection.
- Provide expert change managers to offer the best support to people and processes related to the organizational change efforts.
- Find ways to involve anyone who wants it in the change effort.
- Ensure that people’s emotional needs are addressed and supported.
- Expect change to take longer than expected; readjust expectations and milestones.
- Keep channels of communication actively open and disseminate as much information as possible early on and throughout the change efforts.
- Provide change management learning opportunities to those who most need to lead the efforts and as feasible to those who want it.
- Plan change efforts so that some processes remain stable while others change.
- Stagger and pause change efforts as feasible and necessary to diminish hardship.
- Find ways to reduce negative outcomes for people.
- Provide multiple ways to promote, solicit, and utilize input from people.
- Recognize that you’re all in this together and working together offers substantial return on everyone’s investment.
References


Appendix A

Sample e-mail invitation to identified participants:

SUBJ: Invitation to Participate in Study: Methods for successful personal change in context of organizational needs and change efforts.

I am a graduate student in Organizational Psychology at John F. Kennedy University. As part of the requirements for the completion of my Master’s degree, I am conducting research on the effective methods for making sustainable personal change when expected as part of an organizational change effort. Since you have participated in change efforts recently, I am requesting your consideration to participate in this study.

The proposed study will focus on the experience and results of your successful personal change experience. The study will be conducted through an individual interview with each of six different participants. Each interview will be of 45-60 minutes duration and will be digitally recorded. Study participants will be asked to describe their own personal change experience, and to identify what particularly worked and did not work to help make their change efforts successful. Data gathered in interviews will be analyzed and interpreted with the goal of offering a more complete understanding of how to best support personal change efforts. By focusing on critical factors of such experience, I hope to contribute data that may add information to benefit individuals and organizations as they implement change.

Participation is completely voluntary and you are free to change your mind at any time and choose not to continue. Should you choose to participate, all information you give during the interview process will be confidential and your individual contributions will be anonymous. All data collected during the interview process will be stored in a secured, confidential location accessible only by me and a third-party transcriber. Each participant will be identified on the audio files by first name and participant code only. I will also make available to you a copy of the summary of the results of this study at your request.

Thank you for your consideration. I sincerely hope that you will choose to participate! If you have any questions or would like to talk with me further prior to making a decision to participate, please feel free to call me at 510-235-5395.

Sincerely,
Marcia Rayene
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

My name is Marcia Rayene. I am currently a graduate student in the Masters of Organizational Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California. This research project is a requirement toward the completion of my Master’s degree. This research project is being conducted under the advisement of Sharon Mulgrew, M.P.H. – Organizational Psychology Project Advisor. She can be reached at SAMulgrew@aol.com, or 510-450-0378.

Project Summary: The proposed study will focus on the experience and results of your successful personal change experience. The study will be conducted through an individual interview with each of six different participants. Each interview will be of 45-60 minutes duration and will be digitally recorded. Study participants will be asked to describe their own personal change experience, and to identify what particularly worked and did not work to help make their change efforts successful. You may also be contacted by phone at a later date for clarification or follow-up necessary to insure accuracy of the data.

Data gathered in interviews will be analyzed and interpreted with the goal of offering a more complete understanding of how to best support personal change efforts. By focusing on critical factors of such experience, I hope to contribute data that may add information to benefit individuals and organizations as they implement change.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is completely voluntary and participants are free to change their mind at any time and choose not to continue even after signing this consent form.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All information given by study participants is confidential and individual contributions are anonymous. All data will be stored in a secured, confidential location accessible only by me and a third-party transcriber. Each participant will be identified on the audio files by first name and participant code only.

Availability of Results: A summary of the results of this study will be available to participants upon request after completion of the study.

**Consent:** I hereby consent to participate in the above research project. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may change my mind or refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence. I may refuse to answer any questions or I may stop the interview. I understand that some of the things I say may be directly quoted in the text of the final report, and subsequent publications, but that my full name will not be associated with this study.

| Participant Signature: ____________________________ | Date: ______________ |
| Name: (Please Print) ________________________________ | |

| Witness Signature: ________________________________ | Date: ______________ |
| Name: (Please Print) ________________________________ | |
Appendix C

Interview Questions

Primary questions are in bold text. Additionally listed in plain text are potential follow-up questions that may be asked if the participant does not address them in his or her response to the primary question. Additional questions may also be asked, to follow emerging data from the participant’s own story and responses.

Mutual introductions
Summarize the participant’s background as it was gathered in the selection process.

I would appreciate it if you would reflect back on your personal change experience and share as much of it as you can with me.

1. **Tell me about the context of your organization’s change efforts and about your own personal change experience.**
   - What were the main goals for this organizational change effort?
   - How were you and your role at that time affected by this organizational mandate?
   - When and how did you first become aware of the need to make personal changes within this larger effort?
   - What were your responses to this perceived need to make personal changes?

2. **What kinds of change practices did you encounter within the organizational change efforts? Which practices supported you in your individual change efforts and which did not work for you?**
   - How were you approached by people in charge of leading the change efforts?
   - How were you approached by people to whom you reported regarding these change efforts?
   - What kind of approaches or change practices supported you to make those personal changes?
   - Which approaches did not support you? What was missing for you? What did you need? What would have supported you better?

3. **What was particularly motivating for you as you pursued your personal change efforts? How were you able to accomplish these changes?**
   - What changes were the most challenging or difficult for you to undertake? The easiest? Tell me more about that.
   - How did you deal with these difficulties?
   - What kept you going when it became difficult, for whatever reasons?
   - To what do you attribute your success in making these personal changes?
4. **As a result of this personal change experience, how do you see any need to make more personal changes in the future?**

   Is your perspective the same or different now about making personal changes?
   How did this successful experience prepare you to manage future change needs?
   How might you change your own process of making personal changes, based on your previous experience?

5. **What was most significant for you about this successful personal change experience?**

   What aspects of your personal change experience are most meaningful for you?
   What are you most proud about?
   What shifted the most? The least?
   What other affects did this experience provide for you?

6. **How did your success in making personal changes affect your relationship to the broader organizational change efforts?**

   Tell me how your change work and that of the organization intersected or connected.
   What lets you know that your personal change work was successful?
   What affects happened between you and the organization when you conducted your own change work?
   How did you perceive the organizational change efforts before you began your own personal work?
   How did you perceive these efforts during and after your own successful changes?
   What suggestions might you have for people making their own personal changes?
   What suggestions might you have for people facilitating organizational change?