

Chapter 18

Resistance to Organizational Change in Academia: A Case Study From Palestine Investigating the Under-Reflected Role of Change Agents

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ABSTRACT

Resistance to change happens to be a phenomenon in which both the change agents and change recipients are equally responsible for all forms of resistance. Resistance and its various forms are an outcome of the change agents' observations and their interpretations of the conversations, behavior, and reactions of the change recipients. This chapter uses auto-ethnographic reflexive narratives of two change agents involved in the self-assessment process at a college planning to seek US-based business program accreditation to make sense of the change process. The purpose of this chapter is to emphasize the under-reflected role of the change agents and how they influence and affect the behavior of change recipients and thereby contribute towards employee resistance. The chapter also emphasizes the crucial role of reflection and introspection in the sensemaking activities of the change agents in the entire change initiative and thereby adds evidence-based organizational change and development initiatives in an academic setting where research is limited.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational change has become inevitable over the past few years. With globalization, competition, strategic alignment, introduction of new management theories and models, organizations and their employees are continuously being exposed to change in a variety of ways. In spite of careful research and planning by organizational leaders, change initiatives are a major source of concern. Usually organizational change and development (OCD) efforts and interventions have a tendency to produce failure (Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004). Resistance to change has been cited as the most common reason for the failure of majority change initiatives (Erwin & Garman, 2009). However, resistance to a large extent has been seen as a “psychological phenomenon located over there in the change recipients” (Anderson, 2016; Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008, p.370) and “objectified as a socio-psychological phenomenon” (Dent & Goldberg, 1999 as cited in Ijaz & Vitalist, 2011, p.119).

This has minimized the development of OCD tools and methodologies to increase the success of change initiatives. Most of the efforts remain concentrated on showing change recipients “the error of their ways by dealing with the misunderstandings, fears and apprehensions believed to underlie their resistance” (Ford et al., 2008, p.370; Kulkarni, 2016), resulting in a lack of ‘evidence based’ organization development tools which assist change agents in repairing trust (Tomlinson, Dineen & Lewicki, 2004), resolve issues of injustice (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999) and restore credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

Therefore, to portray a more complete picture, resistance to organizational change should be reconstructed as a phenomenon where both the change agents and change recipients are equally responsible for its occurrence. Employees’ resistance to change is observed, deconstructed, made sense of and given appropriate meanings by the change agents (Ford et al., 2008). Employees’ actions, conversations and reactions are behavioral triggers which change agents make sense of and label as resistance. Studies which can “engage all forces of change, all contributions to change i.e., recipient action, agent sensemaking and organizational background and the dynamics of relationship” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362), allow a more balanced picture of the entire change process. Studies which go beyond the “one-sided change agent centric view” (Ford et al., 2008, p.362; Kulkarni, 2016) by critically reflecting on the contributory role of the change agents and the agent-recipient relationships (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, Ford et al., 2008) are few. Further, “reflexivity has been identified as a useful method to support change agents” and assist them in understanding their role in the entire change process but “there is little to no clarity [on] how it should be executed” (Ostentoski, 2015, p.41).

The entire process constituted action, reflection and new action (Schon, 1987). Change agents reflect, consciously explore using their personal knowledge and experience to critique their actions, seek relevant evidence, learn and then apply this new knowledge to rectify the change resistant environment. Reflection and introspection may appear to be a time consuming, abstract and complex process but however it is also a rich experience. Reflection allows questioning of current evidence-based practices and their subsequent modification to increase the overall success of the entire change initiative (Thompson and Burns, 2008).

The focus of the chapter is on investigating the under-reflected role of the change agents in the entire change process and how they could contribute towards the change recipients’ resistance practices. Also, how change agents by reflecting on their actions and behaviors and its effect on change recipients can minimize resistance. The chapter explores issues such as the various forms of employees’ resistance which might occur within a college functioning under the umbrella of a university, planning to seek business accreditation offered by an American professional organization within the next few years. How do

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