


Organizational Change: The Challenge of Change Aversion

Jason A. Hubbart 

School of Natural Resources, Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Design,
West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506, USA; jason.hubbart@mail.wvu.edu; Tel.: +1-304-293-2472

Abstract: Organizational change has been investigated for decades, with many works addressing change adoption challenges. Change aversion, like change resistance, is not uncommon, but going unchecked can reduce organizational change initiative success. This communication aims to provide a concise in-road for students and practitioners to the organizational change and change aversion literature. An attempt is made to enter this complicated discussion in a way that may assist the reader in understanding what change aversion is, how vital acceptance of organizational change is, and that there are operational practices that can facilitate a culture of change acceptance. Aversion to change may result from many factors, including (but not limited to) fear of the unknown, discomfort over a potential loss of control, and the instinctive tendency to prefer the familiar over the unfamiliar. However, despite advancements in the administration of inevitable organizational change moments, challenges related to change resistance can always occur, particularly lacking effective change leadership. Leadership can address resistance early, thus more readily guaranteeing a positive and productive organizational change outcome. Offering employees quality jobs and an inclusive, empathetic, and considerate environment can lead to early organizational buy-in and change acceptance, thereby improving long-term organization efficiencies and outputs. Ultimately, organizational change initiatives are most likely to succeed with buy-in and acceptance, thereby enabling businesses to remain competitive in a continuously evolving environment.

Keywords: organizational change; change aversion; resistance to change; leadership; management; employee inclusivity; employee positioning; organizational advancement



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1. Introduction

Many works in the literature address the challenges of organizational change (Hubbart 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 1979; Kotter 2007; Manning 2012; Stobierski 2020; Todnem 2005) and the difficulty of accepting change or change resistance (Hubbart 2023; Moon 2009; Shtivelband and Rosecrance 2010; Stokke 2014). However, relatively few sources address the challenge of change aversion amidst organizational change initiatives (Aldosari et al. 2015; Levine and Cohen 2018; van Dijk and van Dick 2009). Change resistance is a well-recognized construct; however, in the following text, change resistance and change aversion are lumped. A lumped approach is taken because while the behaviors and solutions may be similar, the onset of those behaviors can be somewhat different. For example, change resistance may be thought of as a reluctance to adapt to imposed change (Peus et al. 2009), while change aversion may be thought of as similar to loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) or change that a person may be in control of and may therefore avoid. Said differently, people may prefer change they choose for themselves rather than mandated change, and in either case (resistance or aversion), they may avoid that change; hence, as will be discussed later, the importance of buy-in is significant (Moon 2009; Shtivelband and Rosecrance 2010). It is also worth acknowledging that intermediate states of resistance, aversion, or acceptance to change likely exist amidst any given change moment.

Change aversion (or resistance) in the context of organizational change is important because of what change aversion is: a normal, instinctive process that, if understood, can be

addressed, perhaps even preemptively, resulting in successful cultural acceptance before, during, and following organizational change initiatives (Evans and Evans 2018; Festinger 1957; Sedley and Müller 2013). Consider the following scenario from higher education that provides an analogy for change aversion amidst an organizational change moment and supplies some context.

Dr. Smith had been a tenured professor of history at the university for over two decades. She was used to teaching her classes in person, holding office hours, and conducting research in the library. However, everything changed with the COVID pandemic in January 2020. The university shifted to remote learning, and Dr. Smith was forced to adjust to a new way of teaching. At first, Dr. Smith was resistant to the change. She missed seeing her students in person and found connecting with them on web-based platforms challenging. She struggled with technology and often experienced technical difficulties during lectures. She also found it hard to manage her time, as she was now working from home and had to balance her academic work with taking care of her children. Dr. Smith was frustrated and overwhelmed. She missed the routine and structure of her old life and longed for things to return to normal. She was skeptical that online teaching could be as effective as in-person teaching and felt she could not deliver the same quality of education to her students. However, Dr. Smith adjusted to the new reality over time. She started to explore different ways of using technology to engage her students, such as incorporating online discussion forums and interactive activities. She also began to connect with her students more personally, checking in with them regularly and creating a supportive virtual community. As Dr. Smith adapted to remote teaching, she discovered some unexpected benefits. She found that she had a more flexible schedule and could spend more time with her family. She also realized that online teaching allowed her to reach a wider audience, including students who would not have been able to attend her classes in person. As the pandemic continued, Dr. Smith became more confident in teaching online. She even began to see some advantages to remote teaching that she would never have anticipated. For example, she found that her students were more willing to participate in online discussions than in-person ones, which led to richer and more diverse conversations. Ultimately, Dr. Smith came to appreciate the benefits of remote teaching and embraced the new reality. She even found that she could bring some of the lessons she learned during remote education back into her in-person instruction, making her classes more engaging and inclusive than ever before. Looking back, Dr. Smith realized that her initial change aversions had held her back. By embracing the new reality, she was able to grow as an educator and connect with her students in new and meaningful ways. She was grateful for the opportunity to adapt and grow and felt confident that she could tackle any challenge that came her way in the future.

In the context of the preceding example, change aversion (resistance to change) may be a response to some form of new programming (or expectation) that, while reasonable in concept, may be uncomfortable in application simply because it is not a cultural norm. In the example above, Dr. Smith had to adjust to a new and uncomfortable organizational change initiative (online teaching). Still, after a while, Dr. Smith got used to the change and embraced the opportunity to develop her teaching program further and grow professionally. To learn that valuable lesson, Dr. Smith had to navigate an uncomfortable learning process. However, given this example, it is arguable that in some circumstances, resistance or aversion to change can be a productive process with positive organizational outcomes (Ford et al. 2008).

Organizations frequently embark on initiatives for organizational change to modernize significant aspects or procedures within their business. Modernization must occur to align and remain contemporary with the evolving demands of a dynamic industry. Hubbart (2023) defined organizational change as “a process in which an organization alters minor to major structural components to address operational costs, productivity, and service quality deficiencies, identify new growth opportunities, or achieve other organizational goals”. Ultimately, organizational change initiatives are common and essential pivotal

moments enabling businesses to adjust and maintain their competitiveness within a dynamic, flexible, and continuously evolving environment. Organizational change processes have been studied for decades (Hubbart 2023; Jabri and Jabri 2022; Kolbergýtè and Dromantaitè 2022; Manning 2012; Rieg et al. 2021; Tichy 1983; Todnem 2005; Vlachopoulos 2021), and many tools exist to assist in deliberate approaches to yield optimal outcomes (Kearney and Hyle 2006; Kotter 2012; Peters and Waterman 2011; Sarayreh et al. 2013; Tang 2019). However, challenges will always exist because there can be a great deal of organizational variability, including employee resistance (aversion), during these moments. Change resistance (i.e., avoidance or aversion) is a broad term describing a range of emotional, psychological, and social factors that make it difficult for people to adapt to new situations (Alqahtani and Alajmi 2010; Levine and Cohen 2018; van Dijk and van Dick 2009). Resistance to change includes fear of the unknown, discomfort over a potential loss of control, and the instinctive tendency to prefer the familiar over the unfamiliar (Peus et al. 2009). Oreg (2003) developed a scale to measure an individual's dispositional inclination to resist changes and identified four reliable factors: (1) routine seeking, (2) emotional reaction to imposed change, (3) cognitive rigidity, and (4) short-term focus. These factors suggest that change-averse people may fear losing their routines, experience negative emotions from imposed changes, and be unable to adapt to new situations, focusing too intensely on short-term outcomes. Gleicher and Petty (1992) showed that fear of change could influence the processing of persuasive arguments and that expectations of reassurance may affect how people evaluate solutions presented in compelling messages. These findings suggest that people who are change averse may fear uncertainty and the unknown and may benefit from reassurances that required changes will be beneficial. Admittedly, reassurance, while generally helpful, may be an oversimplified solution given the complicated underlying interpretive issues that drive change aversion (Weiser et al. 2020). However, reassurance can be a positive investment lacking other adaptive and strategic implementations for a given change moment.

The purpose of this article is to provide a concise in-road to students and practitioners to the organizational change and change aversion literature. It is not the objective to provide a literature review but instead to (a) present a discussion of change resistance that may (b) assist the reader in envisioning how change acceptance affects a successful change initiative and (c) facilitate awareness that there are organizational and operational philosophies that can result in a change acceptance culture, resulting in more positive and productive outcomes from inevitable moments of organizational change.

2. Adjusting to Change

While identifying the myriad of sources of variation that may lead to change aversion is beyond the intent of the current article, adjusting to something new can be difficult for various reasons. Some leading explanations include (the list is not conclusive) the following:

- **Comfort zone:** People tend to have a comfort zone where they feel safe, secure, and familiar. When they are asked to step out of this zone and try something new, it can be uncomfortable and even scary. Stepping out of a comfort zone can be frightening because it requires risk-taking, willingness to try something different, and potential failure or disappointment (Endrejat 2021; Neil and Young 2001).
- **Attachment to the old:** People often form attachments to things they are used to or have grown attached to. Forming attachments is true for personal belongings, such as clothes or other items people have used for a long time. It is also true for habitual tasks or routines they have grown used to and comfortable with over time (Singh 2012).
- **Expectations:** People tend to have certain expectations regarding new things. For example, they may expect a new shirt to feel like their old one, even though the new one is made of different materials or has a different fit. Or they may expect a new professional expectation to fit as comfortably as a previous expectation. This is further complicated when multiple expectations may be organized around each other for efficiency, and one change upsets overall productivity (Peus et al. 2009; Singh 2012).

- Fear of change: Change can be intimidating, especially if it involves leaving behind something familiar and entering the unknown. People may fear that the new situation will not be as good as the old one or that they will not adapt to the new situation. There can be an automatic expectation that the change will fail because it does not fit the established normal operations (Endrejat 2021; Peus et al. 2009; Weeks et al. 2004; Welbourne 1994).
- Cognitive dissonance: Sometimes, people may experience cognitive dissonance when trying something new. Cognitive dissonance can occur when people hold conflicting beliefs or attitudes, such as “I like my old way of teaching” versus “I should try something new”. These ideological conflicts can create mental discomfort as individuals try to reconcile these conflicting thoughts, often leading to avoidance (Burnes and James 1995; Caliskan and Gökalp 2020; Gruber 2003).

Adjusting to new expectations can be challenging because of the factors above. However, it is also true that with practice, patience, and an open mind, adjusting to organizational changes can be significantly eased and more easily navigated (Devos et al. 2007; Kimberley et al. 2018). The reality is that organizational change is a constant reality for most if not all, organizations and institutions. Whether organizational changes are due to industry adaptations, new regulations, or customer needs and preferences shifts, organizations must adjust their practices to remain competitive and relevant (Hubbart 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 1979; Kotter 2012; Peus et al. 2009). Therefore, organizational change can be difficult and stressful for employees, who may feel uncertain about their future and strongly resist change (Evans and Evans 2018; Kotter and Whitehead 2010; Neil and Young 2001). A key to successfully navigating organizational change moments is to encourage open-mindedness. When employees resist change, they may cling to old habits and processes, which can create obstacles to implementing new strategies and hinder the organization’s progress. Indeed, studies show that open-minded and adaptive employees can help the organization progress more smoothly and effectively (Devos et al. 2007; Kimberley et al. 2018). Thus, it benefits organizations to develop those behaviors in their employees.

Employees who remain open-minded amidst organizational change initiatives become better equipped to learn and embrace new ideas and business practices. They are willing to explore new methods, processes, and technologies to improve efficiency and effectiveness. They are also more willing to collaborate and share knowledge, which can lead to more positive outcomes and increased innovation. Furthermore, open-minded employees willing to adapt to change will likely be happier in their occupations. Instead of feeling stuck in organizational cultural norms, they have the opportunity to learn and grow, which can lead to greater job satisfaction and motivation. Ultimately, through buy-in, engagement, and adaptation, employers and employees advance their industry and emerge from a change movement more focused and financially resilient (Moon 2009; Shtivelband and Rosecrance 2010; Stokke 2014).

3. The Role of Leadership

Leadership is critical in managing organizational change and fostering a culture of openness and adaptability. The job of leadership is to create a vision for the organization and communicate it clearly (and often) to employees. They must also ensure employees understand why changes are necessary and how change mandates will benefit the organization. Ensuring employees understand why organizational change must occur is essential for leaders as leaders often direct organizational evolution, building on existing systems and transforming old ones to develop new visions that advance organizational productivity (Hubbart 2022; Jabri and Jabri 2022; Kotter 2007, 2012; McKenna 2020). To meet these objectives, leaders must also remove obstacles and provide the necessary resources and support to help employees adapt to change. Resources may include training programs, mentoring, coaching, and other forms of support that help employees develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the new environment.

Leaders must also be empathetic during change initiatives to reduce aversion and resistance. They must foster a culture of openness and encourage employees to share their thoughts and ideas. They must create a safe space for employees to voice their concerns, provide feedback, and be willing to listen and make changes based on that feedback (Hubbart 2023). It is therefore important to acknowledge that sometimes employees are change averse because they are experiencing organizational incompatibilities and conflicts that confuse proximate and ultimate productivity deficiencies (Broadberry and Wallis 2017; Harris et al. 2007; Simons 2002; Timming 2021). In such circumstances, simply focusing on buy-in may not address some underlying organizational challenges that are impeding progress. Finally, leaders must model the behavior they want to see in others, be ready to adapt to change and demonstrate a willingness to learn and grow. When leaders lead by example, they create a culture of transparency and adaptability essential for managing organizational change and achieving long-term success.

4. Facilitating Trust and Reducing Change Aversion

The issue of trust in the context of organizational change has been well-researched (Askvik and Jamil 2013; Baek and Jung 2015; Fuglsang and Jagd 2015; Kotter and Schlesinger 1979; Semerciöz et al. 2011; Sööt and Rootalu 2012; Young and Daniel 2003). Several methods have been developed that can assist change leaders in creating a culture of trust, thereby reducing change aversion during organizational change initiatives. While an exhaustive review of the literature on this topic is well beyond the scope of the current article, an example is provided as a contextual in-road for the reader. Mazzei (2014) proposed a comprehensive framework for communication strategies that can enhance employee engagement and buy-in during times of change. This framework (Figure 1) consists of seven key strategies change leaders can implement to promote effective communication and stakeholder support. The first strategy (1) establishes a clear and consistent communication pathway, ensuring all stakeholders receive relevant and timely information about the change initiative. Second (2), transparency is crucial; leaders must communicate openly and honestly with employees, providing clear rationales for the proposed changes. Building trust (3) is another key strategy, which can be achieved through active listening, being responsive to feedback, and following through on commitments. Fourth (4), leaders should train managers to become effective communicators, equipping them with the necessary skills to engage employees in meaningful conversations about the change initiative. Increasing awareness and accountability (5) for organizational values is another crucial strategy that can help employees to understand the rationale behind the change and align their behaviors with the organization's values.

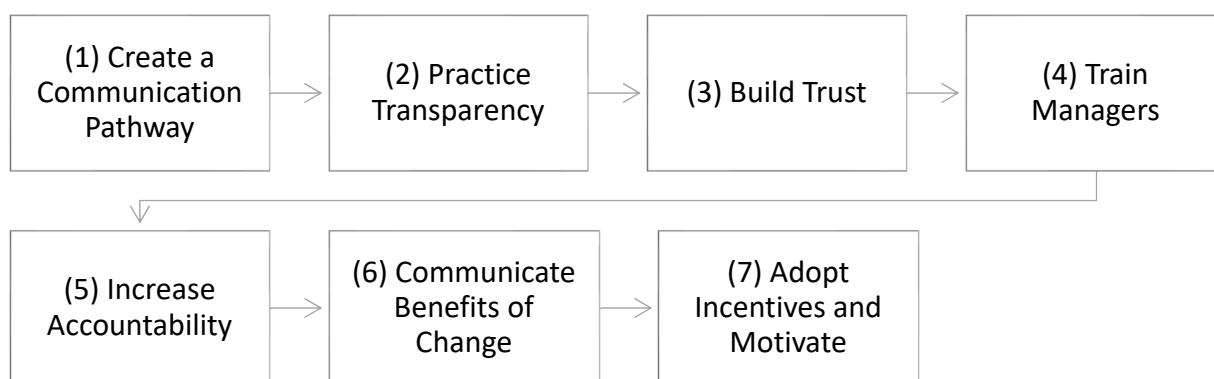


Figure 1. Communication strategies to develop employee buy-in and reduce change aversion amidst organizational change initiatives. Developed from Mazzei (2014).

In addition, leaders should emphasize the mutual benefits of the proposed change for both employees and the organization (6). This approach can help employees understand how the change will benefit them and feel motivated to support it. Lastly (7), leaders

should adopt small practices that encourage and reinforce employee motivation, such as recognizing and celebrating successes and providing incentives for good performance. Implementing these strategies requires change leaders to be self-aware and empathetic to organizational stakeholders (Mazzei 2014). Therefore, leaders must empathize with employees and understand their concerns, needs, and perspectives to communicate effectively and build trust. By following effective communication strategies, leaders can successfully navigate change initiatives and foster employee engagement and buy-in.

5. Investing in Change Acceptance

Change acceptance involves welcoming and embracing change instead of opposing or evading change (Hubbart 2023). Astute leaders understand that investing in their employees translates to investing in future organizational change initiatives, thereby improving the likelihood of change acceptance as those moments come, and they will. Preempting successful change initiatives through a culture of change acceptance is accomplished in many ways, including (but not limited to) developing high-quality jobs and equitable work environments (Tagulao and Marques 2022). In this context, it may be worth asking, “If quality jobs can make companies more competitive, resilient, and equitable, then why don’t more companies create them?” Unfortunately, many leaders fail to recognize the extent of workers’ critical role in company performance and the value of investing in employee empowerment and employability (Kalyal et al. 2010). Similarly, leaders may be less concerned about high employee turnover because they may believe that employee work is less critical or that employees are replaceable (Boushey and Glynn 2012; Kacmar et al. 2006). In either case, the workers may be undervalued for their talents and inadequately positioned to support the organization most effectively (Eiselt and Marianov 2008; Erdogan et al. 2011; Ward and Tripp 2012). Often, these same companies seek to increase profits by adding more product units and increasing output while rearranging the organization’s structure, roles, or responsibilities, thereby avoiding underlying financial issues. However, talented leaders recognize that value to the organization is created by delivering the best value to customers. Quality operational execution and low employee turnover are critical to achieving this goal.

Stated differently, offering quality jobs is an altruistic move and good for business. Organizations that do not provide a positive environment and adequate employee care often suffer from rampant absenteeism, sloppiness, lack of focus, and change aversion. Consequently, administrators may question how they can entrust their company’s fate to such a workforce. Subsequently, the administration may enact as many controls as possible and centralize many operations they believe the administration can handle more effectively (McKenna 2020). Essentially, these organizations are building an operational system assuming the workforce cannot meet expectations (Ton 2014, 2023). In such cases, managers’ assumptions about employees may prove true simply because they create a system that promotes the behaviors administrators fear.

On the other hand, if leaders recognize that employees are reliable and possess unique skills deserving of customized expectations, the outcomes can be positive for the organization and the employees. Ultimately, leaders and employees must trust that each will do their jobs with integrity and hold each other accountable for their distinct responsibilities. If an organization can operate with a competitive salary, have low turnover, and have few operational challenges, an operational system emerges that is profitable, empathetic, considerate, and greatly lacking in change aversion.

6. Conclusions

Organizational change is a process in which an organization alters minor to major structural components to address operational costs, productivity, and service quality deficiencies, identify new growth opportunities, or achieve other organizational goals. The literature presents challenges related to organizational change and the difficulty of change aversion. Understanding and navigating change aversion issues can assist in successful outcomes of organizational change initiatives. Accepting change is essential to embrace

new concepts and experiences, taking on unknown risks, and adapting to varying circumstances. Developing change acceptance in employees means investing in employees through quality jobs and equitable work environments. Ultimately, offering quality jobs is good for business and essential for personnel development, professional achievement, and preparations for future acceptance amidst inevitable organizational change moments.

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