HUMAN REACTIONS TO CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Many approaches to organisational change exists as change became dominant within organisations. Organisations are increasingly involved in some form of change, however, the impact of change on the individual is often disregarded. As a result, creating meaningful and sustainable change remains challenging as individuals struggle to find meaning within this context. Our study followed a qualitative research approach and a grounded theory methodology was adopted. This research indicated that individuals find it difficult to engage with change in a meaningful manner as stress, fear and anxiety prevail. The importance of leadership surfaces as leaders must help individuals to gain a sense of identity in a change initiative. Granting individuals new powers, new freedoms, choices and proper guidance through the quagmire of uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos will promote empowerment. Offering individuals relievers to curb anxiety, stress and fear, would provide them with new tools for mood control, emotional stability, consolation and creativity.

Keywords: Alternative intervention technologies, human reaction to change, meaningfulness, organisational change, stress, transformation, trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Meaningful work is no new concept. Maslow (1965) and Alderfer (1972) described types of work that promote self-actualization, while McGregor (1960) described work that allows the expression of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity. Moreover, Locke (1976) argued that job satisfaction is a function of doing what is personally valued. Meaningful work also links to engagement as Kahn (1990) argued that employees are engaged when their "preferred self" is manifested in the workplace. What is identified as meaningful in many individuals' lives is often tied to the self and identity (Debats, Drost and Hansen, 1995).

Parallel to the above, the new economy ushered in huge business opportunities and great turmoil, resulting in the constant state of change in which organisations have to operate. Denton and Vloeberghs (2003) reminds us that the world arena is a continually changing environment, making adaptability imperative. Both Burke (2009) and Guillory (2007) found that globalisation, new technology, customer expectations and increased diversity accelerate change, generally with extreme unpredictability. Most organisations accept that they must change. However, change remains difficult to achieve, and few companies manage change effectively (Meaney and Pung, 2008).

Bareil, Savoie and Meunier (2007) estimated that 46% of organisations undergo three or more complex changes at any one time. Yet, various authors (Fukukawa, Spicer, Burrows and Fairbrass, 2013; Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Meaney and Pung, 2008) found organisations continue to struggle with effective change implementation. Dahl (2009) reminds us that although academics, consultants and managers have focused on change management for decades, they are still unable to control the change process without negative consequences. The impact of this can be devastating for individuals in these systems and then, finding meaning within the above context, remains improbable.

2. ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

An awareness of the need for change directs the change process (Armstrong, 2006), but it is difficult to move forward without knowledge of what to expect (Burke, 2004), therefore change is challenging (Smith, 2011). Armenakis and Harris (2009) argue that for employees to embrace change and organisations to prosper, organisations require knowledge about appropriate organisational change implementations.

2.1 Organisational change theory

Change is generally implemented for positive reasons, but the low success rate of change programmes is often attributed to employee resistance (Di Virgilio and Ludema, 2009; Ford, Ford and D'Amelio, 2008). Resistance has been attributed to the poor execution of change strategies, poor communication and a lack of employee involvement schemes (Rosenberg and Mosca (2011) as well as to large, bureaucratic organisations with mechanistic structures which hinder change through too much managerial power and too many procedures and rules (Werkman, 2009). Eby, Adams, Russell and Gaby (2000) argue that building positive employee beliefs, perceptions and attitudes is critical for successful change. Employees' subjective experiences of change must be addressed to understand what resistance to change actually entails (Oreg, 2006).

Leadership models are likely to become increasingly significant given greater diversity, technological change and increased international competition (House, 1995), coupled with the breath-taking changes foreseen in the business environment (Eisenbach, Watson and Pillai, 1999). Kotter (1995) underscores the importance of leadership to the change process, because by definition, change requires the creation of a new system and then institutionalisation of the new approach. However, there has been little integration between change management and leadership in the literature (Eisenbach et al., 1999) and much remains to be established about the role of leadership in the change process (Bateh, Castaneda and Farah, 2013). Burnes (2004) and Kotter (1996) views the ability to manage change as imperative. A prime task of leaders is to effect change, and change in turn requires strong leadership (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 2009). However, traditionally these two functions are treated as separate matters (Kotter, 1995).

2.2 Impact of leadership on organisational change

Valid points of inquiry into change management include discerning ingredients that distinguish successful and unsuccessful efforts (Marshak, 2002). Prahalad and Hamel (1990) introduced organisational core competence, identifying specialised skills which constitute collective learning. Leadership, planning, communication, decision making (Crawford and Nahmais, 2010), adaptability and flexibility, commitment and support, motivation and reward (Todnem-By and Dale, 2008) are seen as influencing factors.

The behaviours of organisational leaders directly influence actions within the work environment that promote change (Gilley, 2005; Ngwenya, 2014). Ahn, Adamson and Dornbusch (2004) sees the challenge of managing change as the most fundamental and enduring role of organisational leaders. Gilley, Gilley and McMillan (2009) found leadership an obstacle to change as they found leaders possessed insufficient change skills, suggesting that a considerable percentage of variance in effectively leading change may be predicted by the leader's ability to motivate others, communicate effectively and build teams. Todnem-By

and Dale (2008) confirmed the importance of adaptability, flexibility, commitment and support as critical success factors. Vakola and Nikolaou (2005), found a well-structured work environment and well-balanced work schedules reduces stress and uncertainty which improves change attitudes.

2.3 Negative emotions relating to organisational change

Organisational change is a primary cause of stress (Tiong, 2005) due to feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and threat (Jimmieson, Terry and Callan, 2004). During organisational change individuals are often stressed by role overload and ambiguity which affects human resource potential (Tiong, 2005).

Change compels employees to adapt to new circumstances, but retaining some stability enables employees to maintain a sense of identity and understanding (Huy, 1999). Individuals have an inherent need for predictability and order (Hogan, 2007). Organisational change may be experienced in ways that contradict this basic need and deplete employees' adaptive resources (Bernerth, Walker and Harris, 2011).

Studies indicated that the potential for negative outcomes is particularly heightened when the rate of change is perceived as being too frequent (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Huy, 2001). When change is perceived as a discrete event with a beginning and an end, employees are better able to predict and adjust their behaviour accordingly (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). When an organisation is in a state of continuous flux, employees are unable to align their thoughts and actions with the expectations of organisational leaders. Marks (2003) proposed a saturation effect such that employees can handle only so much disruption. Berneth et al (2011) implicitly suggest there may be a moment where change becomes too much; exhaustion is the central mechanism through which change fatigue drives employees' affective reactions (e.g. less commitment) and behavioural intentions (e.g. turnover intention).

Dahl (2009) examined the effect of organisational change on the likelihood that individual employees leave the organisation or receive stress-related medication and found employees of organisations with large degrees of change have a significantly higher risk of experiencing stress (receiving prescriptions for stress-related conditions) and/or leaving the organisation. The effect of stress can be devastating with huge organisational costs (Corbitt, 2005) and further detrimental consequences such as higher absenteeism, lower productivity, lower job satisfaction and low morale (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik and Welbourne, 1999).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was followed and a grounded theory methodology adopted. The study's purpose was to create emerging theory as concepts were discovered in the collected data. Observations and interviews initially covered a broad range of concepts which were narrowed down as themes and concepts emerged. A literature review informed interview questions. The collected data was subjected to a process of grounded theory, using open, axial and selective coding as well as constant data comparison.

3.1 Population and sampling

Theoretical sampling was used to collect-, code- and analyse the data in order to decide where to sample next in accordance with emerging codes and categories (Glaser, 1978) and to inform category saturation (Charmaz, 2006). Saturation was understood to mean that additional information no longer provided new insights. Sample participants were selected for relevance to the breadth of the issue and not their representation towards the target population. Sampling stopped once the body of knowledge no longer expanded (Cooper and Schindler, 2011).

3.2 Data collection methods

Data was collected through a case study, eight in-depth interviews, four focus group sessions, solicited data, field notes and observations. On average, each focus group session comprised seven employees from within Finance, Human Resources and Information Technology departments. The backdrop was the manufacturing industry in South Africa.

The following research steps and methodology was employed in this study:
1) Solicited data provided research context through a case study and content analysis. Quality data was ensured through integrity, relevance and credibility;
2) Three senior leaders were interviewed to understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change as viewed by senior management who were involved in the strategic change initiatives. Content analysis, descriptive statistics and coding of themes through grounded theory provided data analysis. Quality data was ensured through fit, relevance, modifiability and workability;
3) Two ex-CEOs' were interviewed to understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective. Content analysis, descriptive statistics and coding of themes through grounded theory provided data analysis. Quality data was ensured through fit, relevance, modifiability and workability;
4) Two CEOs' were interviewed to understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective. Content analysis, descriptive statistics and coding of themes through grounded theory provided data analysis. Quality data was ensured through fit, relevance, modifiability and workability;
5) One divisional head was interviewed to understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective. Content analysis, descriptive statistics and coding of themes through grounded theory provided data analysis. Quality data was ensured through fit, relevance, modifiability and workability;
6) Data was collected from senior and middle managers through focus groups. The purpose was to understand the impact of organisational change initiatives on individuals and leaders and to explore the impact of organisational change on middle management and understand their role in implementation. Content analysis was done and quality data was ensured through fit, relevance, modifiability and workability;
7) Minutes and project work contextualised the impact of organisational change by using solicited data;
8) Personal notes further contextualised the impact of organisational change. Field notes were used;
9) Observations allowed for the emergence of an understanding of individual engagement in and reactions to organisational change through behavioural and non-behavioural observations.

Content analysis was done in the case of minutes, project work, personal notes and observations. Quality data was ensured through integrity, relevance and credibility.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through theoretical coding, theoretical memoranda and theoretical sorting. Interview questions were refined throughout the process to ensure that data analysis built a tentative theory. Theoretical coding conceptualised the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators in the data (Glaser, 1978). Key ideas guided further data collection and analysis.

During open coding, data was broken into discrete parts and compared. Open coding categorised segments of data with a short name, summarising and accounting for each data piece. Thereafter, focused selection commenced where the most frequent or significant codes were sorted, synthesised, integrated and organised. Through this naming and categorising processes our own assumptions about phenomena were questioned and explored (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

After open coding, axial coding reassembled the data in new ways. A coding paradigm was developed which (1) identified a central phenomenon, (2) explored causal conditions, (3) identified the context and intervening conditions, (4) specified strategies, and (5) delineated the consequences. Axial coding sorted, synthesised and organised sets of data and then reassembled the data. Questions such as when, where,

why, who, how, what and with what, helped to convert the text into concepts. Axial coding promoted the emergence of a conceptual framework to contain the newly developed concepts.

Selective coding was employed to combine categories and their interrelationships, to form interlinked connections relating to organisational change and leadership. Through selective coding, data was integrated through the reduction of raw data into different concepts and to establish a core category. This core category was related to other categories, relationships validated and further enhanced. The result of this process of data collection and analysis was probably a relevant substantive-level theory.

4. FINDINGS

This section focuses on the data findings. These findings are discussed as they emerged from the case study, in-depth interviews and focus group sessions.

4.1 Case study data

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

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

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

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

Challenges surface when a pure project approach is followed. Projects that impact on and/or change individual's and their job roles or functions need to include a change management element. The change and project management functions must present a unified change proposition. Through a stronger change management case, early inclusion and discussion involvement can be ensured. Such joint co-operation will contribute positively towards the change management perception. The earlier in the project such a unified proposition can be presented, the sooner and perhaps more easily, successful change might be achieved.

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

4.2 In-depth interviews

The data consistently revealed a lack of methodology when organisations undertake change. Many leaders acknowledged that they are not influenced by any model and acknowledged that they did not know any

model names. One leader admitted to being model agnostic. In all instances, change was undertaken using little or no methodology. In addition, it seemed that change happens regardless of whether or not a model is followed. Constant organisational change is the reality.

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

The implication of wrong decisions, wrong beliefs, empowering the wrong people and the implementation of non-workable solutions were shared concerns. Detrimental leadership characteristics were identified as having a short-term view, making wrong decisions, empowering the wrong individuals, creating uncertainty, not leading, splitting teams and not presenting a unified front.

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

One leader commented that business operates on very short term cycles and therefore instant gratification precludes a long term vision. Although respondents agreed on the inevitability of change, many respondents agreed that instant gratification is an increasing problem and amplified by the rapid advances in technology and profit fixation. A short-term view, survival, instant gratification and misalignment were identified as elements which will result in change failure.

The importance of trust and sacrifice was repeatedly highlighted and presented as vital leadership characteristics. It was generally accepted that management must show that they trust their employees. Similarly, leadership must be trusted. All respondents agreed that poor communication jeopardises trust, and that there can be no change without trust. Paradoxically, the data was unequivocal in stating that a leader cannot assign trust onto himself or herself, and that sacrifice implies giving something up. All respondents agreed that leaders have to discard their egos in order to be successful. Power games and ego should be replaced by empathy, ethical behaviour and honest, open conversations. Poor treatment of employees was noted as one of the main reasons for change failure.

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

The data generally indicated that individuals and teams struggle with the pace of change and the related stress which results. The data also revealed that organisations are unable to deal with the stress responses of individuals engaged in the change process. Respondents agreed that for as long as emotions such as fear, guilt, mistrust, rejection, false expectations, scepticism and feelings of exclusions are predominant and prevalent, individuals cannot optimally participate in the change effort. Uncertainty creates fear which is perpetuated through different messages. When organisations embark upon change, fear becomes the standard. All the respondents acknowledged that it becomes irrelevant whether fear is rational or irrational.

Respondents concurred that their organisation had no effective methods in place to cope with heightened employee stress levels. All respondents agreed that unmanaged and/or uncontrolled stress renders individuals unable to engage in the required change initiative. Thus, they stated that the modern, fast-paced business environment requires a keen awareness of individual stress coupled with regular stress checks.

4.3 Focus group sessions

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

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

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

All the emotions that were shared in relation to organisational change were negative. Main emotions were stress, resistance, anxiety and feeling despondent and unequipped. Instability, confusion, no autonomy, unsuitable training, disempowerment, non-involvement and the difficulty of change were also mentioned. Expressing fear, unhappiness, scepticism, uncertainty, conflict, damage and prayer were reiterated.

Leaders were not seen as calm, available and displaying necessary sensitivity. Many respondents complained that leadership is reactive and do not explain the rationale behind required changes. A further complaint was that leadership do not show direction. Leadership was considered important regardless of a stable or changing business landscape. Significant leadership characteristics were identified as ethics, honesty, integrity, respect, trustworthiness, being proactive and authentic and living organisational values. Key leadership tasks were indicated as change guidance, reasoning the change, mobilising people's willingness and ability, sharing vision, solving real problems, encouraging people to buy in and explaining the change. Employees expect leadership to communicate, value the importance of employees and convey intentions truthfully.

The data revealed that change is generally a mess due to a lack of organisational change knowledge and change principles. No change methodology was followed and change was done in a rudimentary fashion with precious little internal knowledge and support. Current change models do not resonate therefore no theoretical methodology is followed. No methodology influences change and change generally only becomes a key topic once the situation is already detrimental.

Strategy does not encompass change and change generally does not form part of strategy. There against, success factors are autonomy, communication, permissible decision making, change enablement, inclusivity, leadership, ensuring a common understanding by all and empowerment. The reasons for change failure point to reactive and ineffective leadership, inefficient management, profit above people, no strength in leading change, lack of knowledge, vague explanations, poor communication and the implementation of solutions that fail to address the real problems.

The data showed inconsistent management styles. One respondent experienced management as archaic. Another respondent stated that change managers are clueless and ineffective. Another stated that management is unable to do change. Senior management were not perceived to empower employees, were always changing something and spent a lot of time on damage control. Poor planning, poor translation of strategy and poor communication were attributed to senior management. Management were seen to be playing power games, building empires and changing haphazardly without consultation, explanation or support for employees. Crisis management depicted the general management style. Management was also accused of not understanding employees, not being transparent and not allowing employees any decision-making power or inclusivity in the change processes.

Employees felt bombarded by the high frequency of change. In addition, their feelings and emotions were not taken into consideration. This contributed to failure. Negative methods such as alcohol and irrationality were used to mitigate overwhelming feelings of negativity and to provide relief from stress.

5. HUMAN REACTIONS TO CHANGE

There are currently changes in virtually all dimensions of the socioeconomic environment. Concerns focusing on issues such as business, government, politics, education, health and social care, religion, management, leading, investing, borrowing, buying, owning, working and innovating are permeating societies as never before. Bloom (2010) reminds us that humans do not take kindly to change. Wild ideas scare people, they fill them with anxiety and doubt. Straying grotesquely from the beaten path makes humans fearful and even self-destructive.

The data indicated that organisational change results in fear, stress and anxiety. Fear of the unknown, habit, self-interest, economic insecurity and failure to recognise the need for change, distrust, perceptions and scepticism were all identified as factors that may contribute to the individual's resistance to change.

On an organisational level, the presented data confirmed structural and cultural inertia, threats to existing power relationships, threats to expertise and resource allocation as well as scepticism about previous unsuccessful change efforts and poor planning as organisational factors standing in the way of successful organisational change.

Relating the data to Scharmer's (2007) u-movement as adapted by Viljoen-Terblanche (2008) to integrate human reactions to change, indicates that there has been no mourning (shock, disbelief, discard and eventual realisation). Respondents still seemed to be in a state of shock and/or disbelief. The required processes of discarding and realisation or clarify, crystallise and change had apparently not started.

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

Figure 1: Basic elements of the whole person

Given human reactions and experiences relating to change and the reality that poorly planned or executed organisational change initiatives increases stress levels, the researchers consolidated these ideas into figure 1 which resonate with Graves' (1974) insistence on the importance of a multidisciplinary, multidimensional approach to understanding human nature, while incorporating the bio-psychosocial systems in humans. Figure 1 indicates that individuals comprise physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. When one of these elements is burdened, the other will also be troubled. Only when all these elements receive equal attention or are balanced can there be any coherence. The whole individual should be considered to ensure cohesion, optimal functioning and minimal resistance. A whole person can contribute much more at an individual, team, organisational and community level.

Figure 2 builds onto figure 1, indicating the whole person with positive and away responses. Positive responses include understanding, engagement, discussion and involvement. Away responses comprise the negative circle of stress, fear and anxiety. Continuous flux and lack of understanding result in disconnect and reduced cognitive capacity. Clear begin and end points allow for improved adaptation and self-organisation, creating an opportunity where the individual can lift chaos into order. Evident in figure 2 is the vicious cycle created by stress, anxiety, fear and resistance. Stress creates fear, which creates more stress, which then creates anxiety and resistance which again results in increased fear and stress. This stress, anxiety, fear and resistance cycle is fuelled by the individual's away responses. Unless positive, toward responses come into play, it will remain difficult for the individual to break this cycle.
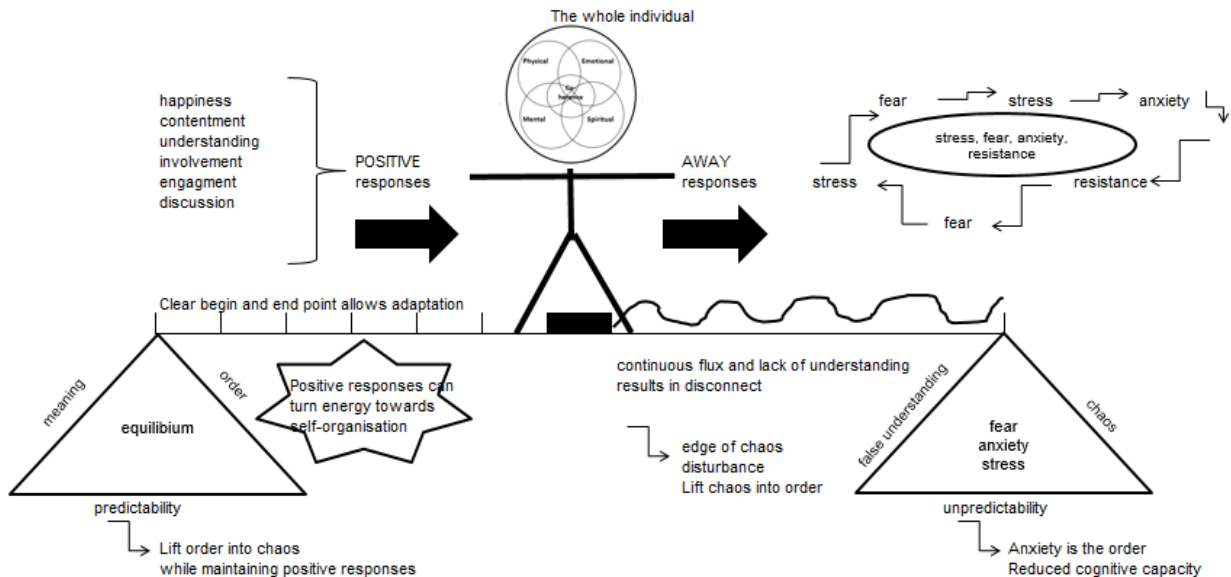

Figure 2: The individual and organisational change

As organisations struggle to manage the stressful change process effectively, uncertainty, fear, stress, anxiety and mistrust are created. Individuals may then react through negative thoughts and feelings. Without an outlet for these heightened emotions, they may be perpetuated. When leaders do not assist or guide people to identify a purpose or at least an understanding of organisational change, and when people are driven by negative feelings and emotions, these people are at risk of losing perspective. Similarly, successful organisational change could be compromised.

This study highlighted the effect of emotions, stress and trauma, and their high prevalence in the context of organisational change. Increased stress largely contributes to resistance during organisational change initiatives. Fear, uncertainty and insecurity featured in every conversation. The first and often lasting emotion when discussing organisational change was fear. Fear of any kind throws the individual into an ancient survival mode, which, when fully active, shuts down higher modes of evolutionary awareness.

It seems that in order to attain successful organisational change, fear, stress and anxiety must be reduced. The researchers thus concluded that the inability of organisations to harness insecurities, stress, fear, anxiety and even trauma, contributes to the high failure rate of organisational change. Further, stress, fear and anxiety leads to survival responses. When driven by survival responses, finding meaning is highly unlikely. Fearful perceptions disturb the neural processing of information in the brain, resulting in distortion. This distorted information will always be negative and prevents individuals from seeing and acting upon actual reality. Actual reality then becomes a perceived, distorted reality. Individuals then react to a distorted reality, making real change extremely difficult.

Organisations require change. However, only if the individual is able to release and become free of anxiety, will individual change and organisational meaning become a reality.

6. CONCLUSION

People need meaning. They need to know that their contributions are important and what they are working for. Therefore, leaders must assist individuals to gain a sense of knowing within a change initiative. Granting individuals new powers, new freedoms, choices and proper guidance through the quagmire of uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos will promote empowerment. Offering individuals relievers to curb anxiety, stress and fear, would provide them with new tools for mood control, emotional stability, consolation and creativity.

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