Human Reaction to Change: The Reality and Impact of Stress

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Abstract

Change has become inevitable and a dominant aspect within organisations. As organisations are increasingly involved in change, many approaches to organisational change exist. However, the impact of change on the individual and the reality of elevated stress levels during periods of organisational change is often disregarded. Within this context, creating meaningful and sustainable change remains challenging.

This study followed a qualitative research approach and a grounded theory methodology was adopted. Negative emotions dominated the research data and our research indicated that individuals find it difficult to engage with change in a meaningful manner as stress, fear and anxiety dominate.

Human reactions and experiences relating to change and the reality that poorly planned or executed organisational change initiatives increases stress levels, informed us that organisations have to regard individual's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. When any one of these elements are burdened, the other will also be troubled. Only when all these elements receive equal attention or are balanced can there be coherence. A whole person will be able to contribute much more at an individual, team and organisational level.

We emphasise the necessity to challenge organisational change methods as we highlight the reality of stress within organisations. Further, our research data indicated that few organisations are able to effectively address elevated levels of stress in individuals. Heightened stress levels are often ignored as few organisational resources are available to support individuals through an organisational change nightmare.

The importance of leadership surfaced 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 nightmare of uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos is empowerment. Offering individuals anxiety, stress and fear relievers, would provide them with new tools for mood control, emotional stability, consolation and creativity.

Introduction

Change has become all pervasive, permeating every aspect of modern life. Our modern lifestyles are characterised by change. Taleb (2012:13) speaks of membership in the extended disorder family: uncertainty, variability, imperfect and incomplete knowledge, change, chaos, volatility, disorder, entropy, time, the unknown, randomness, turmoil, stressor, error, dispersion of outcomes and un-knowledge. Such extended disorder has become the norm within society and within organisations. The future is unstable, unpredictable and non-recurring. This causes a sense of loss and/or anxiety for individuals, organisations and society.

The new economy ushered in huge opportunities and great turmoil arising from such an increasingly volatile environment, resulting in the constant state of change in which organisations have to operate. 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.

The reality is that humans do not take kindly to change. Wild ideas scare people, they fill them with anxiety and doubt. Bloom (2010) reminds us that straying grotesquely from the beaten path makes humans fearful and even self-destructive.

In theory, most organisations accepted that they must change or die. However, change remains difficult to achieve, and few companies manage the process effectively (Todnem-By, 2005). Globalisation, new technology, customer expectations and increased diversity accelerate change, generally with extreme unpredictability while contributing to the need for organisations to significantly modify the way they do things.

Change occurs on multiple concurrent paths for both the individual and the organisation. No or little respite may result in distrust, uncertainty and the reality of organisational change fatigue (Lewis, Romanaggi & Chapple, 2010). Yesterday's practices and assumptions no longer work, therefore, the purpose of organisational change is to adapt to the environment, improve performance and change employees' behavioural patterns (Leana and Barry, 2000). Even though change is the new normality, change implementation remains a risky endeavour as organisations continue to struggle with effective change implementation, resulting in low success rates (Armenakis and Harris, 2009).

The researchers conducted exploratory research in an effort to increase the current body of knowledge on organisational change. Unfortunately, the reality and impact of stress on individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole has not been incorporated into any change models. It seems as though many of the negative outcomes of organisational change can be mitigated through successful change. Reducing negative outcomes such as resistance, stress and insecurity will positively impact on the lives of individuals, groups and organisations alike.

Organisational Change

Negative Emotions Relating to Organisational Change

Given workforces with a greater degree of demographic diversity, technological change and increased international competition, coupled with the breath-taking changes foreseen in the business environment, leadership models are likely to become increasingly significant. 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.

Change compels employees to adapt to new circumstances, but retaining some stability enables employees to maintain a sense of identity and understanding (Huy, 1999). Because one of the main aspects of human nature is people's inherent need for predictability and order (Bloom, 2010), one should bear in mind that major organisational change may be experienced in ways that contradict this basic need and deplete employees' adaptive resources (Bernerth, Walker & Harris, 2011). Likewise, research showed that an overemphasis on organisational change may come at the expense of other important organisational factors such as commitment or satisfaction (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). Huy (2002) indicated that the potential for negative outcomes is particularly heightened when the rate of change is perceived as too frequent.

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 & Griffin, 2006). Alternatively, 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 (such as less commitment) and behavioural intentions (such as turnover intention).

Exhaustion is a feeling of being depleted or overextended beyond one's capacity to handle workplace demands. The energy to perform basic job tasks disappears and employees are left feeling drained (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004).

Distinguishing acceptable stress from excessive stress has a significant impact on the success of organisational change (Chen, 2011). The overwhelming effect of stress can be devastating with enormous organisational costs (Corbitt, 2005) and detrimental consequences such as higher absenteeism, lower productivity, lower job satisfaction and low morale (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik & Welbourne, 1999). Loh, Than & Quek (2011) found the relationship with one's superior a key source of stress.

Organisational Change Models

Various organisational change models can be found in literature such as Lewin (1951), Kotter (1996) and Tushman and Romanelli (1985). Later, Sirkin, Keenan & Jackson (2005) argued that organisations must pay equal attention to hard and soft aspects during organisational change. Sirken et al (2005) concluded that duration, integrity, commitment and effort determine the outcome of any change initiative.

Scharmer (2007) developed the U-process which leads people through three core movements that allow them to connect to an emerging future. "Prototyping in the U-process builds on the two movements that allow one to break through habitual patterns of the past: sensing the emerging whole and establishing a connection to the source or authentic self"

(Scharmer and Kaeufer, 2010:27). Theory-U informs that there are three inner voices of resistance that keep us from hearing the emerging future. The voice of judgement is resistance to an open mind which stifles creativity; the voice of cynicism is resistance to an open heart because we are entertaining the companions of arrogance and callousness; the voice of fear is resistance to an open will. Managing all three voices appropriately, can take us from fearful to fearless. These inner voices are obstacles to change. Once these are conquered, a space can be born where a high energy, generative system can move through to collectively connect and generate a new emerging vision with new rules. ''To lead profound change is to shift the inner place from which a system operates" (Scharmer, 2007:377).

Kübler-Ross (1963) contributed to the understanding of emotional experiences when she defined human reactions to change during the process of loss. This model is still applicable in organisations today because the model normalises the emotions relating to change while describing the normal behavioural patterns of both individuals and organisations.

Viljoen-Terblanche (2008) developed an integrated model which describes the human reactions to change through an adaptation of the work of Hopson and Adams (1966), Kübler-Ross (1963) and Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers (2004). This model depicts specific emotions as experienced during the different phases. The letting go phase includes emotions such as denial and resistance, which are accompanied by feelings such as shock, disbelief, anger, insecurity, blame, anxiety, happiness, fear, threat, guilt and depression, while the letting come phase consists of acceptance, the making sense of, the understanding of, and ultimately, the integration of the change. This phase is accompanied by the relevant emotions of commitment, optimism and engagement.

Dahl's (2009) research examined the effect of organisational change on the likelihood that individual employees leave the organisation or receive stress-related medication, and found that 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. He (Dahl, 2009) further argues that organisational change can lead to employee frustration and uncertainty because organisational change threatens the identity and implicit contract of the organisation with its employees. Furthermore, increased frustration, uncertainty, fear and the instability induced by organisational change will increase the stress on employees while increasing the risk of employees leaving the organisation.

Fischer (2006) developed the transition curve which analyses the way individuals deal with personal change. This model explains that individual anxiety will arise when confronted with change. This will be followed by happiness, which, in turn, will lead to either denial or fear. Fear will lead to threat and then to guilt which may turn into hostility or into gradual acceptance. Once change is accepted an individual can move forward.

Whilst all of these models are relevant, the impact and reality of stress in the individual change process is repeatedly omitted.

Stress and the Organisation
Stress comes in many shapes and disguises. It can be internal or external, and can be experienced at an individual, organisational and societal level. However, the effects of stress are likely to be detrimental and costly to the wellbeing of the individual, the organisation and larger society.

Unfortunately, if we seek security in today's organisations it may only heighten our anxieties. The security we seek and inherently know was provided by early groups does not exist in the culture of groups that support our survival today. This causes confusion and sows further seeds of mistrust while planting questions of trustworthiness (Grady and Grady, 2011).

Organisational ecologists (Hannan and Freeman, 1989) have long argued that organisational change and transformation are rarely completely positive experiences, especially when the core features and core identities of the organisation are subject to change. They (Hannan and Freeman, 1989) argue that there are substantial obstacles to fundamental structural changes in organisations because changes can fuel undesirable effects on employees such as increased uncertainty, fear, frustration and occupational stress.

Dated exploration to the degree to which individuals perceive that they are specifically stressed by organisational change was revealing. During the anticipation stage of organisational change, high levels of uncertainty are prevalent (Isabella, 1990) which increases stress perceptions (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998).

Organisations are built on trust and reliability, where employees are loyal and committed towards the organisation and the implicit contract they have with it. Change threaten these values (Dahl, 2009) and have been viewed as a threat to organisational identity (Hannan, Baron, Hsu & Koğcak, 2006). This is true where identity is well-established in the organisation. Changes that deeply influence identity erode its reliability and accountability, leading to frustration and confusion. A destabilisation process follows, which involves significant costs of reshaping operations and realigning the organisation (Péli, Pólós & Hannan, 2000). Corbitt (2005) confirms this, stating that the overwhelming effect of stress on employees can be devastating to employees, and the cost to the organisation enormous. Furthermore, a disruption in the social environment affects individual's higher-order thinking (Baumeister, Twenge & Nuss, 2002).

Examples of internal pressures are ineffective leadership, morale problems, a high turnover of capable people, absenteeism, labour problems, increased political behaviour in the organisation and turf fights (Kets De Vries, 2001). Instead of minimising workplace stress levels, organisations are encouraged to manage stress to optimal levels (Le Fevre, Matheny & Kolt, 2003).

The concept of optimal stress arose from the Yerkes Dodson Law (Certo, 2003). Here, common management practices assumes through the application of the Yerkes Dodson Law that a reasonable amount of pressure, anxiety or fear in the environment leads to higher performance than if stress is not present (Certo, 2003).

Numerous research reports have revealed that employees who experience large-scale change report higher levels of stress, more anxiety and increased feelings of uncertainty (Jones, Watson, Hobman, Bordia, Gallois & Callan, 2008).

Data Collection

Research Methodology
A qualitative research approach was followed and a grounded theory methodology adopted. The purpose of this study was to create emerging theory through the collected data, themes and constructs, and 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 was conducted to inform the interview questions. The researcher used open, axial and selective coding combined with constant data comparison.

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. Theoretical sampling was used to inform the saturation of categories, which was understood to mean that additional information no longer provided new insights into the subject matter. Sample participants were selected for relevance to the breadth of the issue and not how well they represent the target population. Sampling stopped once the body of knowledge no longer expanded.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through a case study, in-depth interviews, focus group sessions, solicited data, field notes and observations. The case study comprised three case elements. Eight interviews comprised the sample size for in-depth interviews. Four focus group sessions, averaging seven employees per session, comprised a further sample. The research steps and methodology employed in this study are summarised in table 1 which also outlines the data collection phases, sample groups and the objective of each step of the process.

Table 1: Description of research steps and methodology

Research step	Purpose of research step	Data collection method	Data analysis	How to ensure quality data
Solicited data	Provides research context	Case study	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility
Three senior (regional) leaders	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	In-depth inter-views	Content analysis, descriptive statistics, coding of themes (grounded theory)	Fit, relevance, modifiabi-lity and workability
Two ex-CEOs' (important share-holders)	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective			
Two CEOs'	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective			
One divisional head	To understand the role of leadership and the concept of organisational change from a strategy perspective			
Senior managers	To understand the impact of organisational change initiatives on individuals and leaders	Focus groups		

Middle managers	To explore the impact of organisational change on middle management and understand their role in implementation			
Minutes, project work	To contextualise the impact of organisational change	Solicited data	Content analysis	Integrity, relevance, credibility
Personal notes	To contextualise the impact of organisational change	Field notes		
Behavioural and non-behavioural observations	To understand individual engagement in and reactions to organisational change	Observations		

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through theoretical coding, theoretical memoranda and theoretical sorting. In this study, interview questions were refined throughout the process to ensure that data analysis started to build a tentative theory. Theoretical coding conceptualised the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators in the data. The key ideas became a guide for further collection and data analysis. In addition, this study employed open, axial and selective coding.

During open coding, the data was broken into discrete parts and compared for similarities and dissimilarities. Open coding was utilised to categorise segments of data with a short name, summarising and accounting for each data piece. Each word, line or segment was named. Thereafter, focused selection commenced where the most frequent or significant codes were sorted, synthesised, integrated and organised. Through this process of naming and categorising phenomena the researcher's own assumptions about phenomena were questioned and explored.

Through axial coding the data was assembled in new ways after open coding. 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 was used to sort, synthesise and organise sets of data and then reassembled the data in new ways using axial coding. Using questions such as when, where, why, who, how, what and with what, helped the researcher to convert the text into concepts. The process of axial coding promoted the emergence of a conceptual framework to contain these 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 which were linked through relational statements to explain the phenomena of organisational change and leadership. Through selective coding, a core category was established. This core category was related to other categories and validated their relationships. During selective coding, categories were enhanced which needed deeper refinement. The result of this process of data collection and analysis was probably a substantive-level theory relevant to the topic of organisational change and leadership.

Findings

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 inability of the organisation and leadership to address the 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 also 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.

The different change initiatives mentioned in this case study failed to realise their full benefits, despite well-developed and planned technical solutions. It would seem that cost and time overruns remain unless organisations include individual participation, inclusivity and behavioural change as well as effective stress reduction methods concurrently.

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 stated that there is no model that he believes in and admitted to being model agnostic. In all instances, change was undertaken using little or no methodology, almost to a point of being model agnostic. In addition, it was obvious that change happens regardless of whether or not a model is followed, as constant change in organisations remains a 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. The new organisation should be designed by 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 the respondents raised a management concern. 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. According to this leader business therefore needs immediate gratification. Although respondents agreed on the inevitability of change, many respondents agreed that instant gratification is an increasing problem, which is amplified by the rapid advances in technology and profit fixation.

Trust and sacrifice were presented as vital leadership characteristics as the importance of trust was repeatedly highlighted. 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, but also 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.

One respondent concluded that change is chaotic and organisations which are not strong in change planning, will likely have a low success rate. Because organisations are not strong in planning, thoughts about future actions, needs, expectations and anticipations should be on the agenda more frequently.

The detailed collected data was further broken down into positive, neutral and negative categories. The big "four-letter-word" of business was revealed as TIME. However, communication, leadership, trust and ethics also featured prominently in every discussion.

The data generally indicated that individuals and teams struggle to keep up with and make sense of the pace of change and the related stress which results. A short-term view, survival, instant gratification and misalignment were identified as elements which will result in change failure.

The data also revealed that organisations are unable to deal with the stress responses of individuals engaged in the change process. The 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.

Some respondents agreed that many organisations have become large and impersonal and as a result, no longer understand its employees. According to the collected data, leaders lose their intuitive ability to communicate, engage and speak to their followers as a result of increased workload and time pressures. This results in disconnect between leader and follower.
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.

The respondents concurred on the importance of acknowledging the heightened stress levels of employees. They further agreed that their organisation was unable to effectively cope with these stress levels, while not having effective methods in place to reduce stress levels. The respondents stated that regular stress checks and a keen awareness of individual stress are required because of the modern, fast-paced business environment. Unmanaged or uncontrolled stress renders the individual unable to engage in the required change initiative.

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. Respondents stated that there was no help available, that they felt stressed because of the uncertainty, that lots of confusion was experienced as people did not understand the assignment of 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. Respondents in all focus groups admitted that change was difficult and resulted in anxiety. Many respondents 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.

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 change because she does not understand the change. This respondent continued to state that there are always changes happening. The social engineering of change was often unethical as perceived by respondents.

All the emotions that were shared in relation to organisational change were negative. The 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.

Owing to the fact that the leaders were not calm, available and failed to display presence and sensitivity, the data related to emotions revealed an insecure attachment. Many respondents complained that their leadership is reactive and does not explain the rationale behind the required change. A further complaint was that leadership does not show the direction. Negative methods such as alcohol and irrationality were used to mitigate overwhelming feelings of negativity and to provide relief from stress.

The data revealed an utter lack of organisational change knowledge, coupled with the use of hardly any change principles. No change methodology was followed and change was done in a rudimentary fashion with precious little internal knowledge and support. As current change models do not resonate, no theoretical methodology is being followed. No methodology influences change and change generally only becomes a key topic once the situation is already detrimental. Hence, change is generally a mess.

A respondent stated that she has never seen the bigger picture. She continued to say that one must know where you are, where you want to go and how to get there. However, according to this person the change strategy is never communicated. Poor communication worsens the process.

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, the importance of profit above people, no strength in leading change, lack of knowledge, vague explanations, lack of communication and the implementation of solutions that fail to address the real problems.

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 the organisation's 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 showed management styles to be inconsistent, this could result in negative output. One respondent experienced management as archaic. Another respondent stated that change managers are clueless and ineffective. Yet another stated that management is unable to do change and change is therefore a mess. Senior management were not perceived to empower employees, were always changing something and spent a lot of time on damage control. Poor planning and poor translation of strategy as well as 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.

Damage control results in consultants being called in to fix the resultant mess. Consultants stay on, becoming long-term advisers. 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 a too high frequency of change which contributed to failure. Employees also felt their feelings and emotions were not taken into consideration which worsened during periods of change. Employees want to and need to understand and engage in the change and expect senior management to be aware of their unique challenges. Engagement at an employee level means empowerment, participation, understanding, decision making powers and inclusivity.

Modernity requires inclusivity and participation at all organisational levels, coupled with planning, communication, control and clear schedules. Organisations require trust from employees. Modern employees require trust from their organisations. The modern organisation might be able to sustain daily practices of crisis management with inclusion and effectively dealing with individual stress.

Reactive, nebulous leadership who place profit above people will probably result in change failure. Ineffective planning and communication hamper successful change. Only if leaders are followed, can successful organisational change become a reality. Employees expect leadership and guidance throughout the change process. Displaying empathy with the various challenges experienced by employees, being mindful of employee emotions and enabling employees are all vital elements in the achievement of successful change.

Discussion

Human Reactions to Change
The data indicated that organisational change results in fear, stress and anxiety which could stem from the individual, groups, community, the organisation, leadership, management or a combination of these. Fear of the unknown, habit, self-interest, economic insecurity and failure to recognise the need for change, distrust, perceptions and scepticism all contributed to individual resistance.

Organisationally, the 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.

In terms of Viljoen-Terblance's (2008) adaptation of Scharmer's (2007) u-movement 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. While certain change models acknowledge emotions and their role, the impact of stress appears to be ignored. It seems possible that such elevated stress levels could hamper individual movement towards change acceptance.
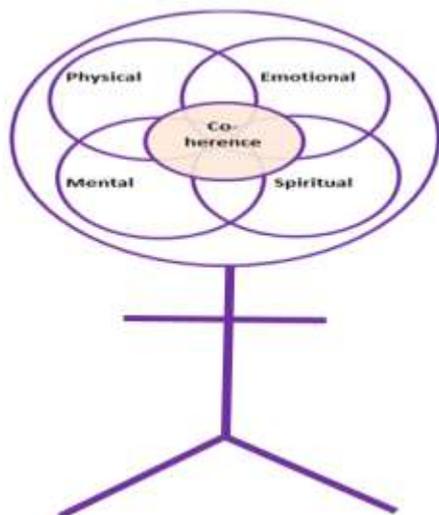
Figure 1: Basic elements of the whole person

Human reactions and experiences relating to change and the reality that poorly planned or executed organisational change initiatives increases stress levels, led the researcher to consolidate figure 1, indicating that individuals comprise physical, emotional, mental and spiritual elements. 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.

Organisational change and stress

The data findings confirmed that many factors were influenced by increased stress levels which, in turn, result in stress-related behaviours, coupled with decreased cognitive capacity. Life has become stressful. Time pressures within time-compressed lifestyles are stressors faced by many working individuals. Unrelieved stress becomes perpetual, and will undeniably influence organisational change efforts negatively. Dahl (2009) confirmed this, indicating that despite the long-standing focus on change management, the average organisation is unable to control the process of change without significant negative consequences.

The data reported feelings of stress, anxiety, reduced autonomy, reduced ability and even total shutdown. One would assume that it is unlikely that an individual would be unable to function optimally, given such feelings. However, in the South African context, poverty, migrant labour, energy supply challenges, public anger, alcohol abuse and domestic violence are added stressors. Statistics on rape, crime, violent crime, uncontrolled shootings, domestic violence, racial and political violence and road accidents are commonly available through Statistics South Africa.

Figure 2: An example of the interconnectivity of organisational change

It is unlikely that many individuals would remain unaffected by the above. Given these added stressors, coupled with organisational change, there could well be a moment when change becomes overwhelming. It seems reasonable to propose that sustainable change can only be achieved through the attainment of individual vicissitude. Yet, organisational change is an interwoven web of interconnectivity. If links are continuously stressed, the implications become unpredictable and may even weaken and/or damage the web. This principle is displayed in figure 2, which also indicates stress variables involved at an individual level. Therefore, the additional stress caused by organisational changes creates huge challenges for leadership and organisations.

The individual and organisational change

The impact of stress and the importance of lowering individual stress levels are indicated in figure 3 which was developed taking into account the research findings and realities that emerged from the data. With high stress levels, it becomes extremely difficult to change behaviour and create new meaning. Individuals with high stress levels will in all probability revert back to old, wrong habits because all their available capacity and energy is required for survival, perhaps merely to function as stress reduces the individual's window of tolerance and/or range of effective functioning.

Figure 3 illustrates the split second in which an unconscious decision is made. Change is unpredictable and uncertain, resulting in fear as the primary emotion. Instinct kicks in which will most often result in impaired decision making which is then utilised as the base from which information is processed. Thoughts therefore become repetitive, falling back to known memories and perceptions. Increased stress results. A vicious circle ensues. Each individual's emotional tolerance window will depend on the quality of choice which arises.

A low emotional tolerance window will result in the individual falling back into habits which are comfortable and known. A high emotional tolerance window will allow new behaviour to be explored and actioned which in turn can result in newly created meaning. Figure 3 justifies the importance of lowering individual stress levels in meaningful and sustainable ways to enable organisations to achieve successful organisational change.
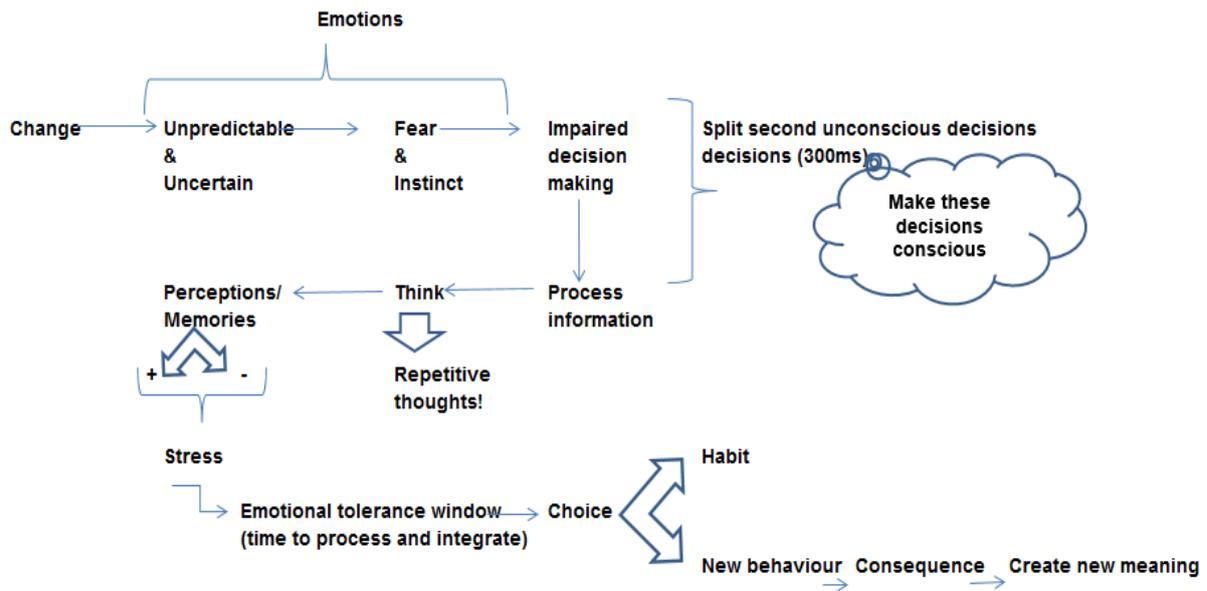
Figure 3: Individual reactions to change

An awareness of the brain's survival responses of fight, flight or freeze may provide a starting point from which diversity and inclusivity can be acknowledged. Only when leadership is able to mitigate the fear response in individuals, can meaning and successful change become possible.

Conclusion

Stress has become an integral part of individuals' daily lives. Organisational change perpetuates stress through increased anxiety and distress. Leadership, as an extension of the individual, is equally faced with the reality of stress in their own lives as well as in the lives of subordinates and team members. Organisations in South Africa should no longer deny the fact that organisational change results in elevated stress levels.

Human behaviour as a result of stress was discussed. Negative behaviours include violence, alcohol and medication as outlets for heightened stress experiences. Much has been written about these negative behaviours. However, it seems as though precious little is available in traditional literature on the management of stress and negative behaviours in an organisational context.

Organisational change results in stress, but organisations struggle to handle individual stress. The importance of the human element in creating successful organisational change seems clear. Today's successful leaders require methods which can facilitate successful collaboration. Successful collaboration becomes possible if stress levels are within normal ranges. Unfortunately, traditional organisational literature fails to present applicable stress reduction methods which are congruent with this multifaceted dilemma.

The organisational stress dilemma seems fourfold. Firstly, organisations and leadership require a deep awareness of stress, its impact on productivity and its effect relationships and general interactions. Secondly, organisational change will increase stress if it is not managed and implemented responsibly. Thirdly, traditional interventions relating to stress and anxiety seem limited in their ability to provide a long-term resolution to this phenomenon. However, that does not detract from leadership's responsibility to be aware, display empathy and mitigate

further stress through mindful leadership practices. Fourthly, it is necessary to find novel, applicable interventions to reduce stress to acceptable levels.

Our data indicated that there is no optimal stress level after which performance will decline. Soon after stress had entered the picture, reduced performance followed. Pressure, anxiety or fear in the environment quickly leads to shutdown, regression, demotivation and distress. Limbic responses such as fight, flight and freeze then become reality.

Leadership and Managerial Implications

Organisational change is challenging. Stress is a key element which leaders have to deal with in modern organisations. This requires self-awareness, self-regulation and knowing oneself. Given the turbulence of today's organisational environments, leaders cannot lead when they are not in control of their emotions. Emotional regulation is required first of the self, and then only of others. Awareness of threats to status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness can relatively easily mitigate threat responses from employees, allowing for a more productive work environment.

The study underscored the impact of a lack of leadership, guidance and poor management. Many individual struggles with organisational change are perpetuated through poor leadership qualities. Leaders who are unable to regulate their own behaviour and emotions create further stress in an already stressed system. Lack of guidance perpetuates uncertainty which, in turn, increases fear. Leaders who fail to understand and lead according to different thinking systems, will continually fail to extract positive emotions and goodwill from employees.

As long as individuals function on the basis of anxiety, stress and fear, no real change can occur. Individuals must be released from anxiety and fear, if they are to engage successfully in a change initiative. Only by being in a reassured and calm state can organisational change be applied for the betterment of individuals and their teams, organisations and society at large.

The data indicated that organisations are unable to handle or support increased stress levels. All the individuals interviewed indicated that they had sought support outside of the organisation. It has been argued that once a situation has been appraised as stressful, an individual determines what coping response to enact to reduce his or her levels of stress. This judgement about what to do is evaluated, in part, in the context of available support resources.

The huge responsibility and accountability required of leadership and management within an organisational change context are often underestimated. Yet, leadership and/or management actions can endanger a change initiative. Certainly one of the requirements of leadership and management in the modern organisation is to firstly acknowledge the high incidence of stress. A further requirement seems the bold step to acknowledge that there are inadequate organisational resources to support the stress dilemma. Then, alternative stress reduction programs can be evaluated and considered for implementation.

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