

Paper for “Power Dynamics and Organizational Change IV”
Symposium at the 11th EAWOP Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, 14-17 May 2003

A Different View on Resistance to Change

Kilian M. Bennebroek Gravenhorst

Universiteit van Amsterdam
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences
Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR)
Kloveniersburgwal 48
1012 CX Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Phone: +31 20 525 2110
E-mail: kgravenhorst@fmg.uva.nl

Abstract

For half a century or more, organization scientists have been claiming that change has become the steady state of the contemporary organization. Organizations have to change to adapt to the new demands of their environments. At the same time, we are confronted with the widespread notion that people do not want to change. In general, psychological and management literature describe resistance as a standard or even natural psychological response to change. Resistance is supposed to result from individual and organizational forces that are directed at stability. Thus, it is explained to managers and consultants how they can deal with employees who resist change and how resistance can be overcome. In this paper, the general view on resistance is questioned. I propose an alternative view in which people want to contribute to change in their organization. This view is supported by six case studies in organizations involved in complex change processes. The first question in these studies focuses on the degree to which resistance or willingness to change is found in organizations. Resistance is commonly described as a response that has to be expected from all members of an organization. Here, I investigate how positive and negative responses to change are distributed within an organization. The second question focuses on the distribution of resistance over three different groups in organizations. The common idea is that managers want to change, and employees do not. Thus, the resistance of the latter group has to be overcome. This study compares how members of management teams, line-managers, and employees evaluate change in their organizations and tries to understand their different views within the context of the change processes, instead of as individual psychological responses. Results show that willingness to change is the general response in the organizations. Only a very small percentage of the people resist the changes. The three groups differ in their willingness to change. Their positions and roles and the change process can explain these differences. The idea that employees are limited in their capacity to change is not supported.

Introduction

Change seems to have become one of the few stable factors in the contemporary organization. Over 50 years ago, Coch and French (1948) already stated that frequent changes in people's work are necessary to keep up with competitive conditions and technological development. According to Emery and Trist (1965), the complexity of the environment of organizations increases and its predictability decreases, which makes the study of organizational change more difficult. Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) observed that most organizations need to undertake moderate changes once a year, and major changes every four or five years. Change does not always have an external starting point, it can also originate from an internal source (1985). Inefficient organizational processes, problems with coordination, and lack of cooperation are examples of causes for change that lie within an organization. By now, many publications about organizational change start their introduction with a perhaps obligatory paragraph about change as the permanent condition of modern organizations. This paper is no exception. Changing organizations form the context of this study so it is relevant to point out why change takes place.

Organizations need to change to adapt to external or internal developments, but realizing effective change is very problematical. According to Kanter, Stein, and Jick (1992) change is so difficult that it is a miracle if it occurs successfully. One major barrier for change is resistance of people in organizations (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, Werkman, & Boonstra, 2003; Heller, Pusic, Strauss, & Wilpert, 1998). Resistance is commonly considered to be a standard or even natural reaction to organizational change. It is described as an almost inevitable psychological and organizational response that seems to apply to any kind of change, ranging from rather modest improvements to far-reaching change and organization transformation. Change and resistance go hand in hand: change implies resistance and resistance means that change is taking place. One of the assignments of top managers and change managers is to overcome resistance of both line-managers and employees. I do not share this common view of resistance. As a researcher and practitioner I experienced numerous instances in which resistance did not occur, even though many other barriers to change were present. Therefore, I propose a different view on resistance. In this view, resistance is mainly caused by a change approach that excludes relevant stakeholders from the change process. This view implies that resistance need not arise in during processes of

organizational change. This way of approaching the subject is an exception from the general point of view.

The next section of this paper contains a review of the literature on resistance to change. I start with presenting definitions, manifestations, and causes of resistance as they are generally described. Then I introduce an alternative view on the concept. Subsequently, I investigate if this alternative view is supported by empirical material. Three questions guide this investigation. The first question is if resistance is a standard response to change. The second question is if members of management teams, line-managers, and employees respond differently to change in their organization. The third question is how the results of the first and second question can be explained. In the following section, I present the method that was used in this study. Questionnaire data were collected in six case studies of organizations involved in far-reaching change processes. Results are presented in the subsequent section. I start the last with conclusions and explanations of the results. Here, I also discuss implications for practitioners and future research.

Resistance to change

Kurt Lewin introduced the term resistance in his field theory and later work on group dynamics (e.g., Lewin, 1947). In the classical study of Coch and French (1948) resistance is connected to change in organizations. They describe resistance of employees as one of the most serious obstructions for the changes that management considers to be necessary (p. 512). Coch and French do not provide a clear definition of the term resistance. In the section where they present their preliminary theory of resistance to change they introduce it as primarily a motivational problem, which obstructs learning new skills required by a change (p. 516). After analyzing their initial results they extend their idea when they describe resistance as “a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces” (p. 521).

Watson (1969) defines resistance as all the forces that contribute to stability in personality or in social systems. He adds that from the perspective of a manager or consultant these forces may seem an obstruction. Yet he continues by stating that “From a broader and more inclusive perspective the tendencies to achieve, preserve, and to return to equilibrium are the most salutary” (p. 488). Thus, he sees resistance to change

as a natural reaction of individuals and social systems originating from the need for a relatively stable situation.

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) do not define resistance to change. They just state that “one major task of managers is (...) to implement change and that entails overcoming resistance” (p. 106). Elsewhere, they sketch a common scenario in change processes. In this scenario a manager becomes aware of problems, initiates change, and finds that his or her initiative runs into resistance (Kotter, Schlesinger, & Sathe, 1979, p. 379). For them, resistance seems to be an inevitable reaction to change, as people are limited in the capability to change and to understand what is good for the organization.

The distinction between individual and organizational resistance is found in many contemporary management textbooks (e.g., Mullins, 1999). Mullins defines resistance as the forces against change in work organizations (p. 824). He sees resistance as a common phenomenon as people are naturally wary of change. After discussing sources of individual and organizational resistance, the section ends, as is the case in most textbooks.

A similar view is found in writings on change management (e.g., Conner, 1998). Conner states that resistance to change is a natural reaction of people to anything that significantly interrupts their status quo (p. 126). He explains that change disrupts our expectations and produces a loss of the psychological equilibrium we value. In his opinion, human inertia makes people cling to certainty and stability.

Resistance to change manifests itself in different ways. Coch and French (1948) mention grievances, turnover, low efficiency, restriction of output, and aggression against management. Watson (1969) discusses how expressions of resistance alter during a change process. In the early stage almost everyone openly criticizes the change. In the second stage innovators and opponents become identifiable. The third stage is marked by confrontation and conflict. In the fourth stage, innovators become powerful and opponents retreat to latent resistance. In the fifth stage, opponents become alienated from the organization. Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) mention that negative responses to change from individuals and groups can vary from passive resistance to aggressive attempts to undermine it. Mullins (1999) only mentions that resistance can take many forms. Conner (1998) distinguishes between covert and overt resistance. He does not discuss examples, but explains that it is important for managers to encourage

overt expressions of resistance. Covert resistance can go unnoticed until it destroys their change project.

Many causes of resistance are listed in these publications. At the individual level we find psychological factors such as resentment, frustration, fear, feelings of failure, and low motivation (Coch & French, 1948). Watson (1969) discusses preference for stability, habit, persistence, selective perception and retention, conservatism, tradition, self-distrust, and insecurity. Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) provide examples of what they see as the four most common reasons for resisting change: people focus on their own interests and not on those of the organization as a whole (one is tempted to read “management” here, instead of “organization), misunderstanding of the change and its implications, belief that the change does not make sense for the organization, and low tolerance for change. Mullins (1999) discusses selective perception, habit, inconvenience or loss of freedom, economic implications, security in the past, and fear of the unknown. Conner (1998) mentions that loss of control is the most important cause of resistance. Two of the authors comment on resistance at the organizational level. Watson discusses conformity to norms, systemic and cultural coherence, vested interests, sacred values, and rejection of outsiders. Mullins discusses organization culture, maintaining stability, investment in resources, past contracts and agreements, and threats to power or influence.

A summary of this literature review of resistance results in the following sketch of the common view of the concept. I already mentioned that resistance is generally considered to be a standard and according to some authors even natural reaction of people to change in organizations. It is described as an almost inevitable psychological and organizational response that occurs in any kind of change process. Resistance seems to apply to everyone in an organization, except to top managers. One may get the impression this is a special group, with supra-human abilities. Yet, it is more likely that resistance does not occur in members of this group because they are usually the ones who decide about the changes. As change strategists (Kanter et al., 1992) they initiate change processes and subsequently they are confronted with line-managers and employees who resist these changes. Expressions of resistance show that we are dealing with a serious issue. Aggression and turnover are reported as well as milder manifestations as absenteeism and lower motivation. Resistance is caused by many different factors that are generally classified as individual factors on the one hand and

sometimes as organizational factors on the other. A few authors also mention group factors. So we can distinguish between micro, meso, and macro level causes of resistance. However, the dominant view is that people do not want to change or are unable to change even though it is required if an organization is to meet the demands of the environment.

Kanter et al. (1992) use the distinction between strategists, implementors, and recipients of change to describe the key players in change processes and their roles. Strategists are the people who identify the need for change after for instance recognizing tension between the organization and its environment. They initiate the change process. Usually, strategists are CEO's, top managers, and consultants. Implementors manage the day-to-day process of change. They translate the goals of the teams into the divisions, departments, and teams of the organization. Line-managers are usually the implementors. Recipients must adopt and adapt to the changes. Usually, this is the largest group in an organization: the employees. Paradoxically, they fulfill a rather passive role in most change processes, and yet their response to change is crucial to its success. Kanter et al. state that recipients "can fundamentally reshape [...] change" and "their behavior determines whether a change will stick" (p. 379).

This points to what I consider to be a major cause of resistance: a change approach that excludes relevant stakeholders from the process. This factor is not discussed in the standard literature. In addition, the idea that paying careful attention to the management of a change process and to the inclusion of all people that are confronted with the consequences of the changes can prevent resistance is also missing. Initially, this surprised me. However, it is understandable if one considers that the perspective of top managers dominates the literature (Boonstra & Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 1998; Hardy & Clegg, 1996). Hence, unsuccessful change can either be ascribed to line-managers who are unable to implement changes properly, to their resistance, to the resistance of employees, or – if one does not want to blame other people – it is the fault of the organizational system. I propose to consider the top-down and content-driven change approach that top managers usually choose as the main problem (Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al., 2003). Such an approach is logical if one believes one has to overcome resistance because people do not want to change. I find this belief contestable. Therefore, this study investigates how people respond to changes in their organizations.

Method

Data were collected with questionnaires as part of a survey feedback project. The goals of the project were to assess the barriers to change in the organization and to discuss these barriers with different stakeholders in order to increase the effectiveness of the change. Six cases were selected. The first criterion for selecting cases was that the organization had to be involved in a far-reaching or second-order change process (Levy & Merry, 1986). This kind of change processes affects the strategy, structure, culture, technology, and work processes of an organization. Given the magnitude and scope of these changes, it is more likely to find resistance in second-order change processes than in situations where moderate improvement is sufficient to deal with external demands or to solve internal problems. The second criterion was that a participating organization would be medium-sized (i.e., 100 to 500 employees). This is considered to be an appropriate size to work with the survey feedback method (Seashore, 1987).

Case 1 and 6 are insurance companies, case 2 and 5 were care organizations, and case 3 and 4 are government detention institutions. In case 1, two insurance companies merge to form a new one. In case 2 and 5, the organizations abandon a focus on offering a set of standard services to clients and start to focus on the individual care their clients demand. In case 3 and 4, organizational development and improvement is required to meet the demands of Central Government and to implement internal policy. In case 6 an extensive change process takes place to become a more flexible and profitable daughter of the company that recently acquired it.

The questionnaire consisted of 79 statements about the organization and the change process. These statements represent 16 scales (see Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al., 2003). In this paper I focus on the two scales that indicate whether resistance to change occurs or not. These scales are labeled Outcome Expectation and Support for Change. Table 1 lists the statements of both scales. These statements refer to individual causes and manifestations of resistance as they are generally discussed in the literature. For instance, the inability to see the need for change supposedly causes people to resist change. Thus, if respondents answered that they do not find the change process necessary this was interpreted as a sign of resistance to change. People were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree with the

statement. They could also choose a neutral position. For each scale, answers to the statements were recoded if necessary and sorted into four categories. Averaged scores that fell between 1 and 2 were seen as very negative outcome expectations or very low support for change. Averaged scores between 2 and 3 were seen as negative outcome expectations or low support for change. Averaged scores between 3 and 4 were seen as positive outcome expectations or support for change. Averaged scores between 4 and 5 were seen as very positive outcome expectations and high support for change.

Table 1
Items Measuring Outcome Expectation and Support for Change

Scale	Items
Outcome Expectation	<p>The change process makes me feel insecure.</p> <p>The announcement of the change process gives me the feeling that I have not done my work properly.</p> <p>I have enough knowledge and experience to perform well after the change process.</p> <p>I have negative experiences with previous change processes.</p> <p>The change process has unwanted consequences for my private life.</p> <p>The changes harm my interests.</p>
Support for Change	<p>I find the changes necessary.</p> <p>I have faith in the feasibility of the changes.</p> <p>The changes have clear advantages for me.</p> <p>I support the goals of the change process.</p> <p>I am willing to put an effort in the change process.</p>

In each case, the procedure for the distribution of the questionnaires was adjusted to the situation in the organization. In most cases, the line-managers distributed the questionnaires in their teams and monitored the response. They were also invited to fill in the questionnaire themselves, as were the members of the management teams. People could fill in the questionnaire at work or take it home. In case 1, the questionnaire was sent to employees' home addresses. In case 6, people could sign up for an occasion to fill in the questionnaires in the large meeting room of the company. Filling in the questionnaires took place on a voluntary basis. It was assured that no results would be fed back that could be tracked down to individual respondents.

In addition to the data collection with questionnaires, different stakeholders were interviewed and documents were studied to obtain information about the organization and the change processes. One of the purposes of the qualitative data collection was to

find out who were the strategists, implementors, and recipients of the changes. In the cases, I investigate who fulfills which of these roles and subsequently I explore whether these roles can be used to explain part of the results.

Results

The total response in case 1 to 6 was 47%, 45%, 50%, 55%, 63%, and 79% respectively. In most cases, the response of management teams and line-managers was somewhat higher than the response of employees. In case 1 and 2 none of the members of the management teams filled in the questionnaire. Reliabilities for the Outcome Expectation scale were .63, .68, .72, .70, .78, and .75 respectively. For the Support for Change scale, they were .73, .72, .77, .78, .82, and .84. These results suggest that the data collection and the instrument are of sufficient quality. There is not an accepted criterion for survey response, but generally one can be satisfied with 50% or more (Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld, & Booth-Kewley, 1997). The variation in response over the cases can be explained by improvements in the procedure that was followed. I found no reason to believe that systematic non-response did occur and there are no indications that the results have been distorted by the non-response. Scale reliabilities are satisfactory and consistent over the cases.

The results for Outcome Expectation and Support for Change are listed in Table 2. The table shows the overall results for management teams, line-managers, and employees together. These results suggest that resistance is not a standard response to change processes. In each of the six cases more than 50% of the members of the organization had a positive or very positive expectation of the outcome of the change process. In addition, in each case the support for the changes was high or very high amongst more than 50% of the respondents. In case 1, 4, and 5, these percentages were about 75%. In case 2, they were over 90% and in case 6 they were close to 90%. The relatively low scores in case 3 can for a large part be explained by the fact that in this case neither the management team nor the line-managers had a clear idea about the goals of the change process and by the fact that the line-managers strongly criticized the conduct of the management team.

Table 2
Outcome Expectation and Support for Change

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6
Outcome Expectation						
Very negative	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Negative	20%	4%	31%	22%	22%	11%
Positive	68%	69%	62%	66%	66%	55%
Very positive	11%	27%	7%	13%	11%	33%
Support for Change						
Very low	3%	0%	0%	4%	1%	2%
Low	24%	8%	44%	23%	22%	13%
High	62%	72%	51%	63%	67%	58%
Very high	11%	20%	5%	10%	10%	27%

These results can be specified for members of the management teams, line managers, and employees. Figure 1, 2, and 3 contain a graphical display of the results for the three groups. Such a display makes it easier to compare how the groups responded to the changes in their organizations. The results of employees were almost similar to the overall results because this group formed the largest part of the total response in each case (84%, 95%, 82%, 91%, 95%, and 75% respectively). Thus, Figure 1 shows the same as has been described in the previous paragraph. Figure 2 shows the results of line-managers. Their expectation of the outcome of the change process was more positive and the support for change was higher in each case. In case 3 and 4 the results of line-managers were relatively similar to the results of employees. However, in the other four cases there was no sign of resistance whatsoever. Line-managers had a positive or a very positive expectation of the outcome of the change process and their support for the changes was high or very high. Figure 3 shows the results for members of the management teams. Their results were most positive. Only one of the three members of the management team in case 3 did not support the change process. This was one of the reasons for the problems in this case that were briefly described above.

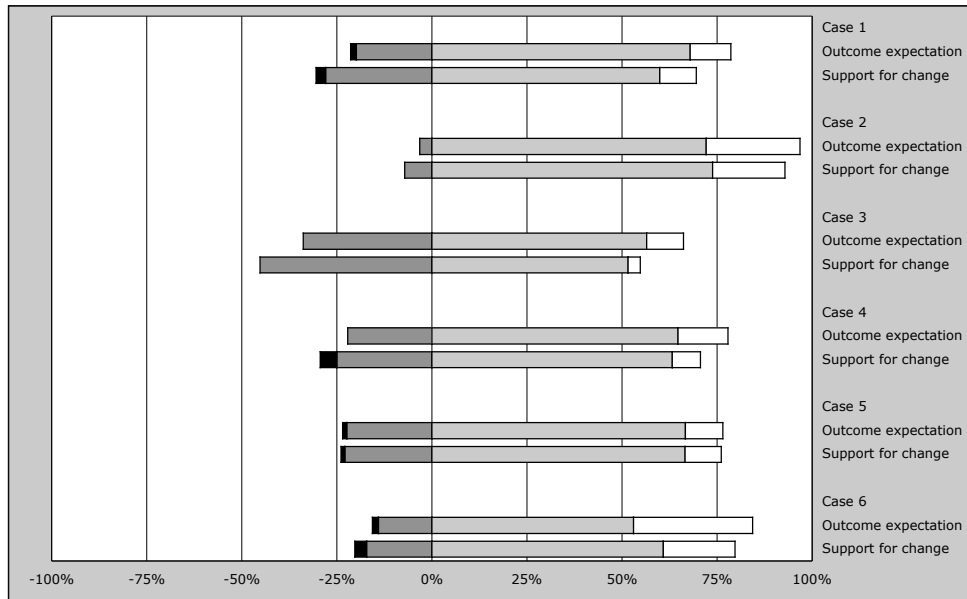


Figure 1. Outcome Expectation and Support for Change specified for employees.

Note. The axis starts at -100% and ends at 100% so that negative and positive results can be seen more easily. Negative results point to the percentage of the employees that resists change. Positive results indicate the percentage of the employees that is willing to change. Very negative outcome expectations and very low support for change are black, negative outcome expectations and low support for change are dark gray, positive outcome expectations and high support for change are gray, and very positive outcome expectations and very high support for change are white.

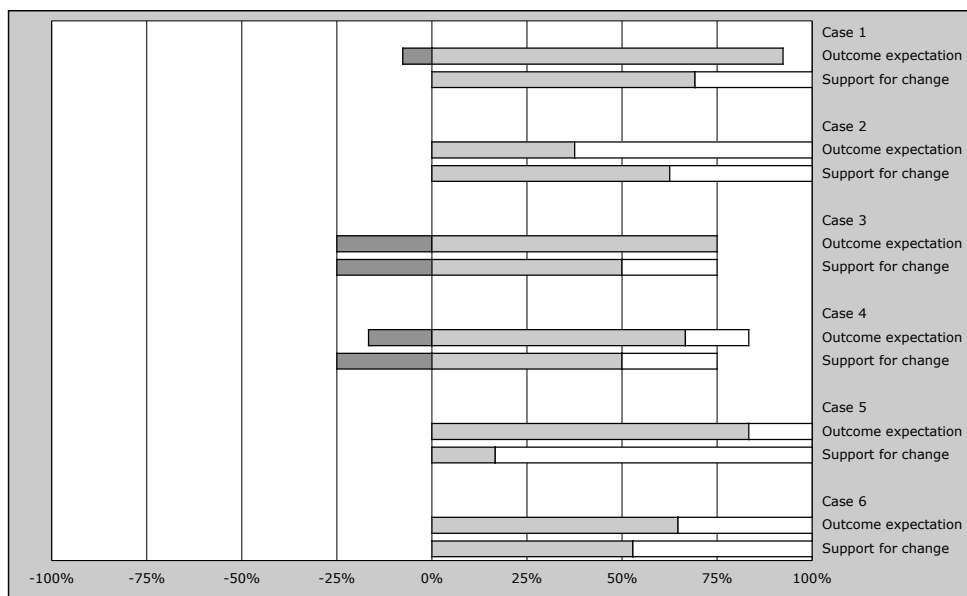


Figure 2. Outcome Expectation and Support for Change specified for line-managers.

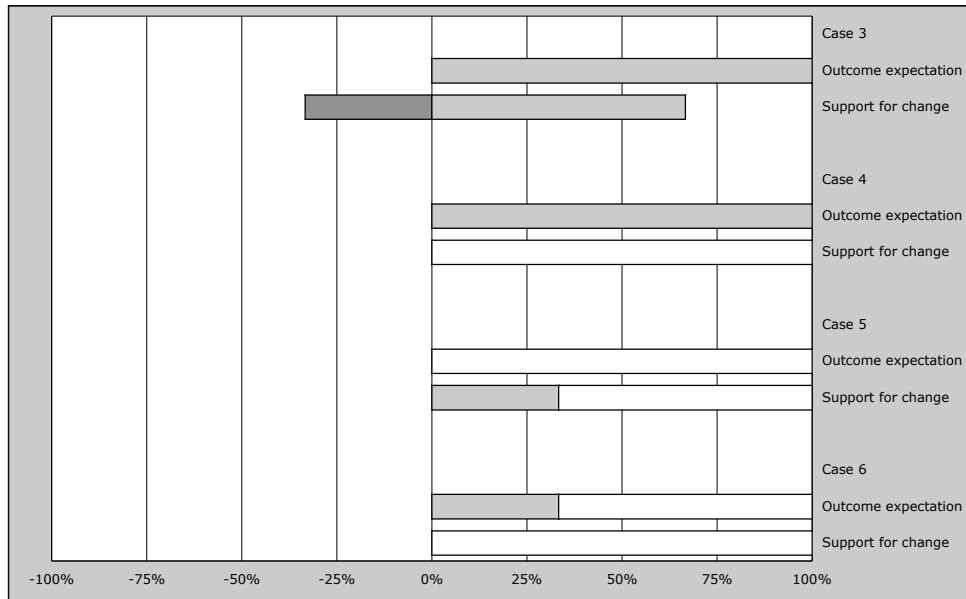


Figure 3. Outcome Expectation and Support for Change specified for members of management teams.

Table 3 shows who fulfilled the role of change strategists, change implementors, and change recipients in each of the cases. Generally speaking, the CEO's and the management teams were the strategists, the line-managers were the implementors (or were supposed to fulfill this role), and the employees were the recipients of the change in most cases. Three remarks must be added to this general classification. First, in case 1 to 5, the members of the management teams who were responsible for a division of their organization, also fulfilled the role of implementors together with the line-managers. In fact, in case 1 to 4, these members of the management team were the leading implementors. Second, in case 5, employees also fulfilled the role of implementors. Here, line-managers and employees worked together in translating the consequences of focusing on demands of clients to changes in the work of the teams. Third, in case 6, everyone in the organization was involved in the change process from the start. In a sense, all members of the organization fulfilled each of the three roles. However, the CEO, management team and line-managers were the most important strategist. Employees fulfilled this role to a lesser extent. Line-managers and employees contributed equally to the implementation. Given this division of the roles, I choose to characterize "all" as recipients.

Table 3
Strategists, Implementors, and Recipients of Change

	Strategists	Implementors	Recipients
Case 1	CEO Management team	Management team Line-managers	Team managers Employees
Case 2	CEO Management team	Management team Line-managers	Team coordinators Employees
Case 3	CEO Management team	Management team Line-managers	Employees
Case 4	CEO Management team	Management team Line-managers	Employees
Case 5	CEO Management team	Management team Line-managers Employees	Employees
Case 6	CEO Management team Line-managers	Line-managers Employees	All

Concluding remarks

The first question in this study was if resistance is a standard response to organizational change. The results indicate it is not. Six organizations were investigated where far-reaching change processes were taking place. The organizations were involved in a merger, strategic change, or major development and improvement that affected all aspects of the organizations. In these complex and demanding situations where both external and internal causes for change could be distinguished, willingness to change was found amongst a majority of the people. In five of these cases three quarters or more of the respondents had positive or very positive expectations of the outcome of the change processes and support for the changes was high or very high. I therefore conclude that willingness to change is a standard response of most people and that the idea that people's need for stability is an important barrier to change needs reconsideration.

The second question was if members of management teams, line-managers, and employees differ in their response to change. These three groups do differ and there seems to be a pattern in these differences. In each of the cases the members of the management teams were most willing to change. Their outcome expectation and support for change came close to a 100%. The willingness to change of line-managers was just slightly lower. Employees' willingness to change was about equal to the general results, because this group formed a relatively large part in the total response.

So employees came third, yet a large majority of this group could clearly be situated on the willingness to change side of the “willingness-resistance dimension”, as was concluded in the previous paragraph. The conclusion here is that the three groups differ in their willingness to change but that these differences are relatively small. The general notion that top managers need to overcome the inevitable resistance of employees (or line-managers) is not supported at all.

The third question was how these results can be explained. The answer to this question is twofold. First, I need to explain why resistance did not occur, or at least not to the degree that is suggested in the literature as well as by managers and consultants who claim that resistance is a major barrier to change in their practice. This means that we need to focus on *what* it is that people resist, if it is not the changes per se. Second, to understand the differences between members of the management teams, line-managers, and employees in the change process, a focus on their positions and roles in the change process can be of help.

The conclusion that willingness to change is the standard response of most people in the cases may seem difficult to reconcile with the frequent observation of both academics and practitioners that many change processes progress with great difficulty (cf. Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990a; Kanter et al., 1992; Porras & Robertson, 1983). One may get the impression that I am unaware that many problems are encountered when organizations try to change or that I am neglecting the criticism of employees who work in changing organizations. I take these problems and the criticism very seriously, yet I believe they are wrongly interpreted as resistance to change. Therefore, I draw attention to the focus of resistance (cf. Dent & Goldberg, 1999). The results of this study point out that it is not the change itself that people criticize. A large survey and in-depth case studies in Dutch organizations (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002; Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al., 2003) suggest that top-down change approaches and the conduct of change managers and top managers seem to be the primary focus of resistance. This specification points to an essentially different view of the concept. Thus, resistance to change may be a too general term and wrongly leads us to believe that people’s conservatism and need for stability are major barriers to change. People do not resist change as such, they resist being excluded from a change process that affects every aspect of the organization, including their work.

The positions and roles of management teams, line-managers, and employees in the changing organizations can explain the differences that were found in the degree to which each group was willing to change. In all cases, CEO's and the other members of the management teams in the organizations were the strategists. As strategists they initiated the changes, defined the goals, and decided about the change approach. In all cases but one, this was exclusively their domain. In addition, some of the members of the management teams fulfilled a leading role in the implementation. It is hardly surprising that they fully supported the changes they started themselves and that their expectation of the outcome was positive. In all cases, line-managers were the implementors. This meant that they had a lot of influence on the translation of the changes in their departments and teams. Thus, their close position to the change strategists was reflected in their positive expectations of the outcome of the change processes and high support for change. In most cases, employees were merely recipients of the changes that others invented. Their role was limited to carrying out the instructions of management teams and line-managers. This can explain the relatively higher percentage of individual resistance in this group. Nevertheless, a large majority was willing to change.

This brings me to future research. Similar results were found in six cases, even though the situation in the organizations differed greatly. However, further support for the conclusions of this study needs to be gained. I can safely say that the difficulties that both managers and employees in the participating organizations experienced were in no way different from the usual story. Instead, they were representative examples of the problems that many organizations encounter in second-order change processes. So it was not a lucky selection of the only six organizations where change progressed successfully and where the change processes were managed as one can only dream, on the contrary. Still, a larger data set is needed to confirm the findings of this study and to see if the patterns that were found also apply to other organizations. In addition, I did not discuss what to do with the 25% of the employees who expected little of the change processes and who did not support the changes. I am aware that attention is needed for these results, but that was not the focus of this paper.

We need to explore why willingness to change is used so little and what the alternatives are to make change a more collaborative effort of all stakeholders. Regrettably, a lot of energy and motivation in organizations is lost without good reason.

Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue that the idea of management and employees as opposing parties leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The results of this current study suggest that it is worthwhile to set this idea aside. CEO's, top managers, and consultants do not have to overcome the resistance of employees. Their challenge is to design change processes in such a way that groups can work together and realize a shared goal: improving the organization and their work. This asks for a change approach in which strategist, implementors, and recipients come from all departments and hierarchical levels of an organization.

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