Change Research and Application Report

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this Change Research and Application Report is to provide the opportunity to review and analyze an article related to organizational change and development from a scholarly journal. From our assigned reading, *Organization Development: The Process of Leading Organizational Change,* D.L Anderson covers a substantial amount of research, theories, applications, and resources regarding the principles behind organizational change. One of the references he listed which caught my interest was an article in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science called *“Challenging “resistance to change”* by Eric Dent and Susan Goldberg. In my line of work, the idea of “resisting change” intrigues me because, from my experience, it is never the intended target that is “resisting” change. Within this report, I will review the selected article, provide implications and recommendations for organizational change and development based on my analysis of the article, and go over the application of key principles from the article with an actual personal case example.

**Review of the Article**

*Challenging “Resistance to Change”* grabbed my attention because change is a constancy in my organization. Necessary or not, it is a prevalent issue. Eric Dent and Susan Goldberg did a wonderful job examining one of the most widely accepted mental models that with any change, there will be resistance to overcome. They look at organizational behavior regarding change and the notion that it is the manager’s job to overcome the resistance to change by the employees. They wanted to show how resistance to change became received truth. The definition of received truth means that the truth is accepted without question or assessing its credibility. Kurt Lewin introduced the term as a systems concept, which showed that managers and employees are affected equally. If you accepted the received truth model (mangers vs employees), it would be quite easy to overlook and misunderstand change dynamics within an organization. The idea that resistance to change is correlated with a psychological concept in which resistance is limited to the individual, and the manager’s task is to overcome that resistance. To better understand and move towards a more productive model of change dynamics, the authors illustrate alternatives to the idea of resisting change.

Over the last 30 years, there have not been significant alterations of ideologies concerning resistance to change. The authors assert that “people may resist loss of status, loss of pay, loss of comfort, but these are not the same as resisting change.” When organizations put effort into communicating the vision and rationale behind the change, while soliciting participation from their employees, there is little individual resistance. However, there are organizational barriers like structure or performance appraisal systems in place that make employees feel like they must make a choice between the new organizational vision or their self-interest. Additionally, they highlighted a study consistent in that finding that people in power will work towards maintaining the status quo, instead of changing it. Kurt Lewin offered a three-phase model of organizational change in which he described change as a process of (1) unfreezing, (2) moving, and (3) refreezing. Current organizational practices need to be released (or unfrozen) to be changed. Once they are changed, they need to be refrozen as newly adopted regular practices. Lewin pointed out that two forces worked together to maintain equilibrium in an organization: forces promoting a change and forces promoting the status quo (Anderson, 2020, p. 120).

Dent and Goldberg argue that the mental construct represented by the resistance to change molds the behavior of people in the organizations. It is so embedded in the culture that people are not aware how their mental models impact the realities around change dynamics and result in overall dysfunctional organizations. As the article continues, they offer areas of change. Change can be planned as part of organization development (OD). As Lewin has evolved his concept of change being a systems perspective (not simply an individual issue), so did other researchers who studied organizational behavior. Referencing Lewin’s Change Process, they believed it was “more effective to weaken the barriers that to strengthen the drivers.” The theme of group dynamics continued in the article by illustrating experiments that concluded when groups that were allowed to participate in the design and development of the changes have a much lower resistance among those not involved. The authors go over the origin of the term “resistance to change” and reference many experiments and articles that do not really address the resistance part of the title. Later research uses the phrase “overcoming resistance to change” but the research associated with that topic deals with change itself, not the resistance to it. The authors list Lawrence’s five prescriptions for what management can do about resistance to change. They include broadening staff interests, using understandable terms, taking a new look at resistance, developing new job definitions, and revising the role of the administrator.

The article concludes by demonstrating the importance of problem framing when it comes to examining resistance to change. Assuming resistance to change, and the textbook strategies for overcoming it, does not form a useful framework for resolving change implementation issues (Dent and Goldberg 1999). Using Lewin’s “force-field analysis” and other contributions to group dynamics, you can see how resistance naturally fits into change. As the authors’ state: “making changes effectively in organizations requires specific, targeted action. If the anticipated change will result in loss of status by employees, then the field must research and develop strategies for dealing with loss of status.” If you can understand that last sentence, you will set yourself and your organization up for success when the implementation of change is necessary. Planning for resistance to change is not a successful strategy to address the actual barriers to change.

**Implications**

For organizational change and development to be effective, it is imperative to approach change in the most influential way. Realizing that change should include the entire team will help eliminate the consequences of focusing on the wrong mental model for change. I believe that leadership is influence, nothing more. If you know that a change needs to be made, and you are sitting in leadership position, you must understand the level of influence you can have on the outcome of that change. Learning from those before us, and the experience outlined in the article, the “manager vs. employee” mental mode does not work. It is more likely that a barrier to successful change is those in charge of leading the organization through the change. Communicating the vision and including the whole team in the process eliminates the perceived “resistance” to the given change. People are capable of making enormous sacrifices when they have the agency to act on their own. Give people a choice, and they’ll step up to the plate (Grenny et al., 2013, p. 88). Planning for the impacts that the actual change will entail will prevent your organization from wasting resources to apply for general perceived resistance that can occur with any change. Understanding motivations has significant implications to successful applications to the idea of overcoming resistance to change.

**Application**

Having served in the Air Force for the last 18 years, dealing with change management is nothing new. However, I have been fascinated with how challenging it can be for organizations to make even the simplest organizational changes. The resistance present for something seemingly simple relates back to the core of the article that has a theme of planning for the “resistance” for the change instead of planning for the intended change. One recent example I can relate to this article is when we needed to reorganize our organizational structure. We needed to eliminate a handful of positions and restructure how the organization would be reflected to align with other professional military education (PME) schoolhouses. Nobody was being removed from the organization, but their duty title and responsibilities would be absorbed into other roles. The norm for instructors was to work towards these positions and that the added responsibility in title and position would increase their competitiveness for promotion. However, there were too many positions for the sake of title only and they were negatively impacting the overall effectiveness of the organization. Big Air Force created a plan of action to reflect true responsibility from experience and outlined the requirements necessary to fulfill these newly designed positions. The change was necessary to create an equal playing field for promotion across all PMEs. Uniformity while serving in a special duty assignment was necessary because it is unique and should be treated as such.

Top leadership spent far too much time on how they would deal with the reaction to the positional changes instead of the importance of the change. They thought that resistance would be individually focused on those that would be eligible for the old positions or those currently serving in their capacity. As mentioned before with Lewin’s Three Phased Model of Change and the Force-field Analysis, we needed to unfreeze the old structure of our organization and move towards a new state, and once understanding and acceptance of the change was enforced, we would need to refreeze the new state of the organization structure. Lewin’s concept of force field analysis has become a useful tool for OD practitioners. The tool can help organizational members understand what factors would support a given change effort and what resistance might prevent the change from being adopted (Anderson, 2020, p. 121). One of the most significant factors that leadership (managers) should have considered is their role within the change process. They did not understand their specific role in being responsible for communicating the importance of the change and providing a clear strategic vision of why we were moving in this direction. Resistance is often triggered by the way the manager reacts to the initial resistance. Most managers need to understand the employee’s perspective and admit their own shortcomings in implementing change. The greatest need for change to overcome resistance is the manager (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Leadership’s lack of understanding of the instructors’ perspective caused resentment among the staff. The pushback they were giving had nothing to do with the change itself, rather the approach leadership presented on the implementation of the change. We are still slowly transitioning into these new positions, so leadership still has a window of opportunity to improve their course of action. They need to start by understanding and learning the perspectives of those impacted by the change. Once they figure out the motivations of their members and talk through the “resistance” to the change, they can produce a better training plan and course of action that is the most advantageous to the members. Our members can be more experienced than those leading them so it is critical to include them in the change process. This will increase trust amongst the staff and increase the influence of those serving them.

**References**

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