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What Role Do Employee Stress and Dedication Play in Their Attitudes Toward Organizational Change?

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Abstract

The goals of this study are to examine the relationship between occupational stress and organizational transformation. The present research investigates how occupational stress and organizational commitment, two fundamental concepts in the study of organizational behavior, are related to workers' perspectives on organizational change.

Structure, Methodology, and Strategy - A new "Organizational Screening Tool" called ASSET was completed by 292 people. It assesses factors like how stressed people are at work, how committed they feel to their company, and how open they are to change inside their company.

Results - As hypothesized, there were negative associations between job stresses and openness to change, suggesting that those who experience high levels of stress in the workplace are less likely to embrace efforts to bring about transformational change. Bad work relationships had the greatest effect on workers' resistance to change, highlighting the significance of that occupational stressor. The findings did not lend credence to the hypothesis that organizational commitment acts as a mediator between occupational stress and openness to change.

Implications/Limitations of the Study One potential drawback of the study design is the possibility of common technique variation contamination across all measurements. Furthermore, the current study used a cross-sectional research design rather than a longitudinal or experimental approach, which precludes the possibility of providing definitive causal explanations.

Innovation/value - Findings from this research highlight the significance of strong working connections throughout times of organizational transition. Positive attitudes toward change may be fostered via dispute resolution, the establishment of mutually beneficial working relationships, and clear and open communication. In addition, businesses must assess the potential for increased effort as a result of organizational change. The increase in work load is not only directly related to the shift, but also makes the shift seem undesirable and troublesome, fueling resistance to it.

Keywords Organizational change, Management of change, Stress, Business policy, Greece Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Organizational transformation initiatives are often launched. According to the American Management Association, 46% of US organizations reported having three or more change initiatives/programmes active at the same time, and 84% reported having at least one significant change effort active. More than a third of the 396 firms surveyed in a research by the US Bureau of National Affairs (1996) cited organizational reform as a top priority. These never-ending efforts place a heavy burden on both corporations and their employees. Organizational change disrupts the "how things are done in here" and, as a consequence, people feel uncertainty and begins experiencing anxieties about the possible failure in dealing with the new circumstance (Coch and French, 1948).

Workplace stress has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including low motivation and morale, decreased performance, high turnover and sick-leave, accidents, dissatisfaction with one's employment, poor quality goods and services, strained internal communications, and disputes, among other things (Schabracq and Cooper, 2000; Murphy, 1995; McHugh, 1993). In addition, Chusmir and Franks (1988) contended that stress is at the root of all of these issues, and that it negatively impacts businesses in general. 91% of the 492 human resource and personnel experts polled in the British Industrial Society Survey (2001) identified workplace stress as an issue. In particular, 36% of people thought it was a big deal, and 5% said it was a very big deal.

McHugh (1997) proposed adding stress management to the list of priorities for organizational transformation. She argued that change managers should recognize that employees are under more stress from constant organizational change and that companies should consider including a stress management programme as part of the change management programme. Receptivity, resistance, commitment, cynicism, stress, and related personal reactions are clearly relevant criterion variables to be considered in the framework of planning and

implementing an organizational change, as noted by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999, p. 307). It's apparent that skepticism and stress brought on by change may have a negative impact on productivity. Mack et al. (1998) highlight the fact that workers no longer go through the standard unfreezing–moving–refreezing paradigm of organizational transformation (Lewin, 1947). Employees, on the other hand, are in a perpetual state of uncertainty and seldom if ever return to a refreezing condition. So, although everyone might agree that stress slows down the change process, exactly how stress affects transformation remains unknown. The goal of this research is to determine how individual stress affects organizational transformation. In addition, this article investigates the mediating effect of organizational commitment on the relationship between stress and resistance to change in the workplace.

The impact of stress on attitudes to change

The most commonly definitions of stress may be categorized into three types (Beehr and Franz, 1987). The first type is stimulus-based which considers stress as a situational or environmental based stimulus, impinging on the person. The second type is response-based, defining stress as an individual's psychological or physiological response to environmental/situational forces. The third definition, which is adopted for the purposes of the present study, applies an interactive approach often called the stressor-strain approach. It brings together the concepts put forward in the first two definitions in the sense that it defines stress as both the stimulus (source of stress or stressor) and the response (outcome or manifestation of stress or strain). Theories based on this definition are usually considered to be superior since they offer a more "complete" view of the dynamics of stress and can account for documented differential experiences within a single situation (Arnold *et al.*, 1995).

Secord and Beckman (1969, p. 167) defined attitudes as certain regularities of an individual's feelings, thoughts and predispositions to act toward some aspect of his environment. Arnold *et al.* (1995) indicated that "attitudes reflect a person's tendency to feel, think or behave in a positive or negative manner towards the object of the attitude". According to Elizur and Guttman (1976), attitudes toward change in general consist of a person's cognitions about change, affective reactions to change, and behavioral tendency toward change. Researchers have therefore, identified various employees' responses to an organizational change ranging from strong positive attitudes (i.e. "this change is essential for the organization to succeed") to strong negative attitudes (i.e. "this change could ruin the company"), (Piderit, 2000). Therefore, change can be received with excitement and happiness or anger and fear while employees' response to it may range from positive intentions to support the change to negative intentions to oppose it.

Positive attitudes to change were found to be vital in achieving organizational goals and in succeeding in change programmes (Eby *et al.*, 2000; Martin, 1998; Kotter, 1996; Gilmore and Barnett, 1992). Although change management literature has provided practice with frameworks and methodologies to understand and manage change, the results are quite disappointing. The brutal fact, as Beer and Nohria (2000) described it, is that 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail. The number one reason why organization change initiatives fail is resistance to change (Deloitte & Touche, 1996), which is closely linked with the development of negative attitudes to change. Employee attitudes toward change can impact their morale, productivity and turnover intentions (Iacovini, 1993; Eby *et al.*, 2000).

Many studies suggested that organizational change efforts can be very stressful experience for individuals (Elrod and Tippett, 2002; Grant, 1996). Emotions and responses to change can be so intensive that the literature in organizational change has compared them with individual responses to traumatic changes such as death and grief (Henderson-Loney, 1996; Grant, 1996; Kubler-Ross, 1969). For example, Perlman and Takacs (1990) argued that there is a big similarity between the stages that an individual goes through dealing with death described by Kubler-Ross (1969) and the stages they identified that individuals go through when they experience organizational change. More specifically, they noted that there are many emotional states that a person can experience during change processes, which are equilibrium, denial, anger, bargaining, chaos, depression, resignation, openness, readiness and re-emergence (Perlman and Takacs, 1990).

All these responses to change which are directly related, and in some cases constitute resistance to change are normal since the change process involves going from known to the unknown (Bovey and Hede, 2001). The topic of resistance to change, which is directly related with positive or negative attitudes to change, is well acknowledged in the literature as a critical success or failure factor (Trader-Leigh, 2001; Strebler, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Regar *et al.*, 1994). Other evidence suggests that negative attitudes to change have negative consequences for the organization. More specifically, perceived increased pressure coming from change implementation among state government employees was associated with increased stress, and as a result, was associated with lower job satisfaction and increased intentions to quit (Rush *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) report low job satisfaction and organizational commitment as a result of a merger.

Armenakis *et al.* (1993) indicated that beliefs, perceptions and attitudes are critical in successful change. Unless the majority of staff perceives that the organization develops supportive organizational mechanisms to change, such as top management commitment, allocation of resources, rewards, training, participation in the planning and implementation etc., (McHugh, 1993) change will be a stressful experience. Stress caused by organizational change

will result in creating negative attitudes toward change, and therefore stress will become an inhibitor to change. So we suggest that a negative relationship exists between stress level sources of stress and attitudes towards organizational change.

Organizational commitment, stress and attitudes to change

Porter *et al.* (1976) defined organizational commitment as the relative strength of an individual's identification and involvement in a particular organization. Mowday *et al.* (1982) conceive commitment as an attitude that reflects the nature and quality of the linkage between an employee and an organization. It is a state in which an individual identifies with a particular organization and its goals and wishes to maintain membership in order to facilitate these goals. It is argued that commitment often establishes an exchange relationship in which individuals attach themselves to the organization in return for certain rewards from the organization (Buchanan, 1974). Individuals come to organizations with certain needs, skills, expectations and they hope to find a work environment where they can use their abilities and satisfy their needs. When an organization can provide these opportunities, the likelihood of increasing commitment is increased. It is obvious that this exchange doesn't mean exploitation of employees. Commitment can be characterized by at least three related factors; a strong acceptance of the organization's values and goals, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization. As a result, commitment is determined by a range of organizational and individual factors such as personal characteristics, structural characteristics, work experience and role related features.

There is evidence in the change management literature identifying the role of organizational commitment in a change context. Many authors indicated that organizational commitment plays an important role in employee's acceptance of change (Darwish, 2000; Cordery *et al.*, 1993). Iverson (1996) suggested organizational commitment as the second most important determinant after union membership of attitudes toward organizational change. More specifically, Lau and Woodman (1995) argued that a highly committed employee is more willing to accept organizational change if it is perceived to be beneficial. But other researchers indicated that a highly committed employee may resist to change if he/she perceives it as a threat for his/her own benefit. These findings suggest that there might be an influence of organizational commitment on attitudes to organizational change. Other research also indicated that organizational commitment is a better predictor of behavioral intentions than job satisfaction within a change context (Iverson, 1996; Iverson and Roy, 1994). Employees with high organizational commitment are more willing to put more effort in a change project and, therefore, it is more likely to develop positive attitudes towards organizational change (Iverson, 1996; Guest, 1987). Similarly, Guest (1987) suggested that organizational commitment mediated the total causal effects of positive affectivity, job security, job satisfaction, job motivation and environmental opportunity on organizational change. Therefore, it is hypothesized that a positive relationship exists between organizational commitment and attitudes to change. Lau and Woodman (1995) indicated that each individual determines through his/her perceptual filters whether change is a threat or a benefit. Each individual's unique "schema" of what change is or of what change represents adds to the formulation of attitudes and reactions to change. This argument supports the approach of the existence of individual differences both in the perception of the change event (stressor) and in the causal relationship between perceived change event (stressor) and stress level. There are a number of moderators that have an impact on the perception of change event and on the cause of stress (Mack *et al.*, 1998). Apart from personality dimensions such as locus of control or A/B type of personality, organizational commitment has been identified as a moderator (Mack *et al.*, 1998; Sullivan and Bhagat, 1992). These moderators affect the individual's ability to cope with the change event, the individual's ability to cope with sources and outcomes of stress and the individual's perception of the change event. Therefore, we hypothesize that organizational commitment moderates the relationship between occupational stress and attitudes towards change.

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 292 employees from various Greek organizations participated in the current study; 119 (41.8 per cent) were males and 166 (58.2 per cent) were females. The majority of the participants were between 37 and 55 years of age (53.3 per cent) or 21 to 36 years old (38.6 per cent). A total of 145 of them (51.6 per cent) were employed in clerical-secretarial positions, 38 (13.5 per cent) in technical/professional positions, 25 (9 per cent) in managerial positions and finally 20 (7.1 per cent) were employed in supervisory positions. The remaining, were employed in skilled-manual and sales or marketing positions. A total of 154 (54.4 per cent) were married, 24 (8.5 per cent) lived with their partner, and 82 (29 per cent) were single. Regarding their educational background, 69 (24 per cent) were high-school graduates, 35 (12.2 per cent) had graduated from a college or further education institute, 133 of them (46.2 per cent) were university graduates, and 39 (13.5 per cent) had postgraduate degrees.

Participants completed a self-report questionnaire pack, which incorporated the measures of attitudes to change and occupational stress. In addition, personal and demographic data relating to age, gender, marital status and educational background were also collected. Half of the individuals completed the attitudes to change measure first and half second, in order to control for order effect. Researchers informed the participants about confidentiality issues and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and any stage.

Measures

Occupational stress. Stress was measured through ASSET (Cartwright and Cooper, 2002), a new “Organizational Screening Tool” which is the advanced form of the well-established and extensively used Occupational Stress Indicator – OSI (Cooper *et al.*, 1988). However, OSI is primarily intended for use with White Collar and Managerial workers and is very long and time consuming to complete. Therefore, ASSET has been developed, which is shorter and applicable to all occupations. It has already been used successfully in health care organizations with adequate evidence of construct and discriminant validity both in the UK (Johnson, 2001; Johnson and Cooper, 2003) and also in Greece (Nikolaou and Tsaousis, 2002). According to the authors, ASSET is a very effective tool in diagnosing occupational stress, combining both the sources and the effects of stress. ASSET conceptualizes occupational stress as influenced by a variety of sources (each of them consisting an independent scale), such as work relationships, work-life balance, overload, job security, control, resources and communication, pay and benefits, as well as an evaluation of the employee’s perception of the potential sources of stress that relate to the fundamental nature of the job itself (e.g. physical working conditions, type of tasks and the amount of satisfaction from the job, etc.) named “Aspects of the Job”. An overall Job Stress Index was calculated and used for the purposes of the current study, based on the sum of all the stress indicators described by ASSET. A high score in the overall job stress index indicates increased perception of the stressors associated with high stress levels.

Attitudes to change. Attitudes to change were measured with the Attitudes to Change Questionnaire (ACQ) developed by Vakola *et al.* (2003). The scale consists of 29 items (14 positive and 15 negative), and asks from the participants to rate the extent to which they agree with each item on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree

(1) to strongly agree (5). A typical item of the positive attitude scale is: “I am looking forward to changes within my work environment”. An example of a negative item is: “When a new organizational change programme is initiated, I emphatically show my disagreement”. The negatively stated items were reversed so that a high score to indicate positive attitudes towards organizational change.

(2) *Attitudes to change, occupational stress, and demographic data*

(3) Table II shows the statistically significant relationships of the Attitudes to Change scale and Occupational Stress indicators with demographic variables such as gender, age, and education.

(4) In order to investigate whether gender affects both attitudes to change and stress at work, independent *t*-tests were conducted. As can be seen in Table II, females scored higher than males on attitudes towards organizational change scale [$t(280) = -3.32, p < 0.001$] suggesting that males tend to be more reluctant than females towards organizational change. In terms of occupational stress males also scored significantly higher than females on a number of scales, namely work relationships, overload, and the overall job stress index, demonstrating thus higher levels of occupational stress compared to females. Males also scored higher in organizational commitment (commitment of the employee to the organization). As far as age is concerned, no differences were identified among the four age groups of our sample. Education also showed a positive impact on attitudes towards change, as employees with higher education are better equipped to meet new challenges at work (Iverson, 1996). Educational level was also negatively related with one of the two types of organizational commitment (commitment of the organization to the employee). Finally, these demographic characteristics were not linked to employee satisfaction and turnover intentions.

Conclusion

The current study has also a series of limitations. A limitation of the research design could be that all measures originated from the same source resulting in possible contamination from common method variance. Common method variance, in this case refers to the problem that occurs when the same participant completes all the measures using the same type of paper-and pencil response format. The correlation between the measures will be higher than it ideally should be because participants will apply the same biases to each task. However, the emergence of multiple factors in the results of the factor analyses (Cartwright and Cooper, 2002) weighs against significant influence from common method variance (Begley, 1998). Further, even if it exists, there is no reason to expect that the differences in correlations among attitudes to change, occupational stress and organizational commitment are due to the effect of common method variance, since its presence would not be expected to exert differential bias on the observed relationships.

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