

TOWARDS A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE READINESS

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ABSTRACT

The present study develops the conceptual linkage between individual change readiness and elements of social capital. Manifestations of structural and relational social capital are theorized as affecting various aspects of change readiness. The paper provides an overview of the state of change readiness and an introduction to social network analysis.

Keywords: Change Readiness, Social Network Analysis, Social Capital

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Scholars have increasingly focused their attention on change processes and overall management of the change programme. This area of inquiry has led to the emergence of two interrelated streams, that of change programme management (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Kotter, 2007; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008) and that of change dynamics such as readiness, resistance, and commitment (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Holt, Armenakis, Field, & Harris, 2007; Jaros, 2010; Oreg, 2003). These two streams of interest and the effective management of change dynamics are seen as constructive for theory development and integration, as well as refinement of managerial and interventionist change efficacy. The first of these schools, characterized by the work of Kotter and others emphasizes change from a top-down, project model extending from Lewin's (1947) seminal work in which change programmes must succeed at three objectives. First change programmes must unmake the ossifying elements of organizational process, structure and culture. Second, change programmes must successfully inject the change elements into the organization. Finally, the change programme must re-freeze the structures, processes and culture of the organization in such a way to maintain the inserted change elements. This stream has been extended by the work of Bridges (1991). Of particular interest to this paper is the nature of the social elements of structure, culture and process that act as deterrents to change while paradoxically also serving as the tools for enabling change.

The second stream of change research focuses on select dynamics of change. Research in this stream examines how individuals and groups make sense of change forces, and develop attitudes and sentiments, thus shaping how the individual responds to change programmes. Beginning with very early studies of resistance to change (Coch & French, 1948; Lawrence, 1954), this area has come under increasing scrutiny due to lack of clarity over the terms and use

at multiple levels of analysis (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford, et al., 2008). However, much interesting work has come from operationalizing resistance as an individual psychological variable (Frustr & Cable, 2008; Lines, 2004; Oreg et al., 2008). Along these lines, other efforts have been made to examine the related constructs of willingness and openness to change (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994; Wanberg & Banas, 2000), cynicism about change (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnysky, 2005), as well as commitment to change (Bernerth, Armenakis, Field, & Walker, 2007; Coatsee, 1999; Hersocovitch & Meyer, 2002; Jaros, 2010; J. P. Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, & Topolnysky, 2007).

More recently, theory development, scale development, and cross cultural validation efforts have more directly been directed toward the readiness to change construct (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Cunningham et al., 2002; Desplaces, 2005; Eby, Adams, Russel, & Gaby, 2000; Holt, et al., 2007; Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005). In majority, these approaches have studied change readiness at the individual level. Holt et al. (2007) states that as a result of this approach, “readiness can be defined as a comprehensive attitude that is influenced simultaneously by the content (i.e., what is being changed), the process (i.e., how the change is being implemented), the context (i.e., the circumstances under which change is occurring), and the individual (i.e., characteristics of those being asked to change/be involved)” (p.326). As such, readiness, refers to the extent to which individuals and groups are cognitively and emotionally ready to address the change request and process (Holt et al., 2007). We propose that the construct of readiness also applies to individuals in networks, processes between them, and the networks themselves. We further propose that use of change readiness, as opposed to resistance, commitment, or openness, more closely aligns with an important trend in positive psychology and organizational behavior (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and more importantly, in positive organizational change (Cameron, 2008).

While there is an implicit acceptance of relational and structural network elements in existing change theory, there is, as yet, little scholarly inquiry examining organizational change from a social network perspective. Where such inquiry exists, it uses network modeling as an explanation for diffusion (Suarez, 2005) or it uses organizational change as an explanation for alterations of the social structure of an organization (Burkhardt & Brass, 1990). In other cases, the perception of social support – rather than the structural or relational manifestations of social networks – is used to explain aspects of organizational change (Cinite, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and develop a social network paradigm in organizational change research. It is our belief that such a perspective complements and informs the two change research streams, just as those two streams complement and inform each other. We ground our approach in the change readiness research perspective, although we identify points of intersection with change programme research. Our approach uses social network theories of structural and relational embeddedness as mechanisms explaining the social origins and content of individual change readiness elements.

The remainder of this paper follows in three segments. First, we begin with a discussion of change readiness and identify elements of existing change readiness research which have an implicit social process element. Second, we offer a review of social network theories of structural and relational social capital and propose linkages between manifestations of social capital and change readiness. Finally, we suggest implications and applications of our

propositions affecting managers, practitioners and researchers of organizational change.

Change Readiness

We begin our discussion with an examination of one of the increasingly prominent organizational change constructs, that of change readiness. The construct of change readiness has been developed over many years of research, most prominently coming from the work of Armenakis and Harris (for a recent review of the change readiness theory, see Armenakis and Harris, 2009). In their research, Armenakis and Harris (2009) define change readiness as “the cognitive precursor of the behaviors of resistance to or in support of organizational change” (p. 132). They posit five dimensions (or decision conditions) that an individual addresses when deciding whether to resist or support change. These five dimensions include: discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support and valence. As previously noted, numerous studies have examined change readiness. However, this model proposed by Armenakis and Harris (2009) provides both theoretical and practical relevance.

While the change readiness decision matrix proposed by Armenakis and Harris represents an individual’s evaluation of change, there are a number of reasons to conclude that social forces shape, influence and determine aspects of the individual’s change readiness conclusion. Indeed, change theorists themselves acknowledge the social forces present in change readiness. Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009) observe that “resistance to change is a socially constructed phenomenon that is generated and defined through interaction” (p. 142). They further note that change initiatives involve change agents acting on change recipients, clearly indicating a social exchange process in the change programme. A social exchange framework is further illustrated by Armenakis’ and Harris’ (2009) inclusion of opinion leaders and Kotter’s (2007) observation that influential others must be converted into the dominant coalition. Finally, emerging research in this area suggests that perceived organizational support affects the individual’s evaluation of the valence aspect (Cinite, et al., 2009; Singh, Garg, & Deshmukh, 2008). Collectively, these imply that the individual’s conclusion to support or resist change is molded by their interactions with others and not exclusive to the change agent – change recipient dyad.

A second reason to suspect a linkage to social network theories and organizational change theories lies in the nature of learning implicit to the change readiness decision. Individual consideration of the change readiness decisions proposed by Armenakis and Harris’ (2009) necessitates information acquisition. While their research explicitly recognizes that each individual has a starting disposition serving as a basis for his or her change readiness decisions, their research implies that these decisions can be shaped through information exchange.

This is why Armenakis and Harris suggest direct involvement of individuals in the change process, the experiential aspect augments their ability to decide in favor of change readiness. Similarly, information (or lack thereof) underlies Kotter’s (2007) caution to exclude those individuals who lack crucial information from the change initiative planning stage. Their lack of context may prevent them from properly identifying either the discrepancy or appropriate responses (using Armenakis’ and Harris’ framework). Finally, within the various change theories, the importance of communication networks predominates. Kotter (2007) observes that change leaders in their attempts to positively bring about change should “use every possible channel, especially those that are wasted on nonessential information” (p. 100). Armenakis and Harris (2009) similarly observe the importance of information management and diffusion practices as methods to influence positive change outcomes. In these cases, although the

ultimate readiness decision lies in the individual, the inputs shaping that decision are influenced through social exchange within the organization.

A third reason to suspect a linkage between social network theories and organizational change theories involves the multi-level context which underlies change readiness research. Beyond personal identification, Armenakis and Harris (2009) observe that a social differentiation, or group identification, context plays a role in change readiness. The individual's membership in groups within the organization shapes his or her workplace identity. Therefore, when change initiatives threaten social order, the individual's change readiness response will incorporate these group identity crises. Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009) concur, observing that "change has the potential to negatively impact the social component of an employee's work-based identity" (p. 146). To the extent that two or more individuals perceive themselves as members of a group collective and similarly interpret change initiative consequences to that group identity, it follows then that the change readiness within such collectives might lie at similar levels. This group level component of change readiness is expressed, but not explored in Holt and colleagues (2007), who suggest the existence of individual, group and organizational dimensions of change readiness.

Finally, recent research on change readiness explores the dyadic exchange between leaders and followers (Mehta, 2009; Self, Armenakis, & Schraeder, 2007). While these LMX directions have not yet found support in testing, these researchers argue that other multi-level manifestations (such as core versus periphery concerns that we address later) likely overwhelm the local leader-member dyads (Self, et al., 2007). It seems apparent that the individual change readiness decision is affected by, or positioned within, a higher level relationship, be that dyadic, group or organizational.

The reviewed research suggests that a relationship exists between social exchange and organizational change. Specifically, social exchange influences the information that is readily available, which affects the individual's awareness and evaluation of discrepancies and appropriateness. Vertical influence from managers and horizontal influence from opinion leaders affects perceptions of efficacy and principal support. Finally, recent research suggests that even the most personal of the change readiness decisions, valence, is itself shaped by perceived organizational support and impact on social identity in the workplace.

Taken together, the current state of organizational change research seems naturally disposed towards social network analysis and its theories. In the present study, we review social network analysis and its underlying methodologies and theories demonstrating where extant social network research informs organizational change research. From these linkages, we advance the following testable propositions linking social network and organizational change theories:

Proposition 1. Highly central others in both the advice and friendship networks will have greater change readiness than their less central colleagues.

Proposition 1a. When highly central others in both the advice and friendship networks have extremely high or low change readiness, there will be spillover change resistance effects amongst the others in their ego network.

Proposition 2. Individuals close, or near, to highly close others will have change readiness levels similar to that of the highly close other.

Proposition 3. Members of closed clusters will have less variance in their aggregate change readiness levels than will members of less closed (or open) clusters.

Proposition 4. Individuals occupying structural hole positions will have higher levels of change readiness than those in more closed networks.

Proposition 4a. Change resistance from structural hole brokers presents greater problems with the change initiative than does resistance from individuals in redundant ego networks.

Proposition 5. An individual's change readiness is likely to be more similar to that of their strong friendship ties than that of others in the organization.

Proposition 6. Individuals are likely to have similar change readiness levels as those they seek advice from, particularly when the advice seeking relationship is highly asymmetric in a protégé-mentor context.

DISCUSSION

We have presented a series of arguments linking a SNA perspective to change readiness theory. We suggest that change readiness (or reluctance) diffuses through an organization in a contagious fashion. Certain individuals are more likely to be carriers of readiness (or reluctance) and certain individuals when infected are more likely to accelerate the transmission of readiness (or reluctance). This contagion metaphor is not uncommon in SNA research where attitudes, perceptions and practices travel through a network in a predictable and logical (from a network theoretical context) fashion (G. Meyer, 1994; Scherer & Cho, 2003).

Our SNA propositions are not stand-alone assumptions meant to replace current change readiness research. While we believe that a highly central individual will be more change ready than a non-central one, we see no reason to believe that an individual with an excessive change resistance disposition (Oreg, et al., 2008) would become giddy for change simply because they were central in a network. Similarly, while an individual brokering a structural hole is better positioned to view discrepancies and evaluate the appropriateness of initiatives, such a strategically advantageous position matters little if the human capabilities to conduct such an evaluation are not present in the broker. We place our propositions in context, such that the structural and relational capital influences on change readiness accrue after controlling for substantive individual differences. We seek to supplement, not replace.

Should our propositions hold true, there are five crucial implications for practitioners of change. First, *convert and co-opt highly central actors*. These individuals should be predisposed to support change initiatives. Consistent with Armenakis and Harris (2009), the involvement of these opinion leaders should positively affect their endorsement of the change initiative. Further, once on board, their ability to reach out to many others improves the efficiency of every action in the change initiative.

Second, *if the core is not ready, proceed with caution*. While those in the core may not be the ideal people to diagnose change, nor to suggest and implement initiatives, failing to garner their support leaves substantive obstacles to change on the table. As with central actors, the perceptions of these individuals affect others – however, unlike central individuals the core produce broader spillover.

Third, *heed your brokers*. These individuals are positioned optimally to synthesize and extend organizational knowledge. While their perspective may not change the views of others, these are the people most likely to see what will (or will not) work. Ideally, involve them early to avoid planning out the wrong intervention.

Fourth, when necessary, *penetrate closed clusters*. Recognize that closed clusters are difficult to transform and that they have minimal influence on the perceptions of those outside their cluster. If a closed cluster is already predisposed to support a change, leave it be. However, if a closed cluster is resistant to change – and its conversion is deemed crucial – realize that significant resources may be required to win the cluster over.

Finally, recognize that *strong relations are more likely to cause contagion than weak ones*. When faced with uncertainty, people turn to those they trust most – close friends and trusted advisors. A change agent may find that involvement and communication alone are not enough to shift an individual's readiness when the change message is obstructed by a close relation. Change agents should develop strategies to win support from mentors and consider ways to convert friendship dyads when confronted with resistance.

We argue that SNA should precede a change initiative. The change agent who lacks an understanding of the social context of the organization is ill-equipped to enact change. While those in hierarchical positions of power may be easy to identify, horizontally-powerful opinion leaders do not appear on organization charts. While an examination of experiences might suggest which people have the human capital to benefit change diagnosis and implementation, a social context offers the ability to optimize project membership improving the change management process.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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