

# **EMPLOYEE READINESS FOR CHANGE: UTILIZING THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR TO INFORM CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Readiness for change can be defined as the extent to which employees hold positive views about the need for organizational change, as well as the extent to which employees believe that such changes are likely to have positive implications for themselves and the wider organization (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). In relation to resistance toward organizational change initiatives, Piderit (2000) recommended that future research would benefit from assessing readiness for change as a function of attitudes, whereby researchers distinguish among cognitions, emotions, and intentions (and/or behaviors). In this study, it is proposed that the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a useful approach for understanding the process of attitude formation during times of organizational change. This model not only specifies the role of several social influence variables in predicting intentions to engage in specific behaviors, but also can assist in understanding why common change management strategies (such as communication and participation) may lead to positive employee reactions to change.

According to the TPB, intention is the most proximal determinant of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Intentions, in turn, are proposed to be a function of three independent determinants. The first is the person's attitude, conceptualized as the overall evaluation of performing the behavior of interest. The second is subjective norm, which reflects perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior. The third is perceived behavioral control (PBC), which reflects the extent to which the behavior is under volitional control. The TPB has been used extensively in a broad range of research areas to successfully predict behavior (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001). Despite general support for the TPB, a limitation in the model has been identified due to weak support found for the role of subjective norms to predict intentions (Ajzen, 1991). In response, Terry and Hogg (1996) contend that subjective norm is an inadequate construct to capture the impact of social influence on behavior. As such, it has been asserted that consideration of the effects of group membership on behavior, as outlined by social identity and self-categorization theories, may provide a more comprehensive explanation of the role of social influence.

Social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) is a general theory of group processes and intergroup relations that distinguishes group phenomena from interpersonal phenomena. According to social identity researchers, an important component of the self-concept is derived from memberships in social groups and categories. When individuals define themselves in terms

of a self-inclusive social category, two processes come into play: (1) categorization, which perceptually accentuates differences between the ingroup and outgroup, and similarities among self and ingroup members on stereotypic dimensions, and (2) self-enhancement which seeks to favor the ingroup over the outgroup on relevant dimensions. Social identities are proposed to influence behavior through the mediating role of group norms in that individuals will be more likely to engage in a particular behavior if it is in accordance with the norms of a behaviorally relevant group with whom they strongly identify.

According to Terry and Hogg (1996), a social identity theory/self-categorization theory perspective on the role of social influence in the attitude-behavior relationship differs significantly from that outlined in the TPB model. Rather than collapsing across referents, with social pressure conceived as being additive across all referents and reference groups that participants define as important to them, as in the case of subjective norm, norms are conceived in a way so that they are intrinsically tied to contextually salient membership in specific social groups, and affect behavior because the group is behaviorally relevant. Further, the subjective norm construct in the TPB does not account for the strength of identification with significant others or groups, whereas a social identity theory/self-categorization theory perspective asserts that the stronger one's group identification, the stronger the influence of reference group norms on intentions (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Therefore, from the perspective of social identity and self-categorization theories, it is argued that the perception of the group norm, for strong identifiers, should predict intentions.

The impact of group norms emanating from a behaviorally-relevant group should be particularly relevant to the promotion and adoption of behaviors within an organizational change context. An increasing body of research in application to understanding behavior within organizational culture suggests that employees discern and interpret the behavior of others within a system of shared meaning and common understanding (Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000). Thus, the perception that co-workers in one's immediate work environment are undertaking change-supportive behaviors should be integral in forming intentions to act for those who draw a strong sense of identity from their status as a worker within the unit.

The present research examines the TPB in the context of a building relocation for a large local government organization. Relocation is a significant occurrence that impacts on a range of organizational logistics, requiring strategies to manage uncertainty among employees (see Kleasen & Foster, 2002). Although studies have shown that communication and participation strategies are important for enhancing a range of positive outcomes for employees during relocations (e.g., Martin, 1999) and for many other types of organizational change (Armenakis et al., 1993), the mechanisms underlying these effects remain unclear. It is proposed that the TPB can offer insights into why communication and participation are important predictors of readiness for change perceptions. In this respect, it is argued that effective communication strategies and involving employees in planning and decision-making processes will both have a positive main effect on employees' intentions to carry out change-supportive activities. In addition, it is proposed that these main effects are mediated by attitude, subjective norm, and PBC. The basis for this proposition is based on Ajzen's (1991) assertion that any influences on intentions from variables external to the TPB will be mediated by attitude, subjective norm, and PBC.

First, it was hypothesized that the indirect measures of attitude, subjective norm, and PBC would be correlated with their corresponding direct measures. It also was expected that attitude, subjective norm, and PBC would significantly predict intentions (Hypotheses 1a to 1c,

respectively). Relating to the proposed amendments to the social influence component of the TPB from the perspective of social identity and self-categorization theories, it was hypothesized that the perceived norms of a behaviorally-relevant reference group (i.e., group norm) would predict intentions, but, in line with previous findings, only for those who identify strongly with their reference group (Hypothesis 2). Employee ratings of communication about the relocation were hypothesized to be positively related to intentions (Hypothesis 3a), and that this relationship would be mediated by attitude, subjective norm, and PBC (Hypothesis 3b). Employee participation in change-related decision-making also was predicted to increase intentions (Hypothesis 4a), with this relationship being mediated by the three TPB variables (Hypothesis 4b).

## METHODS

### Sample

One hundred and eighty questionnaires were randomly distributed to employees. One hundred and fifty-one questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 84%. The sample consisted of a similar proportion of male (55%) and female (45%) respondents. The average age of employees was 40.29 years ( $SD = 10.15$ ), ranging from 19 to 63 years. The majority of the sample were employed on a full-time basis (92%). Employees in the sample had an average tenure of 10.60 years ( $SD = 8.79$ ) working for the council, and an average tenure of 5.52 years ( $SD = 4.28$ ) for the division in which they worked.

### Measures

**Intentions.** Employees indicated the extent to which they intended to carry out three specific behaviors during the next 6 months that were considered to be supportive of the relocation process. These activities included whether employees would (i) read notices about the relocation, (ii) dedicate time to completing tasks relating to the relocation, and (iii) archive or dispose of outdated files. Responses ranged from (1) extremely unlikely to (7) extremely likely.

**Attitude.** A measure of attitude toward carrying out activities during the next 6 months that support the move to new premises was obtained using ratings on a semantic differential format (ranging from 1 to 7) across five items (i.e., beneficial-detrimental, negative-positive, useless-useful, constructive-destructive, foolish-wise). Two items were reverse-scored.

**Subjective norm.** This construct was assessed using two items (e.g., “Most people who are important to me at work think that I should carry out activities during the next 6 months that support the move to new premises.”). Response options ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

**PBC.** This variable was assessed across four items (e.g., “I have complete control over whether I carry out activities in the next 6 months that support the move to new premises.”). The response scale ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Two items were reverse-scored.

**Group norm.** Participants rated their perceptions of how many of the employees in their branch they thought would carry out activities during the next 6 months supportive of the move to new premises, ranging from (1) all to (7) none. This item was reverse-scored.

**Ingroup identification.** To assess the degree to which respondents identified with their behaviorally-relevant reference group, they rated the item “How much do you identify with employees in your branch?” Response options ranged from (1) not very much to (7) very much.

**Communication.** Perceptions of communication were measured with three items designed to assess the extent to which employees felt they had been provided with sufficient information about the relocation process. Response choices were (1) not at all to (5) a great deal.

**Participation.** Three items measured the extent of employee participation in decision-making processes relating to the relocation. Responses to questions were recorded on a 5-point scale, ranging from (1) not at all to (5) a great deal.

## RESULTS

### Analysis Testing the TPB in Predicting Intentions

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which the standard TPB predictor variables, and the revised social influence components of group norm and ingroup identification, predicted intentions to carry out specific activities related to the relocation. Entry of the standard TPB variables into Step 1 accounted for a significant amount of variance in intentions,  $R^2 = .26$ ,  $F(3, 141) = 16.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . As expected, entry of group norm and ingroup identification at Step 2 did not account for a significant increment of variance in intentions,  $R^2_{ch.} = .01$ ,  $F(2, 139) = 1.14$ ,  $NS$ . However, entry of the interaction term between these variables at Step 3 explained a significant increment of variance in intentions,  $R^2_{ch.} = .02$ ,  $F(1, 138) = 4.19$ ,  $p < .05$ . Results revealed support for Hypotheses 1a to 1c. Employees who held positive attitudes toward performing behaviors that supported the relocation,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ , who perceived pressure from others to complete the required activities,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ , and who felt they were in control of performing such behaviors,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ , were more likely to intend to carry out supportive activities related to the relocation. In support of Hypothesis 2, the positive relationship between group norm and intentions was significant for high identifiers,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(141) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ , but not for low identifiers,  $\beta = -.02$ ,  $t(141) = -0.27$ ,  $NS$ .

### Analyses Testing the Role of Communication and Participation on Intentions

First, communication was significantly related to intentions,  $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ , supporting Hypothesis 3a. Next, communication about the change event exerted a positive main effect on subjective norm,  $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ , and PBC,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ , but was not related to attitude,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $NS$ . The mediators were then regressed against intentions, while controlling for communication at Step 1. After communication was partialled out, subjective norm and PBC predicted intentions and accounted for a significant increment of variance in each model. For full mediation to be present, the effect of communication must lose significance when subjective norm and PBC are statistically controlled on the subsequent step. If the strength of this relationship is reduced but remains statistically significant, then partial mediation is evident. Support was demonstrated for Hypotheses 3b. The positive main effect of communication on intentions was no longer significant, once subjective norm was entered at Step 2,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $NS$ .

When PBC was in the equation, the observed positive relationship between communication and intentions was weaker,  $\beta = .17, p < .05$ , providing evidence for partial mediation.

Participation was significantly correlated to intentions,  $r = .17, p < .05$ , supporting Hypothesis 4a. The predictor variables were then correlated with the mediators in separate analyses. Employee ratings of participation in decision-making exerted a positive main effect on subjective norm,  $\beta = .21, p < .01$ , but was unrelated to attitude,  $\beta = .12, NS$ , and PBC,  $\beta = .13, NS$ . The third test requires that the mediators are correlated with the outcome variable, while controlling for the predictor variable at Step 1. After the effects of participation were controlled for, subjective norm (entered at Step 2) was predictive of intention, and accounted for a significant increment of variance. The positive main effect of participation on intentions was no longer significant, once subjective norm was entered into the equation,  $\beta = .08, NS$ . Therefore, partial support for Hypotheses 4b was demonstrated, whereby one out of the three TPB variables acted as a mediator of the positive main effect of participation on intentions.

## DISCUSSION

Results of the present study demonstrated general support for the hypotheses, confirming the proposition that the TPB has utility to indicate level of employee support for, or readiness to engage in, activities that support a change initiative. Attitude, subjective norm, and PBC were significant predictors of intentions, accounting for 26% of the variance (Hypotheses 1a to 1c). These findings provide useful information for strategies designed to encourage change-supportive behaviors within an organizational context. Targeting employees' personal attitudes, their perceptions of pressure from others to perform the behaviors, and elements of personal control may be useful strategies to encourage the uptake of change-supportive behaviors.

Support also was provided for the reconceptualization of social influence. Perceptions of group norm predicted intentions only for those employees who identified strongly with their reference group (Hypothesis 2). Change management interventions designed to both foster favorable group norms and strengthen ingroup identification (i.e., feelings of belongingness with respect to a behaviorally-relevant reference group) are likely to assist in developing stronger intentions to support a specific change event. When activities reinforce and induce commitment to a behaviorally-relevant reference group, then it is likely that performance of desired behaviors will become normative in the social work environment and be maintained over time. Thus, the use of group- or team-based interventions during times of organizational change may be integral to maximizing long-term change implementation success.

Furthermore, communication and participation were both positively related to employees' intentions to engage in change-supportive behaviors (Hypotheses 3a & 4a), with the proposal that such a relationship would be mediated by the TPB variables receiving partial support (Hypotheses 3b & 4b). Ensuring that employees are informed and consulted helps to create social pressure among employees to act in supportive ways of impending change. Communication also positively predicted PBC which, in turn, predicted intentions. This is consistent with other theorists who have noted that accurate and timely information about a significant workplace event contributes to a sense of predictability, thereby enhancing personal control among employees.

Several methodological limitations should be considered. In particular, reliance on self-report measures from a single source at a single point in time is problematic because temporal relationships between the focal variables cannot be established. Situational constraints

prevented the use of a longitudinal design in the present study and, therefore, behaviors actually carried out in relation to the relocation during the specified time period were not measured. Future studies should overcome this design short-coming in order to demonstrate the full capacity of the TPB to predict both intention and actual behavior of employees in relation to a change event. Nevertheless, assessment of employees' intentions to engage in relocation activities does serve as a reliable indicator of what employees will actually do during subsequent implementation of the change, as the robustness of the intention-behavior relationship has been demonstrated in an array of studies assessing the utility of the TPB.

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