



## Personnel Review

The effects of change programs on employees' emotions

Carin B. Eriksson

### Article information:

To cite this document:

Carin B. Eriksson, (2004), "The effects of change programs on employees' emotions", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 33 Iss 1 pp. 110 - 126

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00483480410510642>

Downloaded on: 30 January 2016, At: 19:44 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 40 other documents.

To copy this document: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 2789 times since 2006\*

### Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

Paula S. Weber, James E. Weber, (2001), "Changes in employee perceptions during organizational change", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 22 Iss 6 pp. 291-300 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01437730110403222>

Dennis G. Erwin, Andrew N. Garman, (2010), "Resistance to organizational change: linking research and practice", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 31 Iss 1 pp. 39-56 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01437731011010371>

Maria Vakola, Ioannis Nikolaou, (2005), "Attitudes towards organizational change: What is the role of employees' stress and commitment?", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 27 Iss 2 pp. 160-174 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01425450510572685>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:305060 []

### For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit [www.emeraldinsight.com/authors](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/authors) for more information.

### About Emerald [www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com)

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

\*Related content and download information correct at time of download.



PR  
33,1

110

Received May 2002  
Revised September 2003  
Accepted November 2003

# The effects of change programs on employees' emotions

Carin B. Eriksson

*Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden*

**Keywords** *Organizational change, Emotional dissonance, Employees, Learning, Depression*

**Abstract** *This article focuses on an organization that has spent many years attempting to make fundamental changes to its corporate identity and the ideals on which the organization was built. The objective is to discuss the effects of change programs on employees' emotions. The study shows that the change programs have resulted in employees exhibiting signs of depression. The employees have lost their trust in the ability to turn the organization; they see no future within the organization; they tend to concentrate on failures instead of successes; and they feel emotionally fatigued. The paper discusses how emotions can become an obstacle to change and how people that are unable to mobilize and act in a changed way become less receptive to discussions about change.*

## Introduction

We had a conference at one of the nicer conference sites nearby. The theme for the conference was change – of course. In an organization like this, the topic always revolves around change in one way or another. Anyway, the first day, after lunch, the CEO came and put on his show. He showed slide after slide and talked about the need to change – to change values and behavior. He said that the old values that have dominated the way we behave need to be reformulated – we have to find ourselves a new corporate identity. I did not feel encouraged by his talk. I felt I had heard it all before. I felt he was wearing me out. All talk, over and over again, about change and nothing happens.

This citation, from one of the respondents, nicely illustrates the major themes of this article – it is about change and the emotions it is likely to create. It illustrates how people are tired of hearing about change and how they tend to focus on earlier negative experiences of change. Many companies are attempting to make fundamental changes in the way business is conducted as a means to adapt to new market conditions and technology advancements. The change programs concern the organization of work, the organizational culture, leadership styles and similar issues. Almost everyone involved in an organization is likely to know from their own experience that actual change programs often differ significantly from what is initially promised by those who design or initiate the programs. Only a few corporate change efforts seem to be successful, some are massive failures, and many amount to a “zero”. In Argyris' (1990, p. 4) words: “Most of the programs began with a big fanfare and, like old soldiers, they faded away”.



Beliefs and values about the nature and aims of an organization, i.e. perceptions of identity, are obviously crucial when it comes to effecting changes (Alvesson and Björkman, 1992, p. 30; Carroll, 1995). As has been discussed by several authors and disseminated by many consultants and practitioners, strong perceptions of corporate identity offer numerous advantages. Nevertheless, strong beliefs and values can also constitute powerful obstacles to change. Perceptions of the socially constructed corporate identity are therefore of special interest in this study.

### Change and emotions

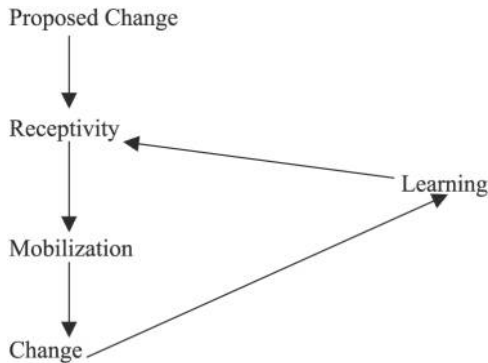
Research on organizational change has shown that change programs often face serious problems. Different theoretical perspectives have identified diverse obstacles to change. Common problems include human resistance (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979), politics and the conflicts between competing groups in a contextually changing process (Starbuck, 1983; Pettigrew, 1985). Other problems such as inertia determined by isomorphic forces from the organization's environment, are discussed in institutional theory (see, for example, Greenwood and Hinings, 1996, for a discussion). There are built-in inertias in individuals, structures and systems that delay or, in the worst scenarios, derail the process of learning and change (Starbuck and Hedberg, 1977; Pettigrew, 1985). To be able to change existing beliefs, values and behavior have to be challenged. Consequently, major organizational changes may involve many different kinds of personal loss for people at all levels and change efforts often run into some form of human resistance. The concept of resistance to change has been widely studied. In a review of studies of resistance to change, Piderit (2000) criticizes the literature for failure to consider the good reasons for the resistance and emphasizes the need to do studies that investigate the ambivalent responses to change.

If beliefs and values are strongly held, they will be harder to change and the experience of loss will be greater (Beyer, 1981; Sproull, 1981). All people who are affected by change will experience some emotional turmoil. Fundamental change in personnel, strategy, identity or other major organizational issues often triggers intense emotions (Bartunek, 1984). However, people will differ in their reactions to change – passively resisting it, embracing it, or actively undermining it. According to Kanter (1983, p. 63), "Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us". Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) suggest that there are four major reasons why people resist change: they are afraid of losing something of value; they misunderstand the change and its implications; they believe that the change does not make sense; or simply, they have a low tolerance for change.

To be able to change you have to be willing to consider change, take actions and take steps to acquire or gain knowledge. Huy (1999) states that we can better understand both change and emotions in organizations if we divide the

change process into its various components. He highlights three critical processual challenges related to the realization of change: receptivity, mobilization and learning (Figure 1).

At the individual level, receptivity refers to an individual's willingness to consider change and recognize the legitimacy of such proposals. On an organizational level, the notion refers to the sum of the members' receptivity. "Receptivity as a process shapes and is shaped by the continuous sense making and sense giving activities conducted among various members of the organization" (Huy, 1999, p. 327). Mobilization involves collaborative efforts and the capacity to implement change. At the individual level, mobilization refers to the concrete actions taken. The ability to mobilize depends on the available resources (time and receptivity of others), support structures, systems and skills. Mobilization requires organizational commitment and effort devoted to change actions, a process that is dependent on the receptivity to the proposed change (Dutton and Duncan, 1987). Lazarus' (1993) stress theory clarifies the relationship between an individual's receptivity to change and mobilization. In the first step of a two-step appraisal model the individual evaluates the significance of a proposed change for his own well being. If the individual believes the proposed change is harmful, it arouses negative emotions resulting in a non-receptive individual. In the opposite situation, when the proposed change is viewed as an opportunity, the positive emotions will make the individual more receptive. In the next step the individual evaluates his or her personal resources to deal with the proposed change. If individuals believe they have the right resources, they are likely to respond more actively. Only if individuals feel that they actually can do something, that they can bridge the discrepancy between goals and performance, will they likely be motivated to mobilize and act (Westen, 1985). Huy's model should not be seen as a linear process with clear steps from proposed change to actual change. Because individuals learn from their earlier experiences in an organization, the



**Figure 1.**  
A dynamic model of  
change

**Source:** Huy (1999)

individual's learning experiences may affect his or her willingness to see the need for change and to mobilize accordingly. Instead of a linear process, a process of re-cycling is more probable. The "learning step" influences the proposed change and is an intricate part of all steps.

The interaction between stored belief structures and interpretation has been shown to be critical to understanding how individuals learn (Armenakis and Feild, 1993). The belief structures of individuals and groups automatically treat and shape all new information. This process implies that we also can expect the receptivity phase to be highly complex. A person's cognitions, emotions and actions are intimately interlinked. For example, employees might be receptive to change until they experience -through action - what change entails. The employees might be receptive on a cognitive level - believing that a certain change is necessary - but on an emotional level feeling quite differently. Learning is often seen as a purely cognitive process of knowledge acquisition, information distribution, interpretation of information and storing information for future use (organizational memory). In an extensive review of scientific research on emotions, Goleman (1996) pointed out the basic assumption that has been made by psychoanalysts since Freud: We do not only learn in a cognitive way but we also learn emotional responses that act without our conscious awareness. It has also been found that children at school learn not only the content of their education but also how to value it and how to relate to their teachers and peers (Holt, 1982). A model for change dynamics needs to include emotional learning as well as cognitive learning and see them as dynamic interconnected processes.

As suggested by Höpfl and Linstead (1997, p. 8), emotional patterning in organizations is extremely important:

The emotional patterning of organizations, whether associated with a strong consciously articulated corporate culture or not, can make learning difficult or easy; make creative work flow readily or struggle to be realized; make changes emergent and organic rather than belaboured, discontinuous and painful; make working a pleasant and growthful experience or a torrid ordeal.

Although concepts such as emotions, feelings and mood are distinct (cf. Ekman and Davidson, 1994), it is not critical for the aims of this paper to distinguish the subtler differences among them. I generally use the concept emotion. Emotional issues in organizational life have traditionally been largely neglected. Earlier studies of emotions in organizations emphasized either attitudinal states, such as job satisfaction and commitment, or models of work stress (Fineman, 1997). More often, however, organizations have been seen as rationally driven with calculative processes and employees selected and trained to function with predictability. Even the change literature, in which one could expect recognition of emotional issues in that even everyday change processes are characterized by emotions, is surprisingly lacking in such themes. As Flam (1993, p. 68) noted, "A serious analytical interest in emotion in general, and in

negative emotions in particular, is almost entirely missing in recent study of work and organizational life”.

Fineman (1997) suggests that emotions are both a part of learning, and at the same time, interfere with learning. Emotions provide the necessary impetus for learning, but are also the ultimate outcome of learning: emotions are both a product and a process for learning. Anyone involved in a change program or a part of an organization working with change programs can testify that the programs create strong emotional states. We frequently meet people who experience anger, anxiety, fear, happiness, joy or other emotions related to work or to ongoing change efforts at work. Fineman (1997, p. 13) writes:

Emotions should be considered not just a by-product or interference to the learning process, but also intrinsic to what is learned, how it is learned and the organizational context in which learning takes place.

Emotions are often described either in psychological terms as an intrapersonal response to some stimulus or as a socially constructed phenomenon. Emotions emerge in a given context and they have objects, e.g. when we are angry, we are angry at someone about something. Fineman (1993) locates emotions in the social realm and asserts that the inclusion of emotions as an area of study will enrich our understanding of organizations from a social constructionist perspective. Emotions cannot be fully understood outside their social context because most human emotions are learned responses, interpretive and culturally specific (Fineman, 1993, p. 10). Emotional behaviors are learned not only from early socialization experiences, but also as part of organizational and occupational socialization processes (Domagalski, 1999). There is a social consciousness at work telling us what types of emotion that are permissible in a given context. Employees learn by way of organizational socialization practices what should be felt in a given social context and to whom you can express particular emotions.

There is a wide range of emotions that employees may experience in an organization. The circumplex model, which describes the relations among emotion concepts, has been used to explore the concept of emotions in organizations (see Larsen and Diener, 1992; Huy, 2002). According to this model, emotions share two basic dimensions: one dimension reflects how pleasant-unpleasant an emotion feels while the other dimension refers to the intensity (high activation-low activation) of the emotion. The hybrid category of pleasant and high activation includes emotions such as enthusiasm and excitement while unpleasant and high-activation emotions include anger, anxiety and fear. The hybrid category of pleasant and low-activation emotions consists of calm and comfort, while unpleasant and low-activation emotions include disappointment, shame and dejection. Ostell (1996) discusses three common emotional behaviors in organizations, namely anger, anxiety and depression. The first two can be categorized into the unpleasant/high-activation category of the circumplex model while the latter



into the unpleasant and low-activation category. Depression has been described as the most widespread condition of all psychological disorders. People feel depressed when they perceive that they or others are unable to influence the course of events in preventing negative consequences. In other words, depressive reactions are associated with the perceived certainty that negative outcomes are unavoidable. Depressed people have low self-esteem and perceive themselves as helpless and situations as hopeless (Ostell, 1996). In an organization individual emotional states could converge into group emotions as people who spend time together tend to have the same beliefs, which are likely to lead to similar emotional states. The phenomenon of emotional contagion (i.e. the transfer of emotion from one person to another) or mirroring has recently been discussed (Bartel and Saavedra, 2000). When people interact, emotions are spread. People in groups “catch” emotions from one another. The more cohesive the group, the stronger is the sharing of emotions and emotional history (Goleman *et al.*, 2001).

This brief review explains why the present paper is about change and the emotions change programs create. Let us move on to the organization in question and see how the people in the organization talk about change programs and the emotions they connect to the word “change”.

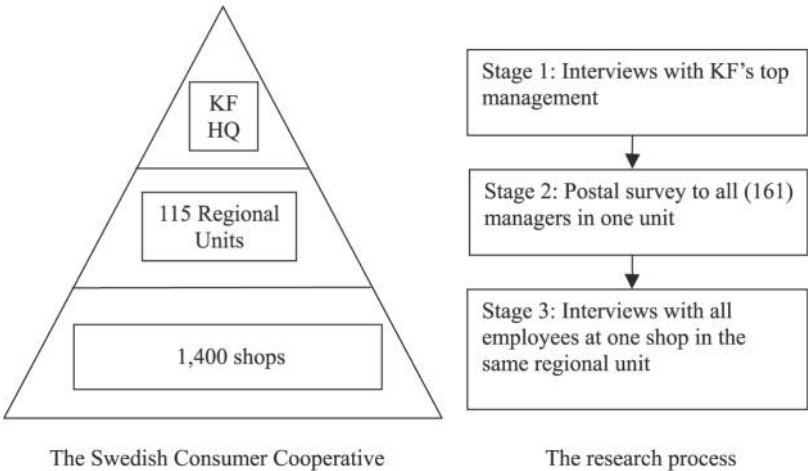
### **The organization in focus**

To study how people talk about organizational change and what emotions they connect to change programs a firm with a history of organizational change efforts that could serve as a case study was needed. Because we know that change is particularly hard in organizations with strong identity beliefs or in big organizations, one could argue plausibly for studying such organizations. The choice fell on the Swedish Consumer Cooperation. For many years, this was a very prosperous organization with a market share of more than 22 percent of Sweden’s daily retail trade. The roots of the Swedish Consumers’ Cooperative can be traced back to the famous cooperative organization in Rochdale, England. The ideal of an open, independent, voluntary, democratic and informative organization, striving not for a few owners’ return on investment but cooperating for the good of many members has been an important value in many Swedish cooperatives (Stolpe and Hjalmarson, 1970). The first consumer cooperatives in Sweden were founded in the 1850s and 1860s, but most of these were short-lived. The cooperatives that were created in the 1890s proved to be more permanent (Ruin, 1960). Kooperativa Förbundet (KF – the Cooperative Alliance), the federation and business organization, was founded in 1899 and became a “daughter with many mothers”. Its statute stated that its aim was to embrace all cooperatives in Sweden, promote their interests and guide their development. KF established itself as a powerful central authority and wholesale dealer with many industries of its own.

The Swedish cooperative movement had a period of unprecedented success and even today it is one of the largest in the world, playing an important role in Swedish business life. From a very modest start in the 1850s, it has now become a giant with two million members and 22 000 employees. Recently, however, the cooperatives have run into serious problems. During the 1980s and 1990s and up to the present time, they have been losing market share, members and profitability. To deal with these problems the top management group, i.e. KF, initiated several projects to introduce organizational change programs into the organization's different units. The goal of these units is to change the corporate identity and the ideals on which the federation was originally built.

A three-stage method

Emotions begin to decay or gather momentum through talk of different kinds. Downing (1997) has focused on the development of social emotions, noting that organizational change precipitates a social drama in which stakeholders resolve emotional and interpretative conflicts through sharing stories. Research has illustrated that in times of major change, the level of talk and gossip in the organization increases (Schweiger *et al.*, 1987, p. 128). The importance of how we talk about things in organizations was discussed over 40 years ago by March and Simon (1958, pp. 161-9) as they drew attention to the role of language in shaping perceptions and in making sense of events. In this study I focus on how the employees talk about change and how they tell the stories of change. A three-stage method was adopted for this study (see Figure 2). In all three stages the respondents were asked how they perceived the change programs. The first two stages of the study are treated only briefly in this paper and are used mainly to provide a background to the third and final stage – the case study of a small shop in



**Figure 2.**  
The research process in  
the Swedish Consumer  
Cooperative



an identified unit. In the first stage, the leading actors in the top management group were interviewed to determine how top management talked about the change programs. Some examples of these conversations are summarized later in this paper. In-depth interviews were conducted with the CEO and five of his closest associates. In this article, we will briefly illustrate how they talked about the ongoing changes and the particular emotions they connected to the word “change”.

The second stage focused on one important regional unit, identified as in need of change by the top management group. All 161 managers, at various levels of this unit, were questioned about their perceptions of the change programs. A questionnaire, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions was mailed to the 161 managers. Of the 161 managers, 121 responded, yielding a response rate of 75 percent. The closed questions provide a broader picture of the pattern of perceptions in the unit. They indicate how middle managers perceive the need for change and what emotions they associated to the change programs. The findings of that part of the study indicated ambivalence toward change, with people simultaneously asking for and regretting change. In this paper, we will briefly discuss the questions in the questionnaire that were designed to tap the respondents’ perceptions of the change programs. In the open-ended questions the respondents were asked to write down their emotions toward the change programs.

The focus of this study is on the third stage. In this stage the results of the previous stages were followed-up with a case study of a small unit (a grocery shop with eight employees) in the same earlier identified regional unit. The respondents were interviewed at their workplace and asked to give their opinions about the change programs and what emotions they associated with the concept of “change”. The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Each interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The intention of this study is not to specify “the only true emotions” in a change process. Rather, the aim is to gain a better understanding and to be able to describe what kinds of emotions change programs produce and how people talk about change. To identify emotions, each respondent’s statements were collected and analyzed. Special attention was paid to common themes and speech activity. All interviews were completely confidential, exploring how the respondents perceived the change programs, what emotions they attached to the programs and to the concept of “change”. For example, respondents who focus on negative events in a low pitch and slow voice are categorized into the unpleasant and low-activation category of the circumplex model. Common themes were categorized under headings such as “focus on negative events”, “sense of loss” “sense of failure” and “helplessness”.

## The background

### *The first stage: top management's discussion about change*

For several years, top management in KF has been emphasizing the need to change its corporate identity. An analysis of the organization's internal magazine *Ledarforum* between the years 1985 and 1997 shows that different kinds of change program are discussed in every number. During this period, there was, on average, at least three major programs launched each year. A common theme in all these discussions was the need for changing the organization's basic values. In many different contexts, top management had tried to communicate the message: "We need to make the organization profit-oriented". In most companies such a message would not be considered provocative, but in a consumer cooperative built on the Rochdale ideals, it immediately created a number of conflicts. In an attempt to legitimize the change efforts top management made use of a variety of presentations, seminars, meetings and information brochures in an effort to explain why the organization needed to change. They emphasized changes in the context of trade. In addition, they described how consumer buying patterns had changed and how late the organization had recognized these changes. According to top managers who were interviewed, the organization had retained old fashioned stores in central locations for far too long. These stores generated little revenue but were costly to run. As the CEO noted in one of the interviews:

At that time, in the middle of the 1970s, we did not notice the new trends. We thought that we had done well so far. If someone talked about the problem, nothing was done anyway. We kept our old fashioned stores longer than was healthy for the organization.

The changed buying patterns were believed to be the product of economic, demographic and cultural changes. Consumers had become "more sophisticated" according to the respondents. They also described how they had lost the consumers' loyalty. The respondents noted that loyalty to and social identification with consumer cooperatives had been stronger in the past than it is today. In the interviews (and elsewhere) the managers discussed how competition had increased and how the organization had failed to meet new customer demands (e.g. products, prices and locations). The change in the environment had put pressure on the organization to implement changes. As reported by top management, one of the reasons for the present problems was lack of internal pressure and criticism. One of the respondents noted the following:

We have been too pleased with what we have accomplished for too long. We have looked back on our successful history with pride. We have failed to see the need for change and many of us have believed that everything is going great and there is no need for change. That is a huge mistake.

The tendency to hold onto old traditions and ways of doing things was perceived to be a major problem by top management. They believed that while

they themselves embraced the need to become profit-oriented, the idea had little support among their employees.

Conclusion: top management had a very coherent, shared picture of the change programs that were needed to rectify earlier mistakes. Previous change programs were referred to as big “zeros” – nothing happened, nothing was accomplished. Top management asserted that too many people had been too pleased with and too committed to the organization for too long.

Employees’  
emotions

119

*The second stage: the endless chatter about change*

In responding to an open question about change used in the second stage, many of the 121 managers mentioned the need for change. Some of the respondents felt that there had been too many changes and that the need now was “to change back” to what the organization was before all the changes. One of the managers wrote:

We have lost our soul. What once characterized our organization is gone. The only thing that matters now is profitability. Everything else that made our organization great is soon gone. I think we need to change back. The change top management is talking about is not a change for us. It is just good for them. The change programs don’t speak to us on lower levels in the organization.

Other managers, however, believed that there had not been enough changes and that there was now a need to change:

We are still running in the old tracks. We need to change and time is running out. The change programs have not led to much good yet. It is more talk than action. I am not pleased with the way things are going.

The majority of the 121 managers desired change, where 92 percent believed that the need for change was great, and 8 percent responded that there was only a moderate need for change. No one reported that change was not needed.

The majority of the respondents believed that it was necessary to change the organization, but they thought that, despite the many change programs introduced by top management, not very much was being done. More than half of the respondents (56 percent) agreed with the statement that “change programs are discussed and written about, but in reality very little happens”. The employees perceived the change programs as something that was more talk than action.

Pfeffer (1983) suggested that an understanding of an organization’s practice comes with tenure in the organization. In this case tenure seems to correlate with lost trust in change programs. Many (73 percent) of the older respondents agreed with the statement that change programs are talked and written about, but little happens. In a comparison of different age categories, managers 40 years old or younger were more inclined to disagree (62 percent) with the argument that little happens regarding change. The variations between the different age groups indicate that older people who have worked in the

organization for a longer time were more skeptical toward the change programs[1]. One of the older respondents stated:

I often feel very fatigued of the hollow chatter about change. When you have been around as long as I have in a workplace, you just know nothing will happen. We have talked so much about the need to change our corporate identity to something positive but nothing has changed for years. There are certainly a lot of things that need to be changed, but I won't believe in any change until I see it.

One concludes that the findings in the second stage indicate that the majority of employees in the unit desired to see change, but few believed it would happen. The managers perceived a need for change but did not believe that any meaningful changes were taking place. Instead, many of the managers described the change programs as "chatter about change" and mentioned how fatigued they were of this incessant talk. Despite many years of planned change programs designed to change the corporate identity, the organization experienced no success in the market. The organization was still doing as badly as (or worse than) it did before the change programs. This finding gave rise to the questions: How do the employees feel about the change programs?

### *Stage three: in the shop*

To explore the richness of the phenomenon a case study was conducted in the third, and for this paper most important, stage of the study. Most of the eight employees in the small shop were middle aged (between 40-55 years), although one was younger than 30 years and one was due to retire in a year. The employees had all been working in the same shop the last five years and some of them had been working together for more than 15 years. One had been on sick leave for a longer period, but was back working full time at the time of the study. Five of the other employees were working part-time. One of the employees held the position as a shop manager another and one as an assistant manager. The work force in the shop, as well in other parts of the organization, was stable with a very low turnover rate. Their talk about the change programs reveals how they made sense of changes and how they perceived the changes.

All employees raised the problem of "fatigue" in response to the question: how do you feel about the ongoing change programs? Consider the experience of one of the employees, a woman in her mid-40s:

I've worked for this company more than ten years and I've seen it all. I can't say that it makes me feel motivated and interested in what's going on in the company. I've felt quite the reverse. You know, there is always something "new" that has to be done and something "old" that should be thrown out. But most of it is just boring talk and I don't have much interest in that kind of talk any longer. I have heard it all before. How I feel about it? Nothing, really – just fatigue.

This attitude was found to be rather common among the employees, where most expressed that they felt fatigue or loss of energy. Over the years, numerous attempts at change had been presented to the employees at meetings,

in the organization's internal magazines and in other information sources. The employees had often seen (but seldom read) the articles or the sources of information about the change programs. In the interviews, the respondents mentioned a few recent articles on change in the internal magazines, but none seemed to have made any impressions on the respondents:

No, I haven't read anyone of those articles. I have read a lot of stuff before and I guess it's the same now as then. It's a lot of talk about how we need to change our old and inefficient ways of doing things. But honestly – there hasn't been much success, has there? They will probably not succeed this time either. And I see no reason to become absorbed in this change talk. I pass this time – I'm too exhausted.

The view on they (the top management) – who “will probably not succeed this time either” and “us, who work in the shops” illustrate the typical distance between different hierarchical levels in the organization. The employees believe that much of the action from top management is inconsequential rambling and that they (on lower levels) have little or nothing to say about such matters. Instead, they feel that all the verbal comments of top management have little to do with the actual actions taken. The employees in the shop tend to see the change programs as a top-down system, with little in it for the people on the lower levels. The rhetoric of change has been loud but the extensive organization has not been able to implement “the new ways of thinking”. The talk about change and the events of everyday day life are perceived as only loosely connected. As one employee remarked:

Organizational change . . . But, what does it mean to me? I go to work every morning and do the same things I have always done and leave work in the afternoon. Nothing has changed in the way I do my work.

The shop manager also perceived this poor association between change and daily activities of the employees as a problem. He, a man in his 50s, his assistant manager and other managers in the region were attending the big regional conference where the CEO was the main speaker. According to the shop manager, the CEO had asked the managers at the lower levels to talk to the employees about the need to change to make them more committed to the change efforts. The shop manager stated:

But, how can I do that? Sometimes we talk about the need to change but no one takes it seriously anymore. We are fed up with that chatter. I can't talk about what we need to do at the same time as it seems impossible to make even small changes. I can't live like a hypocrite.

On a direct question on what emotions the respondents connected to the word “change”, all eight employees responded that they felt “fatigue”. Some of the employees (four of the oldest) also mentioned the more complex emotion “nostalgia”. In these latter cases the employees associated the change programs and earlier failures with a loss of social identification. Where once they had been proud of belonging to the organization, they now have lost that feeling:

The Consumer Cooperative was something special when I was young. I felt proud of the ideals we had. I have been proud of working in this organization, but now it is nothing to brag about.

One concludes that the employees at the small shop had a coherent view of the change programs. They were aware of the programs, but felt the programs put them in a depressed mood most of the time. The depression arises mainly because they perceive that they are unable to influence the course of events. The employees perceive themselves as helpless and the organizational situation as hopeless. They intentionally avoided talking about the change efforts in detail and instead focused on their emotional responses to the ongoing changes. A recurring theme was how emotionally weary they were of the change programs and that they had lost their positive identification with the organization. Furthermore, they did not believe that the change programs would accomplish their goals.

### Concluding discussion

The change programs in the consumer cooperative focused on changing the corporate identity as a way to “handle the future” in an organization that was “stuck in the past”. A common theme in all discussions was the need for changing values. Empirical research on organizational change has shown that change programs often face problems in general and that changing an identity is particularly hard. Emotions are a necessary impetus for change, but are also its consequence. Earlier studies of resistance to change have paid little attention to the ambivalent responses to change. The ambivalence to change is a typical characteristic of the case presented in this paper. We see how people simultaneously ask for change on the one hand and regret hearing the repeated discussion of change on the other. On a cognitive level, they trust the change efforts because they understand that the organization needs to change in order to survive. On an emotional level, however, they have lost their trust for the change efforts and in the future of the organization.

As discussed previously, we can gain a better understanding of both change and emotions if we divide the change process into receptivity, mobilization and learning (Figure 1). At the individual level, receptivity denotes an individual’s willingness to consider change and recognize the legitimacy of such proposals. We can see that several employees paid very little attention to the change programs proposed by top management. They prefer to not talk about it, they avoid reading information or articles about it, and they do not transmit what has been discussed at meetings. Essentially, the employees have learned that it is unnecessary to pay attention to top management’s views on the need for change. As a result, receptivity was low and no mobilization occurred. Mobilization involves collaborative efforts and the capacity to implement change. However, several of the employees felt that the capacity to implement change was low. They remember past mistakes and failures and see no future



for the organization. Mobilization requires organizational commitment and firm efforts devoted to change actions, characteristics that are contingent on the receptivity to change proposals. Stress theory describes the interaction between an individual's receptivity to change and mobilization. It was concluded that only if individuals feel that they actually can do something, that they can bridge the discrepancy between goals and performance, will they then be motivated to mobilize and act. However, if they feel that they cannot act, they may feel that there are no reasons to mobilize and perhaps not even be receptive to discussions about change. As individuals learn and build up a reservoir of memories from their earlier experiences in an organization, this may influence their willingness to see the need for mobilizing, as most change programs do not have the effect they are said to have when they are finally introduced. The employees draw upon memories, emotions and learned lessons that change programs will fail and this, in turn, has effects on their receptivity and their willingness to mobilize. Rather than being receptive, which would allow persons to move from receptivity to mobilization, an emotional routine may instead be created that prevents them from embarking on new attempts at change. The employees simply stop paying attention to the "talk" about change.

A deep change in a core identity requires changes in other parts of the organization, in structures and systems. In large organizations such changes take a very long time to occur. The employees do not see these changes because individuals tend not to see slow and long drawn out processes. They also mistrust top management for different reasons. It is mostly because the employees, especially on the lower levels, believe that much of the action from top management is just talk and that they (the employees) have little or nothing to say about it. The employees in the shop tend to see the change programs as a top-down arrangement with little in it for the people on the lower levels. The rhetoric of change has been rather loud but the big organization has not been able to implement "the new ways of thinking", at least not from the respondents' perspective. Talk about change and everyday life are perceived as loosely connected and hence to engage in all change programs would be irrational and a waste of time for those at the shop floor level.

Many studies of organizational change have suggested that dissatisfaction with the status quo is necessary in order to initiate an organization-wide change process, and that the organization's leaders who believe in the need for change must diffuse dissatisfaction before lasting change can occur (Spector, 1989). In this study of the Swedish Consumer Cooperative it was obvious that top management was effectively diffusing dissatisfaction. In contrast to the idea of diffusing dissatisfaction, Wilkins and Bristow (1987, p. 227) advise executives to "learn to change by honoring the past". The idea here is that by observing the past, bad memories are not reinforced. This strategy in turn, enhances learning. Even March (1972), who reasoned that memory should be

treated as an organization's enemy, acknowledged that, for most purposes, good memories make good choices. The importance of envisioning an attractive future should not be underestimated. The simple act of honoring the past may leave employees clinging on to it. Yet, in the present study the recent past held only bad memories and thoughts, where failures were emphasized on all levels within the organization. In other words, a deliberate diffusion of dissatisfaction does not seem to be an appropriate way to initiate change processes in an organization in which dissatisfaction is already widespread and no desirable future can be imagined. Such dissatisfaction seems to give rise to emotions that are expressed in terms of "fatigue".

People resist change for many reasons, including fear of losing something important, misunderstandings, mistrust and low tolerance for change. The present study indicates that we need to include another reason in this list, namely the emotions that are created by earlier change programs, i.e. we need to consider the history of change in the organization. The employees in the little shop had learned not only that change programs frequently recur and are seldom implemented but also how to value change programs and relate to their superiors. The findings indicate that the change programs had left a residue of emotions, often expressed as fatigue and general lethargy. We could even characterize the studied working place as depressed as the emotions that were expressed were unpleasant and low activated. People feel depressed when they perceive that they and others are unable to influence the situation of the organization; depressed emotions, in turn tend to be contagious.

To understand change processes in organizations we need to understand the emotional history that earlier change programs have created. We need to focus on the emotional patterning of the organization and of the change process. Moreover, we need further research on organizational change, emotions and the role of the emotional history in order to deal efficaciously with the future.

#### Note

1. Age correlates highly with length of employment as employee turnover is low (0.615). Only 30 percent of the managers was 40 years or younger.

#### References

- Alvesson, M. and Björkman, I. (1992), *Organisationsidentitet och Organisationsbyggande*, Studentlitteratur, Lund.
- Argyris, C. (1990), *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Allyn and Bacon, New York, NY.
- Armenakis, A. and Feild, H.S. (1993), "The role of schema in organizational change", in Golembiewski, R.T. (Ed.), *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, Marcel Dekker, New York, NY, pp. 405-27.
- Bartel, C.A. and Saavedra, R. (2000), "The collective construction of work group moods", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 197-231.
- Bartunek, J.M. (1984), "Changing interpretive schemes and organizational restructuring: the example of a religious order", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 355-72.

- Beyer, J. (1981), "Ideologies, values and decision making in organizations", in Nyström, P. and Starbuck, W. (Eds), *Handbook of Organizational Design*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 166-202.
- Carroll, C. (1995), "Rearticulating organizational identity: exploring corporate images and employee identification", *Management Learning*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 463-82.
- Domagalski, T.A. (1999), "Emotion in organizations: main currents", *Human Relations*, Vol. 52 No. 6, pp. 833-52.
- Downing, S.J. (1997), "Learning the plot", *Management Learning*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 27-44.
- Dutton, J.E. and Duncan, R. (1987), "The creation of momentum for change through the process of strategic issue diagnosis", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 8, pp. 279-95.
- Ekman, P. and Davidson, R.J. (1994), *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Fineman, S. (1993), *Emotions in Organization*, Sage, London.
- Fineman, S. (1997), "Emotion and management learning", *Management Learning*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 13-25.
- Flam, H. (1993), "Fear, loyalty and greedy organizations", in Fineman, S. (Ed.), *Emotion in Organizations*, Sage, London, pp. 118-41.
- Goleman, D. (1996), *Emotional Intelligence*, Routledge, London.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. and McKee, A. (2001), *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.
- Greenwood, R. and Hinings, C.R. (1996), "Understanding radical organizational change: bringing together the old and new institutionalism", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 21, pp. 1022-54.
- Holt, J. (1982), *How Children Fail*, Delacorte, New York, NY.
- Huy, Q.N. (1999), "Emotional capability, emotional intelligence, and radical change", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 325-45.
- Huy, Q.N. (2002), "Emotional balancing of organizational continuity and radical change: the contribution of middle managers", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 31-69.
- Höpfl, H. and Linstead, S. (1997), "Learning to feel and feeling to learn: emotional learning in organizations", *Management Learning*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 5-12.
- Kanter, R.M. (1983), *The Change Masters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.
- Kotter, J.P. and Schlesinger, L.A. (1979), "Choosing strategies for change", *Harvard Business Review*, March/April, pp. 106-13.
- Larsen, R.J. and Diener, E.E. (1992), "Promises and problems with the circumplex model of emotion", in Clark, M.S. (Ed.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology: Emotion and Social Behavior*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA, pp. 25-59.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1993), "From psychological stress to emotions: a history of changing outlooks", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 1-21.
- March, J.G. (1972), "Model bias in social action", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 413-29.
- March, J.G. and Simon, H.A. (1958), *Organizations*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Ostell, A. (1996), "Managing dysfunctional emotions in organizations", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 525-58.

- Pettigrew, A. (1985), *The Awakening Giant: Continuity and Change in Imperial Chemical Industries*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Pfeffer, J. (1983), "Organizational demography", in Cummings, L.L. and Staw, B.M. (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 5, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT.
- Piderit, S.K. (2000), "Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: a multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 783-94.
- Ruin, O. (1960), *Kooperativa Förbundet 1899-1920*, ak. avhandling, Rabén & Sjögren, Lund.
- Schweiger, D.L., Ivancevich, J.M. and Power, F.R. (1987), "Executive actions for managing human resources before and after acquisition", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 127-37.
- Spector, B.A. (1989), "From bogged down to fired up: inspiring organizational change", *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 29-35.
- Sproull, L. (1981), "Beliefs in organizations", in Nyström, H. and Starbuck, W. (Eds), *Handbook of Organizational Design*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 203-24.
- Starbuck, W. (1983), "Organizations as action generators", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 91-101.
- Starbuck, W. and Hedberg, B. (1977), "Saving an organization from a stagnating environment", in Thorelli, B. (Ed.), *Strategy + Structure = Performance*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, pp. 249-58.
- Stolpe, H. and Hjalmarson, H. (1970), *Konsumentkooperationen förr och nu*, Raben & Sjögren, Halmstad.
- Westen, D. (1985), *Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism and the Development of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wilkins, A.L. and Bristow, N.J. (1987), "For successful organization culture, honor your past", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 221-9.

**This article has been cited by:**

1. Lily Cheng. 2015. Enablers That Positively Impact Implementation of Organizational Change. *GSTF Journal on Business Review (GBR)* 4. . [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Armin Kashefi, Pamela Abbott, David Bell. 2014. The Influences of Employees' Emotions and Cognition on IT Adoption. *International Journal of Social and Organizational Dynamics in IT* 2:10.4018/IJSODIT.20120701, 1-16. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Hulda Mjöll Gunnarsdóttir Gender and Person/Role Conflict in Management: A Study of Gender, Management Position, and Emotional Dissonance Among Managers in a Scandinavian Setting 271-303. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF](#)]
4. Yi Luo, Hua Jiang. 2014. Effective Public Relations Leadership in Organizational Change: A Study of Multinationals in Mainland China. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 26, 134-160. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Nini Hartini Asnawi, Noorlaila Hj Yunus, Norfadzilah Abd Razak. 2014. Assessing Emotional Intelligence Factors and Commitment towards Organizational Change. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5-10. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Andre S. Avramchuk, Michael R. Manning, Robert A. Carpino Compassion for a Change: A Review of Research and Theory 201-232. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF](#)]
7. Ali E. Akgün, Halit Keskin, John Byrne. 2012. Organizational emotional memory. *Management Decision* 50:1, 95-114. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]
8. Jochen I. Menges Chapter 13 Organizational Emotional Intelligence: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications 355-373. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF](#)]
9. Armin Kashefi, Pamela Abbott The Influences of Employees' Emotions and Cognition on IT Adoption: Some Perspectives from Iran 5152-5161. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Julika Zwack, Jochen Schweitzer. 2011. Resilienzfördernde Möglichkeiten der Teamsupervision bei Changeprozessen. *Organisationsberatung, Supervision, Coaching* 18, 31-47. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Zhang Li, Zhang Lin, Wan Fang Study on the effect of job insecurity on emotional exhaustion: An example of Foxconn jumping incidents 943-949. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Robert M. Sloyan, James D. Ludema That's Not How I see It: How Trust in the Organization, Leadership, Process, and Outcome Influence Individual Responses to Organizational Change 233-277. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF](#)]
13. Wendy Loretto, Stephen Platt, Frank Popham. 2009. Workplace Change and Employee Mental Health: Results from a Longitudinal Study. *British Journal of Management* . [[CrossRef](#)]
14. David B. Szabla. 2008. A multidimensional view of resistance to organizational change: Exploring cognitive, emotional, and intentional responses to planned change across perceived change leadership strategies. *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 18:10.1002/hrdq.v18:4, 525-558. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Robert Barner. 2008. The dark tower. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 21:1, 120-137. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]
16. Seung-Yoon Rhee Chapter 4 Group Emotions and Group Outcomes: The Role of Group-Member Interactions 65-95. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF](#)]
17. 2004. Can employees be co-opted into embracing change?. *Human Resource Management International Digest* 12:4, 26-28. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]