

The Link Between Leadership Style, Organizational Learning and Resistance to Change

By Anton Venter

Introduction



Former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once said, “The only human institution that rejects progress is the cemetery”. ¹Most of us do not work in the cemetery, but in organizations that find themselves in highly turbulent environments where change is inevitable. One of the key competencies necessary for organizations to survive these environments is that of change management. It is here that organizational leaders play an important role to guide organizations through change in such a way that the employees will be comfortable with the change. This article gives guidelines on how to reduce resistance to change through organizational learning.

Ruling vs leading

Winston proposes the following continuum of roles for managers in organizations:

1. **Despotic Ruler** – Where employees have no interest in the organization and the leader must get them to accomplish something.
2. **Benevolent Dictator** – Employees are not able to make a meaningful contribution toward decisions.
3. **Paternalistic Clan Chief** – The leader treats employees as a family.
4. **Democratic Official** – There is a sense of general acceptance of the leader’s position but no real loyalty.
5. **Absentee Leader** – Where employees do not want to be led, like professionals who know where they are going but need the organization for resources and authority.
6. **Transactional Leader** – The employees exchange their commitment for rewards.

7. **Transformational Leader** – Employees and their leader have a shared relationship with the organization.

8. **Servant Leader** – Employees' development and fulfillment are the main focus of the leader. Managers will approach their roles on this continuum anywhere between having a despotic ruler's approach to a servant leader approach.² The more a manager positions his/her role towards the first four roles, he/she will be seen as a ruler; while the more he/she positions his/her role towards the last four roles, he/she will be seen as a leader. A managers' use of power to effect change in organizations needs to be aligned with the role that is chosen. The role that a manager chooses finds expression through the use of either positional or relational power.

Positional power and change

Positional power in an organizational context can be described as the domination of another through the exercising of authority derived from one's position in the organization³. Positional power plays a prominent role in organizational change. Managers that lean more towards the ruler end of the continuum will rely strongly on positional power in a change initiative. Influential scholars propose a "push" change strategy with positional power for directing change in an organization⁴. Planned change models, based on positional power, rest on five key assumptions about change:

- ✓ Change occurs from one state to another in a forward progression through time.
- ✓ Change is always from a lesser state to a better state.
- ✓ Change moves towards a specific end state.
- ✓ Change requires disequilibrium.
- ✓ Change is planned and managed by people apart from the system, rather than those within it.⁵

By using positional power and control the manager ensures that the change initiative stays on course. Kanter proposes that no new change strategy will occur without someone with power pushing it⁶. Using positional power can advance the change initiative where buy-in is not a prerequisite. This works well in situations where a role that leans more towards the ruler end of the continuum is applied. Relying strongly on positional power might have a negative effect on the employees' ownership of a change initiative where a role that leans more towards the leadership end of the continuum is applied. The sustainability of the change initiative will be at risk when buy-in from employees is sacrificed.

Relational power and change

Relational power in an organizational context can be described as the sharing of power through mutual accountability. Managers that lean more towards the servant leader end of the continuum will

rely strongly on relational power in a change initiative. In contrast to planned change models based on positional power, a relational conception of power and change engages different assumptions:

- ✓ Change occurs in a cyclical pattern of ebb and flow.
- ✓ Change is processional.
- ✓ Change has no end state or definitive goal.
- ✓ Interventions restore balance.
- ✓ Corrective action maintains equilibrium.
- ✓ When change occurs nothing remains the same.⁷

Using relational power can advance a change initiative where buy-in from employees is a prerequisite. These managers might struggle to move their employees out of their comfort zone towards the required organizational change due to their sensitivity for employee needs. The time consuming process of using relational power can hold back a change initiative, where buy-in from employees is not a prerequisite.

Whether a manager leans more towards the ruler side using mainly positional power or towards the servant leader side using mainly relational power, will have an effect on how resistance to change is addressed. Organizational learning plays an important role in this regard.

Organizational learning the key to unlock resistance to change

Resistance to change will always be a part of an organization. Randal Ford proposes that people need their defenses most when they are under threat and pressure.⁸ Their defensive behaviors serve to keep them from becoming confused, upset and rudderless anytime something happens contrary to their expectations. This occurs when they participate in organizational change, where the outcomes are uncertain or unknown, and therefore require new learning to adapt. When learning takes place the employee feels safe and in control of their environment again. Therefore every change effort requires new employee learning to take place in order to succeed, but most companies experience difficulty in integrating the “learning vision” into management practice.⁹ The effectiveness of the learning process as a mechanism to reduce resistance to change will be enhanced when the learning is aligned with the role of the manager.

Learning in a ruling vs. leading dominated environments

Learning in a ruling environment is driven by the manager through positional power. People are taught new ways of doing, as well as how this new approach will be controlled and measured. Clear demarcations between superior and subordinates are prominent. One up and one down relations

between supervisors and subordinates dominate. Little to no learning occurs between participants, therefore all learning should be initiated by the manager.

Moving towards the middle of the continuum brings one to learning in an empowering environment. This entails relinquishing power to the next level in the organization for making some decisions as a way to extend positional power. Blurred demarcations between superiors and subordinates occur and learning between participants increases. The manager still drives that learning process, but now through sharing power with a next level in the organization.

Learning in a servant leader dominated environment finds expression in relational power. This is where we find the sharing of power and mutual accountability. Unclear demarcations between superiors and subordinates exist. Learning and sharing of knowledge drive the relationships throughout the organization. The challenge in maintaining change and organizational learning from a relational perspective is one of “redirecting” what is already underway.¹⁰

Different strokes for different folks

The crux of the challenge remains: how to lead the change process in such a way that the required change is achieved, while the change initiative is embraced by employees. Research has long established an important link between organizational learning, power and effective change¹. This article proposes that the correct use of power while managing organizational learning is critical for reducing resistance to change. It further shows how the most effective organizational learning approach will be influenced by the role that the manager assumes in the organization.

References:

¹ Harold Wilson, as quoted in *Respectfully Quoted, A Dictionary of Quotations* (1992)

² Winston, B (2003). PowerPoint presentation. Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA.

³ Ford, R. (2006). Organizational learning, change and power: toward a practice-theory framework. *The Learning Organization* , 13 (5), 495-524.

⁴ Ford, R. (2006). Organizational learning, change and power: toward a practice-theory framework. *The Learning Organization* , 13 (5), 495-524.

⁵ Marshak, R.J. (1993), “Lewin meets Confucius: a review of the OD model of change”. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 393-415.

⁶ Kanter, R.M. (1983), *The Change Masters*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

⁷ Marshak, R.J. (1993), “Lewin meets Confucius: a review of the OD model of change”. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 393-415.

⁸ Ford, R. (2006). Organizational learning, change and power: toward a practice-theory framework. *The Learning Organization*, 13 (5), 495-524.

⁹ Senge, P.M. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Currency Doubleday, New York, NY.

¹⁰ Weick, K.E. and Quinn, R.E. (1999), "Organizational change and development". *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 50, pp. 361-86.

¹¹ Seibold, D.R. and Shea, B.C. (2001), "Participation and decision making", in Jablin, F.M. and Putnam, L.L. (Eds), *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication. Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 664-703.

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