Impact of Change Management on Employee Behaviour, Attitudes and Perceptions in the Public Sector

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Abstract: This paper analyses the impact of change management on employee behaviour, attitudes and perceptions in the public service with reference to the National School of Government (NSG). Change management is a concept which denotes how businesses manage the people side of change, and if they are successful at doing so. Management of change is contingent upon the people involved, the type of business conducted, and lastly the actual action of the change taking place. Regardless of the sector, size, or age of the business or corporate entity, change is a common all-embracing phenomenon and impacts all organizations. Guided by Kotter's research on change management models, the research questions examined the behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of employees within the organisation. Empirical research was conducted on a research sample of 209 employees within the National School of Government. A survey was administered to all employees. In addition to the analyses of the impact of change management on employees, the paper further explores best practices and makes recommendations for future study.

Keywords: Change management, Employee behaviour, Job performance, Public sector

1. Introduction

In today's turbulent environment, change is very important in order for any organization or institution to remain relevant and competitive. Change is inevitable, be it personal or professional. Change has thus become a perilous area of research, as private, non-government organisations and the public sector strive to uphold and improve efficiency in an ever-changing world. At a minimum, every change process is characterised by employees, business processes, infrastructure and systems. Unlike business processes, infrastructure and systems, employees have feelings and opinions about any change process that an institution embarks on. Some of the workplace change processes create an uncertainty and anxiety for employees. Thus, the success or failure of a change process unequivocally hinges on employee reactions to the changes because the employees are the ones who are expected to embrace and implement the change process.

According to Skosana (2018) "organisational change has a significant impact on people working in the organization and it can provide for growth and development while at the same time it can also be viewed as a threat from creating new skills, relationships and activities". In the study by Malatjie and Montana (2019) it was found that the biggest risk that organisations face in a change process, is the possible resistance from employees as well as the possibility of poor job satisfaction afterwards. More often organisational change processes fail to meet their intended purpose resulting in negative impacts on the organisation's workforce. Employees' perceptions of how the change will impact their lives and the organization is what usually influences their attitudes and subsequent behaviors towards and during change processes (Skosana, 2018). Employees' attitudes towards change are a major concern for most organisations in both the private and public sector.

"Implementation of changes in any system, structure or process makes individual change become vital as any change starts with individuals' ability to accept change; and unless a majority of individuals are willing to change their attitudes or behavior, no organisational change may occur" (El-Farra & Badawi, 2012). In a change process, employees' reactions may be positive, neutral or negative depending on how each employee views the change process.

Change in the public sector is unavoidable due to constant change in leadership that occurs every five years in terms of applicable South African legislation. It is to be noted that change in leadership mostly leads to change in vision, mission, goals and objectives of the organization. Thus, these strategic

changes will lead to operational changes and conversely the employees will also be affected (Kuipers, Higgs, Kickert, Tummers, Grandia & van der Voet, 2014; Al-Ali, Sing & Sohal, 2017; Skosana, 2018).

1.1 The National School of Government Background

In their previous study, Malatjie and Montana (2019) highlighted the change processes that the NSG has underwent since the first major change in 2007/2008. The department is undergoing yet another major change which will have an impact on different elements; that is, structure, processes, systems and the people.

The NSG operated without an approved organisational structure for a long time. Even though a start-up structure was approved, the impact of not having an approved structure created anxiety amongst many within the organisation. A process of re-engineering the department's business **processes** was undertaken with all staff members to find innovative ways of creating seamless synergies and avoid duplications in the way services were delivered to client. This process will also assist in breaking down silos that were identified by employees as being the reason the department is not able to reach its full delivery potential. These business processes were also integrated into the current configuration.

In order to ensure that the business processes are efficient, the department will be implementing a digital transformation plan in order to improve efficiencies in the systems. This digital transformation is aimed at aligning business processes with ICT initiatives for innovative delivery and support. When implemented right, these processes will increase productivity and turn-around times, enhance service quality and reduce operating costs while improving revenue generated.

All the above-mentioned processes will inevitably have an impact on people; as a start, the approved migration plan will be used to guide the placement of employees with the right skills into the right positions. A skills audit project will be implemented to ensure that the right skills are identified for the right jobs. The new processes and digital transformation might require a re-skilling of employees so that they are able to operate within this improved environment. Although each of the above projects

has its own project leader and non-key expert, they all report to one manager who has the arduous task of ensuring that the projects are synergised.

This study was conducted as a follow-up on the recommendations made in the paper by Malatjie (2019), whereby it was indicated that employee attitudes during a change process should be investigated. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the degree to which the change management processes impact not only the attitudes, but also the behavior and perceptions of employees of the NSG.

2. Literature Review

"Change management is the application of a structured process and set tools for leading the people side of change to achieve a desired business outcome; that is both a process and a competency" (Creasy, 2018). In the works of Galli (2018), "change management consists of three layers: organization, people and projects". Moreover, "change management is a concept which denotes how businesses manage the people side of change, and if they are successful at doing so" (Hiatt & Creasey, 2003). Management of change is contingent upon the people involved, the type of business conducted, and lastly the actual action of the change taking place. Regardless of the sector, size, or age of the business or corporate entity, change is a common all-embracing phenomenon and impacts all organizations (Bouckenooghe *et al*., 2009).

2.1 Change as a Process

Galli (2018) emphasizes that change management needs to have a process that should be followed. The first phase involves identifying the need for change, in the second phase change details are determined; followed by determining change models; that is, how the change will be implemented, then the final stage will be the implementation phase.

There are different change models that can be used in change management however, in this study Kotter's 8 Step change model was considered as a basis of the change process. Kotter (1996) alleged that "leadership must create and sustain the kind of changes needed for successful organisations to compete in the current competitive world".

The model's 8 steps are outlined in Figure 1 on the following page.

Figure 1: Kotter's 8 Step Change Model
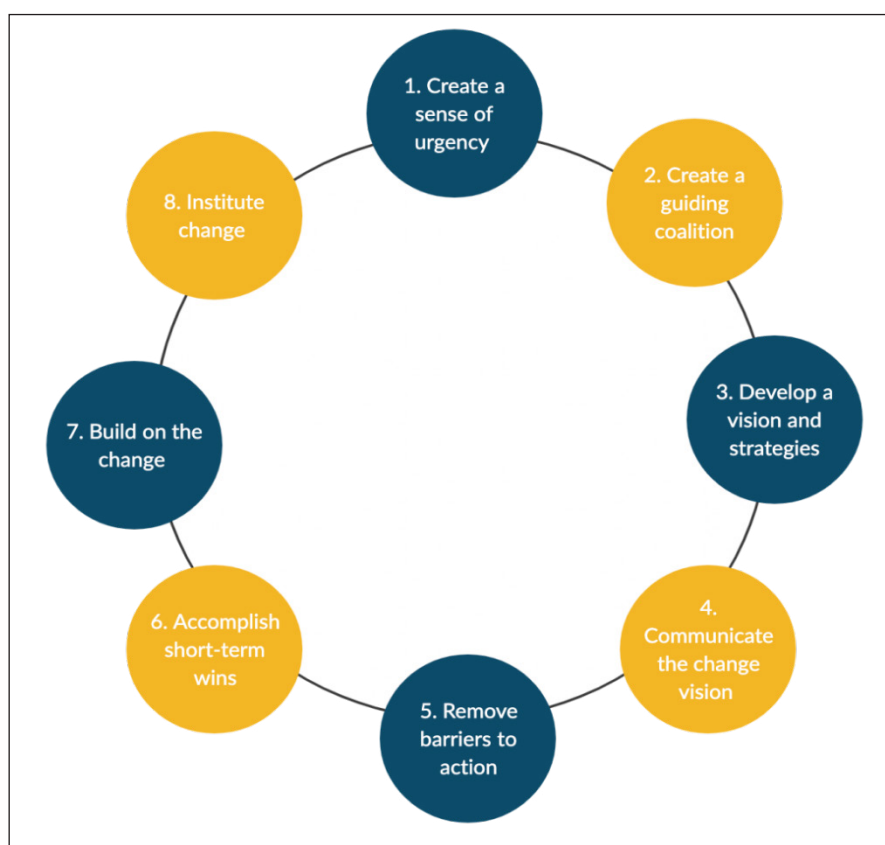
Source: www.kotterinc.com

1. "Create a sense of urgency – creating a sense of urgency is critical to increasing the organisation's awareness that it needs strategic adjustments and that there are always opportunities in sight.

2. Create a core coalition – for effective change to happen, a team of effective leaders must develop into a coalition to build urgency around the need for change. People must know change is necessary.

3. Develop and form a strategic vision – formulating a clear and sensible transformation vision. The transformation vision is required to align objectives and to progress as a group.

4. Communicate and share vision plans – effectively communicate the strategic vision in order to get employees and team members on board.

5. Empowering employees to act on the vision – allow employees to try out new ideas and approaches. Employees need support in removing obstacles to the vision.

6. Generate short term wins – short term wins help the change management team to test the vision against real conditions and to make necessary adjustments.

7. Consolidate gains and produce more change – not allowing complacency and continuous progress is a goal.

8. Initiate and set new changes –the goal is to institutionalize the change and to anchor it in the organisational culture" (Kotter, 1996; Kotter, 2012; Kotter & Cohen, 2012).

An organisation-wide change process is led by the executive of the institution; and in order to improve the likelihood of success of the change process, leadership should seek buy-in from employees, labour and other stakeholders. In the study by Galli (2018), emphasis is made on the fact that "change will not be successful without a well-developed strategic vision, because that organization will not have a roadmap for the change process". Similarly, employees need to understand why change is needed in an

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organization in order to support the change itself. It is therefore important that the change process be managed properly by the leadership, using a clear change management process that is supported by all employees (NSG, 2021).

2.2 Role of Individuals in Change

Although it is agreed that change is necessary for any organisation to remain relevant and competitive, it is believed that change initiatives fail more often than not. Kotter and Cohen (2012) for example, believe that 70% of all change processes fail and attribute this to the human factor; that is, people's attitudes, behaviors and responses to the change. In any change process, employees are the most important aspect as they are the assets of the organization and have the ability to make the change smooth or difficult. It is therefore imperative that they are not only kept informed of the change process but are also involved in the process. Change needs to be communicated from the beginning and regular updates must be given to all stakeholders. Most importantly leadership needs to acquire support and buy-in of most if not all the employees. The above sentences are supported by El-Farra and Badawi (2012) who posits that the implementation of changes in an organization, whether system, structure or process highlight the importance of individuals as any change starts with individuals' ability to accept change; and unless the majority of individuals are willing to change their attitudes or behavior, organisational change might not succeed.

2.2.1 Employee Attitudes Towards Change

Attitudes emanate from how people feel, think and perceive a situation, object or person. Arifin (2020) defines attitudes towards change as how employees feel about change after assessing the changes that the organisation plans to implement or are implementing. Neiva, Ros and Paz (2005) describe attitudes as the predictors of whether or not people will participate in change processes. Based on the outcome of the assessment, employee attitudes can be positive or negative. A negative attitude can result in resistance to change; while a positive attitude can be seen from employee readiness to accept the change (Arifin, 2020).

In their paper, Vakola and Nikolau (2005) found that one of the factors that contributed to employees' resistance to change is stress; that is, the more employees are stressed by the change and how

it is being managed, the more likely they are to develop a negative attitude towards the change. Vakola and Nikolau (2005) further go on to discuss how employee attitudes to change can also affect their morale and productivity which in turn could have negative consequences for the organization. In order for leadership to assist employees develop more positive attitudes to change, they first need to reduce employees' stress levels. This can be achieved through participatory involvement of all staff, consistent information-sharing and leadership support (Schalk, Campbell & Freese, 1998).

2.2.2 Employee Perceptions Towards Change

Naturally, people are inclined to have different perspectives of the same situation, this is due to the information they have about the situation. If no effort is made to clarify a certain situation, everyone makes sense of the situation in their own way and that influences their perceptions. A change process is no different. If an organization does not make an effort to paint the same picture for everyone, individuals will create own pictures of a supposedly common process. Thus, if employees perceive the change to be beneficial to them as individuals, they might be more invested in the change. If they perceive the change to be more beneficial to the organization and not to them, they might resist change.

Although organizations believe that they embark on change processes for positive reasons, if not managed right, there could be high levels of resistance. According to Jones, Hobman, Gallois, Watson, Bordia and Callan (2008), for a change process to succeed, management needs to build positive employee beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. Furthermore, Jones *et al.* (2008) cite Dent and Goldberg (1999) who purport that employee resistance might not necessarily be towards the change itself, but towards the perceived negative outcome of the change or the process of implementing the change.

In a model that was developed by Oreg (2006) as cited in Jones *et al.* (2008) it was found that perceptions towards the anticipated change outcomes; for example, job security, opportunity for growth, were associated with the affective (how people feel) and the cognitive (how they think) dimensions of change. On the other hand, the perceptions of the change process itself influences the behavioral (how people act or react towards change) dimension. Being aware of the above dimensions and what influences them is not enough as there is a further need to unpack

the elements that are associated with these dimensions; that is, perceptions, attitudes and the eventual behavior towards the change. Therefore, perceptions of change outcomes as well as perceptions of how change is managed are usually associated with employees' resistance to change (Jones *et al*., 2008).

2.2.3 Employee Behavior Towards Change

Change readiness refers to the willingness of people to be part of a change process. If employees do not receive proper explanation on change and why it needs to happen, there is generally a reluctance to be part of the process (Wang & Kebede, 2020). As suggested by the above discussion, a combination of employee attitudes as well as perceptions have an influence on employee behavior during the change process. This is because behaviors are seen as external manifestations of what is going on inside a person's mind (Hultman, 2003). If change is seen in a positive light, it will be supported. In order for the behavior to be positive, it is important to have prepared employees to be ready for change (Arifin, 2020).

According to Kotter and Cohen (2012) although changes to the culture, systems and strategy are important, the main challenge when implementing the 8-stages during change process is 'changing people's behavior'; that is, what people do. Linked with the work of Oreg (in Jones *et al*., 2008) it is stressed that during change, management should seek to influence employee's feelings (affect) and thoughts (cognition); this will essentially influence behavior. Kotter and Cohen (2012) refer to this as the 'see-feel-change' flow. Arifin (2020) goes further to discuss the factors that influence people's attitudes, perceptions and behavior towards change as either organizational/external factors such as leadership support and individual/internal factors such as threat appraisal. In order to address this, an organisation's leadership needs to provide support to employees, communicate and encourage employee participation (Schalk *et al*., 1998). With regards to communicate, the leadership should communicate the need and vision for change succinctly to all employees. Communication ensures that employees across all divisions and salary levels, have the same views on the future that is being anticipated in the change.

3. Methodological Approach

A quantitative approach was adopted, and data collected through the administration of a survey to 209 staff members on all salary levels; that is, 42 senior managers (Level 13 – 16), 70 middle managers (Level 9 – 12) and 97 administrators (Level 4 – 8). The study initially planned to only draw the sample from salary levels 9 – 16; however, it was realised that valuable information could be gathered on how the change is perceived and received by employees on different levels, thus all employees in the organisation were included. Quantitative Data was collected using Lime-survey and exported to Microsoft (MS) Excel. Data analysis was performed using (MS) Excel 2013, with the Analysis ToolPak add-on.

3.1 Procedure

The questionnaires were emailed to all staff members accompanied by a clause that emphasised that all responses will be anonymous and handled with utmost confidentiality. Although the responses did not require information that can compromise the anonymity of the responses, there was demographic questions that were necessary for the categorisation of the data received. Participation in the survey was voluntary. The instrument consisted of questions that required the respondents to indicate their responses on a 5-point Likert with 1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree and it took 15 minutes to complete.

4. Results and Discussion

Of the 209 staff members only 28 fully completed questionnaires were received which is a 13% response rate. Out of the 28 respondents 17 were female, 11 male and were in the following age categories – only 2 respondents in the 25-34 years category; 9 respondents in the 35-49 years; 10 respondents in the 45-54 years category and and 7 respondents in the 55-64 years category. Salary levels of respondents indicated that only 1 intern completed the questionnaire, level 1-5 only 3 responses were received; level 6-8 recorded 4 responses; levels 9-12 indicated 7 responses; level 13-14 had 13 responses while on level 15-16 no responses were recorded. The responses received indicated only 1 person who had less than 1-year length of service at the NSG and the rest had been in the NSG for a period of over 5 years and longer.

4.1 Need for Change

53,57% strongly agree and 35.71% agree with the statement that Change is necessary for the NSG

to be a better organisation. *'My views and opinions are considered when decisions that will affect my work are made'* – 46.43% of respondents agree with this statement, while 28,57% neither agree nor disagree and 21.43% disagree with the statement. *I understand the vision and strategic direction that informed the change*, this statement received a 67.86% agree while 17.86% were neutral and only 7.14% disagreed. *Our senior managers encourage all of us to embrace organisational change*, 25% of respondents disagreed with the statement while 46.43% agreed with it and 28.57% were neutral. 75% of respondents agreed with the *statement 'I think the organisation will benefit from this change'*, while 21,43% remained neutral and only 3,5% disagreed with the statement. *'The organisation is going to be more productive when we implement this change'* – 50% of respondents agreed with the statement while 42.86% remained neutral and only 7.14% disagreed with it. *'Feedback of every change intervention is provided to staff timeously'*; 46,43% agreed with the statement, 25% disagreed and the rest were neutral.

In this category the need for change was measured and the outcome is that there is indeed a need for change within the organisation. Results indicate that respondents agree with the need for change and they support the change initiative. Respondents believe that change will make the NSG a better organisation and that it will benefit from change.

4.2 Attitudes to Change

In this section the attitudes of respondents towards change were measured. *'I am quite confident the organisational change initiatives will have the desired effect in my organisation'*, 64,29% of respondents agreed with the statement, 10.71% disagreed and the rest remained neutral. *'I don't see why we need to implement change when past initiatives have failed'* 67,86% of respondents disagreed with this statement, 10.71% neither agreed nor disagreed while 21.43% disagreed with it. '*When this change is implemented, I don't believe there is anything for me to gain'*; 18,47% agreed with the statement, 53,58% disagreed with this statement. 71,43% of respondents disagreed with the statement that *'Changing plans seems like a real hassle to me'* while 21,43% disagreed and the rest remained neutral. *I am looking forward to changes in my working environment'*, majority of respondents agreed with this statement (78,57%) while only 14.28% disagreed with it and 7.14% remained neutral. *'I don't think there are*

legitimate reasons for us to make this change'; 71,43% of respondents disagreed with this statement and only 14.28% agreed with it.

From the data collected in this category, it is clear that most of the respondents' attitude (thoughts and feelings) towards the impending change is positive, it is only a slight percentage of respondents who showed a negative attitude towards the change process. In the works of Argyris (1964); Likert (1961) as quoted by Ritz (2009) in a change process positive attitudes can be achieved through maintaining a positive social organisational environment, such as by providing good communication, autonomy, participation and mutual trust.

4.3 Change Perceptions

'I believe management considered all angles to inform the need for change'; 39.28% of respondents disagreed with the statement, while the other 39.28% agreed and 21.43% did not agree or disagree. Out of the received responses, 75% agreed with the statement that *'the department's leadership understands what they are doing with the change process'* and only 21,43% disagreed with it. *'My opinion is considered when there are changes that will affect my work';* 17,85% disagreed with the statement while 46,43% agreed with it. Majority (60,72%) of the respondents agreed with this statement that *'This change will enhance the position of the organization in the public sector'*. *'I see myself progressing in my career through this change'*; 28,57% disagreed with the statement and 39.28% agreed with it. *'This change will not benefit me in any way'* over 50% of respondents disagreed with this statement. 75% of respondents agreed with the statement that *'Organisational change will improve our organisations overall efficiency'*. *'The intended change makes me question my future employment with the organisation'* 46,43% agreed with this statement while 39,28% disagreed with it. *'Should the intended change be implemented right, the department will be better equipped to meet our client's needs'*; 78,57% of respondents agreed with this statement.

Change perception is about how employees view the change thus in this study the outcome is that respondents view change as a good thing for the department and some respondents are even looking forward to opportunities that will arise from the change initiative. Thus, change is viewed in a positive light and with potential prospects for better growth opportunities.

4.4 Employee Behaviour

'I assist management in advocating for the change as a change agent'; 57,14% of respondents agreed with the finding, 28,57% were neutral while only 14,29% disagreed with the statement. 67,85% agreed with the statement *'I am confident that the change will improve the department's overall efficiency'*. *'I would support and do my best for any change initiative which I see as beneficial to this organisation'* 67,86% agreed with the statement while 32,14% strongly agreed. I am always excited to attend the consultation platforms for change, an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with this statement (89,29%). *'I will participate in change activities because I don't have a choice'*; 53,57% disagreed with the statement, 10,71% did not agree nor disagree while 35,71% agreed with it. *'I would leave the department should an opportunity arise because I see no future prospects here';* 42,86% agreed with the statement and 32,14% disagreed.

Employee behaviour indicates an employee's reaction to a particular situation in the workplace. In this instance, the current situation is the impending change. However, the results of the survey indicate that employees' behaviour towards change is favourable; this is evident in the above statements in which the majority of respondents fully support the change process.

5. Limitations and Recommendations

This study carried some limitations. The data collection process was open for only 2 weeks and as there is employee rotation in place due to Covid-19 restrictions, some employees could have missed the deadline of completion. There were few respondents who participated in the study therefore results cannot be generalised to the entire public sector. Although the NSG findings are encouraging because they suggest a less resistant workforce, the low response rate; that is, 13%, cannot be ignored. It should be interesting to enquire further as to why employees did not participate in the survey. A number of reasons can be assumed; but ideally, the department needs to engage employees through platforms such as focus groups, informal discussions with change agents, at Chief Directorate meetings and in departmental meetings. The information gathered from these consultations could perhaps be used to improve the management of change within the department.

Resistance to change has been highlighted as a culmination of negative employee attitudes and perceptions towards a change process. This is because people, as the recipients of change, have more to lose or gain from any change intervention and if their stress and anxiety are not addressed, they tend to push back (Arifin, 2020; Vakola & Nikolau, 2005).

Resistance to change can be addressed through 3 main processes; that is, communication, support and employee participation. These can be addressed in the following ways:

- Support can come in the form of leadership who acknowledge employees' feelings and perceptions of the change process (Schalk *et al*., 1998). Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006) found that leadership, as a process of social influence in which individuals want to feel included, supported and reinforced, especially during change, is important in ensuring that employees are heard and involved in the change process.

- Support should not only be limited to leadership; but also support from supervisors and colleagues can help employees who are skeptical of the change to be more receptive and develop positive attitudes to change (Giauque, 2014). Informal and formal platforms for engagement and conversations can be set-up in the workplace as safe spaces for employees to discuss the change process.

- Communication is raised in a number of studies as a critical element during the change process (Kotter & Cohen, 2012; Maheshwari & Vohra, 2015; Schalk *et al*., 1998). This is because, if communication is not attended to, it can lead to rumours and various versions of the truth that can work against the organization's change efforts. El-Farra and Badawi (2012) further indicate that 'lack of communication in a change process will lead to mistrust of management/leadership intentions when implementing change'. Communication can be improved through staff addresses by the leadership, newsletters, posters, etcetera to ensure there is a constant flow of information through all the levels of employees within an organisation.

Suggestions could be made for future research to include a larger sample size that will be representative of the public sector. Also, in future studies a

5-point Likert scale should not to be used as participants turn to select the neutral response instead of indicating whether they agree or disagree with statements.

6. Conclusion

Change will always not be successful without the willingness or desire of employees. At any given time, employee morale is important in any organisation as this has an impact on the productivity of the organisation. This becomes even more critical during a change process. Leadership also plays an important role in the change process. As indicated in the study by Ritz (2009) leadership behaviour that is very supportive, that motivates employees, provides regular feedback, gives praise and is open to change has a positive influence on organisational performance and morale of employees. Therefore, employees that are motivated and have a positive morale will not have a problem going through a change process. The above theory supports the findings of this study, whereby employees at the NSG embrace change in a positive way and are looking for opportunities from the change process.

The findings of the study also emphasised the importance of communication in a change process. Galli (2018) asserts that "it is important to effectively communicate the need for change and to include employees, as well as team members to be part of the change process". Thus a proactive approach needs to be taken in a change process whereby any issues that stem from employees are addressed immediately and this can be done where communication channels are available, in turn this will ensure that employees are comfortable in getting on board the change process.

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