

The Importance of Social Norms in Resistance to Organizational Change

Anne-Charlotte Hampe *

Abstract

This research paper focuses on identifying the possible impact of social norms on organizational change. Through the analysis of a variety of different academic sources, the author examines the importance of social norms for employees and the effect these norms have on resisting change. The analysis of these academic sources indicates that social norms have an immense influence on employees' resistance to organizational change. This is due to the importance of social norms in daily life and the negative psychological effects of breaking social norms. A limitation identified in this study is the significance of legitimacy in influencing the resistance to organizational change and reputation of the leadership in an organization, which can affect the employees opinion of the organization. The significance of this analysis is that resistance to change on a larger scale, such as organizational change, is often based on pre-established social norms.

Introduction

Two-thirds of efforts for change within large organizations fail (Rehman et al.)[1]. The importance of change, however, should not be underestimated. In industries, organizational change is essential for improving efficiency and achieving increased productivity and benefits. Yet, with the aforementioned advantages, many employees continue to resist change mandated by their organization. Furthermore, the implementation of change often leads to the dismantlement of certain social norms to enable growth and improvement. These social norms sometimes need to be broken for the benefit of the group; however, it is crucial to recognize that social norms exist to provide stability and cooperation within a group. In most cases, there are consequences to going against or changing existing norms or beliefs. Due to the importance of social norms to the everyday life of employees, change often causes resistance from the workforce. Such resistance from employees is caused by a multitude of factors, most notably the psychological impact of social norms—such as the feeling of community and shared expectations. Understanding the primary causes of employee resistance can help compa-

*Senior Student, Fulton Science Academy.
Contact: ahampe@fultonscienceacademy.org

nies and organizations to implement new methods to lessen resistance when change is necessary. Therefore, this paper explores the question: To what extent do the psychological aspects of social norms cause resistance to organizational change in employees? Taking into consideration the importance of group beliefs and the relationship between employees and the organization, the psychological aspects of social norms in an organization are some of the main factors towards resistance to organizational change.

Importance of Social Norms to Employees

The establishment of social norms is vital for the formation of a community, including those within a company. The necessity of these norms to the group contributes to resistance when changes challenge the established norms. According to Sergey Gavrilets and his team from the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Tennessee, social norms enable individuals to anticipate each other's behavior (Gavrilets)[2]. By establishing norms, individuals in large groups gain a better understanding of mutual expectations, facilitating smoother interactions. These interactions are vital within the workplace because they ensure work is completed efficiently and on time. This efficiency is a core part of the day to day life for employees. Mark Brandt, a researcher on social psychology from Tilburg University, exemplifies the importance of social norms in interactions with his findings that social norms are "oriented towards maintaining the status quo and current societal practices" (Brandt)[3]. Thus, the importance of social norms contributes to employees' resistance to change, especially when it disrupts the status quo. Furthermore, in the *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, Nielsen Mossfeldt, an associate professor at Aarhus University and psychologist, indicates that resistance to change is caused by destroying the existing equilibrium (Mossfeldt 91)[4]. To successfully implement change, existing social norms must often be dissolved to make way for a new work environment. Therefore, one of the reasons employees resist change is that the dismantling of their social norms destroys the stability of group interactions. According to Nickelsen Mossfeldt, due to the "relative stability of group norms, group changes [inevitably] involve conflict between group norms and the external force introducing change" (Mossfeldt 90)[4]. This idea explains that the threat of breaking the existing stability causes resistance against outside forces driving the change. Within organizational change the external force can be interpreted as the

ones proposing change. Gerben A. Kleef, a professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam, and his associates elaborate on the importance of social norms in the resistance of change in their paper; they state that within the group itself people are more likely to disapprove of change if it affects them personally (Kleef 27)[5]. This attitude in combination with the importance of social norms to work relationships indicates that established social norms heavily influence employees' resistance to any changes.

Negative Physiological Effects of Breaking Social Norms

Due to the critical role of established social norms, there are multiple consequences associated with their disruption, particularly when examining resistance to change. The psychological aspect of group norms discourages many individuals from defying them for fear of internal conflict. Breaking social norms often results in significant mental distress; it triggers feelings of "guilt, shame, and disappointment in the self" (Kleef, 26)[5]. Kleef's study shows that the mere thought of going against the group has consequences for individuals. These feelings alone contribute to the reluctance to break norms, fostering resistance to change within the organization. In addition to the internal consequences, employees may also react defensively to proposed changes. In the *Frontier of Psychology*, a study by Nabeel Rehman from the School of Accountancy & Finance at the University of Lahore has found that employees are likely to "show resistance by sticking to the notion that they do not need the change" (Rehman et al.)[6]. This study supports the concept that social norms are directly connected to the resistance within organizations. Considering the psychological toll on individuals who challenge group norms, it becomes clear that these internal consequences play a larger role in resistance to change than many other factors. The discomfort of breaking social norms often persists even when it is tied to material or communal benefits. Sergey Geverilets and his associates in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* state that "violation of these internalized norms can cause psychological discomfort, even when associated with material benefits" (Gavrilets)[2]. Even when a monetary reward is involved, most do not go against social norms due to the fear of and potential backlash from colleagues. Within organizations, change is often intended to improve efficiency or increase longevity, both of which promise benefits to employees. However, the reluctance to embrace change, even with rewards, further demonstrates that the psychological effects of

social norms are a significant factor in resistance. Not only do social norms affect the individual, but they affect the group through reactions. The fear of violating established norms arises not only from personal discomfort but also from the repercussions within the group. In most situations, going against the group will lead to backlash from within. Gerben A. Kleef, a professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam, argues there is a stronger repulsion from the group if the ones implementing the change are “ingroup deviants” or other employees than for the outgroup (27)[5]. This “black sheep effect” provides individuals less motivation to implement change by rejecting the preexisting norms. Some who may wish to facilitate change could be negatively treated by their colleague for not following the group. Thus the combination of internal and external consequences linked to breaking norms highlights the significant role of social norms in employee resistance to change.

Importance of Perception of Organizational Change

Although Social norms have led to resistance to change, it is not the only factor that influences the employees. The relationship between employees and the leaders or organizers of change is another critical factor. The perception of change refers to employees’ views of both the change process and the organization itself. The worse the relationship between the organization and the employees, the more likely there will be resistance toward change within the organization. Rehman states that perceived organizational support “draws its roots from social exchange theory, suggesting it is a mutual relationship between an organization and its employees” (Rehman et al.)[6]. When the relationship is hostile or distrustful, there is often less cooperation and more resistance. Resistance to change stemming from negative perceptions of organizational support is largely influenced by the level of trust between leaders and employees (Khan)[1]. Dennis Erwin and Andrew Garman from the Department of Health Systems Management at Rush University emphasize that employees resist change by “doing the minimum required, not actively cooperating and promoting the change initiative, and not making an effort to ensure subordinates understood the change effort” (Erwin 43)[7]. This research illustrates that the relationship between an organization and its employees has an impact on the efforts for change. The findings from Dennis Erwin and Rehman suggest that employees’ perceptions of the actions taken by an organization strongly influence their level

of resistance or cooperation with organizational change.

Legitimacy

Even though the perception of the organization itself is not based on social norms, the idea of legitimacy is. Legitimacy is defined as something that is in accordance with the norms, beliefs, and procedures that are accepted by the group (Brandt)[3]. This concept is closely related to the perception of organizations, as both focus on the relationship between employees and the organization. Legitimacy, however, is based on the widespread acceptance that specific norms of the group are proper and appropriate, thus connecting the perception of social norms and the community's beliefs. Although social norms and legitimacy are interconnected, the reasons for employee resistance remains the impact of social norms. Without preexisting standards, there is nothing for the employees to compare an organization to. Therefore, the legitimacy of an organization is impactful during the implementation of change due to its influence on the employee's perception of an organization. For instance, when a positive relationship exists between employees and the organization, resistance to change decreases because the source of change is perceived as legitimate. This relationship stems from employees' opinion on their treatment that is primarily associated with personal or societal standards. Furthermore, recent studies have indicated that a group can accept change and leadership, if it is beneficial (Kleef)[5]. When an organization is seen as legitimate and adheres to the group's shared beliefs, trust increases, leading to decreased resistance. However, the perception of legitimacy is partly subjective, based on personal observation. As such, it cannot be considered the primary factor influencing resistance or cooperation from employees as a whole.

Conclusion

Social Norms are the primary factor in the resistance to organizational change due to their importance for employee interactions, and their effect on individuals or groups. The psychological influence of social norms discourages individuals from facilitating change. However, that resistance to change is caused by a combination of factors that can not be restricted to a singular cause. All are interconnected and influence one another, as seen with perceptions of reputation through the concept of legitimacy. While

this interconnectedness makes it difficult to identify specific causes for certain actions, the research concludes that the perception of an organization and the necessity of social norms largely influence the reaction of employees. Cultural differences across the world further shape social standards, potentially altering how social norms and perceptions impact resistance. Although numerous factors contribute to large-scale resistance to organizational change, the most influential aspect is the violation of social norms. Further research could be done to explore how to better integrate beneficial changes without disrupting pre-established social norms.

References

1. Khan, K. & Rehman, M. Employees' Resistance towards Organizational Change. *Blekinge Institute of Technology School of Management, Master Thesis in MSc. Business Administration* (2008).
2. Gavrillets, S. e. a. Modelling Social Norms: an Integration of the Norm-Utility Approach with Beliefs Dynamics. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* **379**.
3. Brandt, M. J. & Reyna, C. Individual Differences in the Resistance to Social Change and Acceptance of Inequality Predict System Legitimacy Differently Depending on the Social Structure. *European Journal of Personality* **31**.
4. Mossfeldt, N. & Niels, C. Five Currents of Organizational Psychology—from Group Norms to Enforced Change. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* **7**, 87–106 (2017).
5. Kleef, G. A. e. a. The Social Dynamics of Breaking the Rules: Antecedents and Consequences of Norm-Violating Behavior. *Current Opinion in Psychology* **6**, 25–31 (2015).
6. Rehman, N. e. a. The Psychology of Resistance to Change: The Antidotal Effect of Organizational Justice, Support and Leader-Member Exchange. *Frontiers in Psychology* **12** (2021).
7. Erwin, D. G. & Garman, A. N. Resistance to Organizational Change: Linking Research and Practice. *Leadership Organization Development Journal* **31**, 39–56.