# Experiential Workshop with Educational Leadership Doctoral Students: Managing Affective Reactions To Organizational Change

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## Abstract

Managing change processes, resistance to change, and organizational members' emotional reactions to change are crucial skills for future educational leaders to learn. Our case study is based on a workshop conducted using two experiential exercises to facilitate current educational leadership doctoral students' reflections on their own reactions to change and their emotional sources of their resistances to change. Two unique aspects of this workshop that drew feedback from participants indicating significant internalization of learning included an "in vivo" change experience and the timing of the workshop during the students' writing and presenting of dissertation proposals. We document how this process facilitated their improved insight regarding the importance of engaging subordinates in change processes. Additionally, cultural differences between Persian, White, Black, and Latino participants as they may affect management of change are described. Participants' reflections and insights are discussed and implications for future practice and research identified.

# Introduction

This is a case study in training future educational leaders to improve their change management knowledge and skills. We developed a workshop to help current educational leadership doctoral students explore their own reactions to change and to discuss how these expectations influence their change management processes. We hoped that with increased insight into their own reactions to change, through the use of two experiential exercises, these future educational leaders would learn how to more effectively manage change in the organizations they will lead.

# Review of Literature

Management of organizational change is a dynamic and hotly debated issue in business, government agencies, and educational organizations (Bennis, 2000; Cohen, 2000; Dunphy, 2000; Gallbraith, 2000; Ingram, 2005; Kotter, 1996; Pettigrew, 2000; Schaffer & Thomson, 1996; Shapiro, 2001; Sparks, 2005; Spencer, 2004, 2005; Weick, 2000; Zaleznik, 1996). According to Burke (2002), "organizations of all kinds today are having to deal with environments that are changing more rapidly than the organizations themselves" (p. 9). Change is therefore most often motivated externally by the environments in which these organizations exist, rather than internally.

This external locus of control is often at odds with stakeholders' (employees, clients/students, the community) internal cognitively constructed identities as part of the organizations in which they function (Schwenk, 2002). The historical narrative of the organizational culture combined with the individual stakeholder's internalized experience of this narrative result in a "sense of self" within the organization, an "organizational self identity," as it were. This meaning-attribution process is how the individual stakeholder understands himself or herself within the concept of the organizational culture or subcultures (Briskin, 1996).

The pace of environmental changes in the modern world and the resulting conflict with our internalized identities "challenges our basic assumptions about ourselves" (Briskin, 1996, p. 145). Therefore, when change is imposed on individuals within organizations, they experience a sort of cognitive dissonance between their personal realities based on their own autobiographical narratives of experiences and an attempt by an external force to assert control in the form of changing not only the policy, process, or guiding philosophy targeted for change, but also changing the individual's sense of self within the organization. Therefore, organizational change may be experienced as a threat to an individual's intra-psychic self-structure and a loss of control over the self. Individuals within

organizations are thus likely to react to change such as they would to an impending assault and either passively resist or actively fight the change at hand. Attention to identifying and addressing these perceived threats are crucial to managing successful change processes in organizations. Swenk (2002) indicates that in order to engage individuals in dialogue about change, it helps to be mindful (having a present temporal orientation) in characterizing change as "part of an ongoing process, rather than disastrous deviations from past procedure" (p. 152). This allows individuals the time and focus to process issues around the need for the changes in such a way as to allow accommodation or assimilation of a new and different perspective into their current organizational self identities. An understanding of organizational change as an evolutionary process, necessarily involving change for survival of the organization, is helpful in engaging stakeholders in the process, rather than focusing on the change as externally imposed and out of their control (Burke, 2002; Weick, 2000).

The literature indicates that understanding the organization's subcultures and engaging these subcultures in the change taking place, rather than simply using power to attempt to exert control over change processes is more likely to lead to success (Locke & Gugliemino, 2006). It is important to identify and value the diversity of roles individual stakeholders play within organizational culture or subcultures. It is also important to understand the information these individuals can provide change managers in how the organization is likely to process change. The literature reveals that to be successful in initiating dialogue about change, one must address several factors posited in the maintenance of status quo such as (Brill & Worth, 1997; Kotter, 1996) (a) the strong emotional reactions stakeholders have to the proposition of change, (b) how to anchor the change within the organizational culture,(c) aspirations regarding what visions or goals are hoped for, (d) insight regarding stakeholders' understanding of reasons for and against the change, and (e) identification of self-reinforcing incentives for and against changing that are personally applicable to stakeholders who are impacted by the impending change.

Cameron & Quinn (2006) illustrate a six step process for addressing the competing values frameworks within organizations as a way to address organizational change processes. These steps are (a) the change manager must facilitate consensus on what the current culture is, (b) then he/she must facilitate consensus on the desired future culture, (c) then he/she determines what the changes will and will not mean individually and organizationally, (d) the change manager facilitates identification of illustrative stories or organizational narratives about the culture and changes within the culture from key stakeholders in the organization, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organizational self-identities at stake, (e) he or she must develop a strategic action plan that takes this information into account, and (f) finally, based on the information gathered, the change manager forms an implementation plan.

This model is often in contrast to how change frequently occurs in reality in educational organizations, which is often experienced by individuals within the organizations as chaotic. This usually occurs because change is often an unplanned response to a problem, rather than being managed proactively. When individuals experience change in a chaotic environment with little or no engagement in the change process, it is understandable that they may react with resistant behaviors due to their perception that their organizational self identities are being threatened. Our case study was therefore intended to utilize experiential learning to assist future educational leaders in becoming mindful of their own reactions to change in an effort to assist their learning more productive ways to engage individual stakeholders in the change processes for which they will ultimately be responsible.

## Participants

The participants for our workshop were educational leadership doctoral students in the process of developing their dissertation proposals. There were 12 participants: 11 females and one male; three Hispanics, one Persian, three Caucasians, and five African-Americans. All were volunteers who could choose at any point not to participate in the workshop.

## Methodology

Two simultaneous experiential exercises took place, followed by processing each of the activities. The first activity included a two part change questionnaire (2007) that was completed individually. The first part of the questionnaire included 12 questions that encouraged participants to focus on their own reactions to changes they have experienced using a five-point Likert scale, one being strongly disagree to five being strongly agree. The second part of the questionnaire included 12 questions regarding the participants' beliefs about best practices in managing change. The participants were then placed into small groups to discuss their responses to the questionnaire including discussion of the similarities and differences in responses between members and what factors the participants believe accounted for similarities and differences identified.

The group discussions were monitored by one of the workshop facilitators in order to emphasize the importance we placed on their perceptions. A spokesperson was selected within the group who then presented their results to the entire workshop audience. The workshop leaders facilitated a discussion between participants to help them process their own insights and experiences they noted in participant responses, demographic or cultural differences, what prompted the strongest emotional reactions of participants and why. They also facilitated the group process regarding how participants' insights may influence their future management of organizational change.

The second experiential activity was initially unknown to the participants. During the design process, the workshop facilitators discussed the ethical implications of initially not informing the participants about the exercise and determined that the risk of potential harm was negligible and that as part of processing of the activities, the "blind" nature of this activity would be disclosed and participants would be encouraged to process their feelings and reactions. Given that this was not initially intended to be a research case study, IRB approval was not sought; however, a university professor with over 35 years experience was consulted, as part of the decision making process.

The participants were classmates who expected, as had been the protocol in all of their previous experiences in this class, that their professor would be present and introduce the facilitators and assist in presenting and processing the material. The professor had previously told the students that if he was 15 or 20 minutes late, they would be allowed to leave and class activities would be rescheduled. However, arrangements were made between the facilitators and the professor prior to the workshop for the professor to come late to the presentation. After 10 minutes, one of the presenters acted as though she felt it was not important for the professor to be there, one of the presenters acted as though he did not want to start until after the professor joined them, and the third presenter appeared conflicted, but then acquiesced to the first presenter, and we began the workshop. The first presenter continued to act as though the agenda was of primary importance, while the other two intermittently responded to concerns raised by the participants regarding their professor not being there and the impending implications. The professor arrived about 45 minutes late, his presence being minimized while the planned activity continued.

During group processing, following the questionnaire and small group activities, one of the presenters encouraged the students to discuss their reactions to the change in their normal class schedule and protocol. Following processing of their own reactions and concerns, they were informed that it was planned for the professor to be late, and then they were given the opportunity to process their reactions to this disclosure. This served as a second experiential exercise on reactions to change and management of change.

## Discussion

With regard to the first exercise, participants differed in their responses to change based on their professional positions. Those who were already in educational leadership positions tended to see change as necessary at times and something that is fairly easily accepted. Those who were not currently in leadership positions within their schools or community colleges discussed the need for understanding the impact change would have on individuals in the organization. Their reflections

revealed a belief that the more closely the individual is affected by the change proposed, the anxiety they experienced increased, resulting in a resistant attitude towards the change. Group processing revealed that those in management should take time and assert effort to listen to those organizational members who would be affected by the change. The participants reached consensus that if the change manager attempted to understand their concerns about proposed changes, as well as participants' underlying beliefs and values related to the organization, it would diminish the resistance they experienced. It was evident that varied perspectives, based on personal, cultural, and professional experiences resulted in different perceptions about how change should be implemented.

Group processing regarding management of change triggered emotional responses among participants, initially due to reactions to the second experiential exercise that were then synthesized with the differences in perception identified by the first exercise. We found that the second experiential activity allowed participants to experience "in vivo" their own cognitive dissonance related to unexpected change. Although several participants initially questioned beginning the workshop without the professor, only one insisted the instructor should be contacted.

Although group processing revealed most participants felt uncomfortable about the process being changed without discussion, their responses were not overtly reflective of their conflicting feelings. This was illustrative of one way individuals in organizations may respond with resistance, if they are not involved in processing, planning for, and carrying out proposed changes in the organizations where they work.

It is important to note this particular group of educational leadership students planned to present their dissertation proposals, resulting in an additional contextual influence in processing their personal reactions to change. The timing of the workshop ultimately was the most powerful intervention because group processing allowed participants to discuss their thoughts and feelings about changes, both planned and unplanned, in relationship to the dissertation process. They noted how having those "in control" of their situation (dissertation chair or manager) understand their emotional connection, based on time and energy invested, and their sense of control in the process, was crucial to their ability to work through their initial, sometimes strong, negative reactions to change. Attaining this acknowledgement and understanding was important in helping them emotionally open themselves to new information and perspectives that may ultimately make the project a stronger reflection of their abilities.

The workshop developed into a manifested parallel process of organizational change, provoking strong emotional reactions affected by participants' levels of investment in the proposed change; their personal value systems, cultural beliefs and traditions regarding authority; and their perceptions of control over the

change processes themselves. When participants had a high level of personal investment, such as their dissertation proposals, it increased their anxiety about the proposed changes and resulted in their increased resistance to the changes. Specific investments of time that had taken the participants away from their families tended to result in the strongest emotional reactions. These participants needed facilitation of their grief process regarding letting go of their emotional investment and their perceived losses. With the grief process being attended to and respected, participants were able to move to what they termed "a sense of hope" allowing them to "let go and go on," thus lessening their resistance to change.

Group processing revealed that personal values and cultural beliefs and traditions specifically about respect for and loyalty to authority figures also brought up strong emotional reactions that needed attention. One female Persian participant spoke about her need to respect authority figures regarding setting the structure for change processes. Her cultural beliefs and values indicated a willingness to be loyal to whoever is in authority, even if that was not the predominant culture among the group as a whole. This type of foundational ethic would likely be advantageous when the person is in a position where others are implementing change in the organization where she works; however, for the same reasons it became evident that it may be difficult for her to identify with and attend to the strong negative emotional reactions someone of another culture may have regarding change.

The African-American participants and those of Puerto Rican and Mexican dissent, tended to have a bias for action, believing that change is necessary for improvement, both personally and in organizations, perhaps due to the fact that they are in minority cultures within the United States, and therefore have necessarily had to fight for change toward inclusiveness in their organizations and communities. Processing the cultural differences regarding approaches to change led to increased sensitivity to other cultural perspectives and personal insights among participants in their own potential biases. The participants repeatedly noted, based on this conversation, how important it would be to attend to, attempt to understand, and facilitate discussion of proposed organizational changes as they relate to individuals' personal and cultural beliefs and values. Through understanding and honoring the diverse perspectives on change, a leader can connect with those in his or her charge and identify ways to reframe change in such a way that the members of the organization see a validation of their core values and beliefs.

Lastly, the level of perceived control the participants had regarding changes they had experienced affected their level of resistance or lack thereof. Participants discussed the need for having the necessary resources available to them through support and accurate honest information about changes prior to implementation in

order to reduce feelings of resentment about change decisions. Additionally, when participants were asked to be involved in the decision making process, planning, and implementation, they felt their input was taken into consideration, and thus valued. This collaborative approach ultimately resulted in increased feelings of inclusion and an internal locus of control among participants and increased engagement in and reduction of resistance to proposed change.

## Implication for Future Practice and Research

Although the conclusions garnered form this workshop were fairly consistent with existing research and the subject matter that is often taught didactically in educational leadership courses about management of change, the experiential nature of the workshop resulted in learning at sensory, affective, and cognitive levels. Due to the multiple methods of processing, participants were more likely to be impacted by the information, thus more likely to draw on this experience to inform the choices they make regarding managing change processes in their future educational leadership positions.

This would suggest that providing an experiential opportunity for learning about management of emotional reactions to change for doctoral educational leadership students may be an effective method of helping students become more self-reflexive and mindful regarding how emotional reactions to externally imposed change may affect those they will lead in the future. It also highlights the tendency toward resistance among individuals who are not engaged in the change processes in organizations. Future research, particularly qualitative case studies and phenomenological interviews, would improve our understanding of the effect of emotional reactions to externally imposed change and the effectiveness of experiential learning about management of emotional reactions to change on future educational leaders' approaches to change management.

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Timmor Sever earned his M.S. in mathematics from the University of Houston in 1989 prior to working as a research assistant in artificial intelligence. Currently he is a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at Sam Houston State University. Mr. Sever is the department chair of mathematics at Houston Community College Central Campus. His current research interests include intervention strategies that improve student success.