

Determinants of Resistance to Organizational Change: A Qualitative Study of a Non-governmental Organization in Pakistan

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the factors that can create hurdles in the process of bringing change in an organization. The research follows a case method approach and selected a local NGO working in Islamabad. In this study, respondents were selected from three different tiers and a qualitative methodology was employed for data evaluation. The research study identifies factors that cause resistance to organizational change. It also identifies resistors to change highlighted by different tiers in the organization. Our content analysis identified that poor communication, culture, status quo, time, and other factors were cited by majority of the respondents as being major sources of resistance to change. We discuss these findings to help local and expatriate managers in change management as this is the first research study with NGOs in the Pakistani context. We provide practical guidance to top management when they plan to initiate a change in their organization. The research study adds value by analyzing the case of a change process in a public development sector organization. Analysis and recommendations are provided.

Keywords

Causes of Resistance, Change Management, NGO, Organizational Change

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1. Introduction

Change is the only constant in the universe. Organizations, whether large or small, must change and adapt to survive [47]. In today's fast changing globalized world, managing change has gained importance everywhere, especially in South Asia's Pakistan as they are growing rapidly in terms of population and economics. Change management has also required challenging magnitudes and proportions [37] such as resetting entire systems or changing the whole human resources process of an organization [33]. Today, it has become a science to manage change [60]. One area that has intrigued researchers is the identification of factors that cause resistance to change. This basically occurs in an organization at 3 levels: individual, group and organizational [17] [45]. No matter at which level change is brought, it ultimately impacts

an organization throughout its culture at various levels [43].

Changes brought in an organization are not only complex, but are mostly implemented in response to changes in the external environment [25] [47]. The actual change process is rarely simple as there are many diverse stakeholders with multiple motives [43]. The result is that resistance through different levels of hierarchy is unavoidable [11]. This study first identifies different reasons that create resistance to organizational change, then tries to dig deeper to find out why these particular reasons have led to resistance and how these can be avoided or at least reduced.

This study explores different factors that create resistance to organizational change in a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Most of the studies on the topic have been carried out for commercial organizations and NGOs have generally

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been ignored. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature. The review of literature identifies different factors causing resistance to change. That is followed by a section on research methodology, which provides details about the techniques and tools used for analysis. The penultimate section gives findings of the study, while the last section concludes the discussion.

2. Potential Change Resistors

The work of researchers such as [36] as well as those [59] have identified different processes which allow organizations to bring about change in their processes. Another equally important issue for them is to ensure that the change sticks and perpetuates itself [68], a process called homeostasis [32]. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the top management to ensure that the time and money spent on change is not wasted, resistance is reduced and the requirements for which it was initiated in the first place are fulfilled [43] [50].

Whenever the topic of change management and factors causing resistance to change are discussed, one factor that is most mentioned is culture and another is stress which people tend to resist [30]. According to Hofstede (1993), culture is the mental programming (software) of human beings (brain), the way they think, the way they behave, and how they carry themselves. Culture can be defined as the combination of factors that bind people together and serve as their cohesive identity [23]. It identifies the pattern on the basis of which individuals living together in a society are likely to behave [27]. It covers all the factors including norms, mores, values and beliefs [26]. Culture not only differs from country to country, but people living in the same country can also have different cultures. Some studies [9] have identified that when we talk of culture in the perspective of a country as huge as India, not even two states seem to have a similar culture. Like countries, companies also have a culture of their own and this culture predominantly identifies the way in which people behave and interact with each other [32]. Proper development of culture takes years of hard work and interventions and once it is in place, trying to change it again require some serious explanation and grave reason to be justified [37]. We propose: *“the more rigid the culture of an organization, the greater is the resistance of employees to change.”*

The next factor that may create resistance to change is rumor generation. People who work in an organization obtain prior information about decisions from carriers in an organization. These carriers are mostly workers at lower levels. However, the quality of information that travels through these carriers is not in its purest form [3], is corrupted, and has so many versions. This distorted version is likely to create resistance

in the mind of employees [32]. Over the years managers have started using an informal tool of communication, known as grapevine, to have a tinge of the rumors that exist in the organization [30]. We propose that *“as more rumors spread across the organization, more people will add their versions to it and the greater will be the resistance of employees to change.”*

Another factor that creates resistance to organizational change is the incompetence of a change agent. The smaller the capabilities of a change agent, the more skeptical the employees would be about the change process and consequently, the greater would be the resistance against it. Even when a change manager is experienced, the change is invariably so unpredictable that he/she always faces a unique situation each time [24]. The result is that the employees working in an organization, who undergo change may always have some reservations [63]. We propose: *“the more competent the change agent, the lesser is the resistance of employees to change.”* Some studies have [52] identified that of all the employees in the world, Asian employees are the ones who highly question the ability of the change agent in bringing change in the organization. It is because of the fact that the employees working in Asia are mostly “hand to mouth”. Their whole financial status and the wellbeing of their family depends upon their jobs.

Though NGOs nowadays are engaged in multifaceted activities [54], they do not have a constant source of funding. They do not earn through business ventures and mostly rely upon donors for funding [51]. Moreover, NGOs, compared with for-profit organizations, have a high operating cost [63]. Therefore, they do not always have the resources to train their own change agents [42] or to develop and maintain a full-fledged change management department with adequate competencies, financial resources and skills [66]. We propose: *“the greater the feeling of resource constraints in an organization, the greater is the resistance of employees to change with a sincere intent to preserve resources.”*

In today’s scenario, among other resources, time is a highly valuable commodity for organizations. Nowadays, organizations face tough competition [14] and they initiate change to remain abreast of others through a proper and well-developed plan. Because of increasing pressure, multinationals have to be certain about every step they take and every change they implement [64]. This requires time. The fact is that resources such as money and human capital can be developed, but once time is lost it can never be regained [25]. There is another dimension to the discussion when employees resisting change because of limited time is a pattern that can be traced to the entire globe [21]. This is because they believe that the changes being introduced do not add value to the welfare work they are doing. We

propose: *“the greater the time constraint, the greater will be the resistance of employees to change.”*

Lack of communication is also an important resistor for change. Lack of communication with the employees depicts lack of trust [42]. In reaction, they become secretive and do not share their feelings with managers. This leads to a spiral effect in which both the management and the employees hide information resulting in a communication gap [9]. Whenever any change process is implemented by an organization, it has to make sure that it is properly communicated and employees fully understand the necessity and reason for change. Many times, employees feel that organization is already performing well and no change is required [66]. This feeling leads to resistance to change and only a strategy communicating the need for change can reduce it. By communication, the process becomes more transparent and employees are in a better condition to accept the policies and decisions of management [34]. We propose: *“the greater the communication gap in understanding the reasons for change, the greater is the resistance of employees to change”*.

Whenever change occurs, it disturbs the status quo, in which the employees feel comfortable [8]. It interferes with their normal routine [64] and forces them out of their comfort zone [22], creating discomfort and mental anguish [43].

Organizations, of every shape and size, have political groups or sub-groups with transparent boundaries [41]. These groups are formed by people coming together due to some tangible and/or intangible common interest or personal goal [59]. These political dynamics can also influence the management decision-making process [69]. These groups develop their own leaders whose ultimate responsibility is to work for the welfare of the in-group members [9]. The response of a group to a change initiative will be proportionate to the change that affects them. Furthermore, groups working in an organization have different amounts of powers [59]. Every time a change is brought, different groups respond differently [32]. If the change leads to loss of power, it will resist it [27]. However, if a group is likely to gain from the change process, it would support it [64]. This analysis is equally valid for individuals and their reaction to change. We propose: *“the more powerful the political groups, the greater is the resistance of employees to change that may pose a threat to their authority. Greater the negative effect of change on the power of an individual, the greater is his/her resistance to change”*.

Organizational leadership has a very important role to play in the implementation of a change process [25]. For the change process to materialize, it is crucial that an organization knows exactly the change it would implement. This is where the role of leadership comes in [9]. It is the confidence of the leadership that flows down the organization. If the leadership

is confident about change, it helps the change agents to implement the change process successfully [60]. We propose: *“the greater the competence and commitment of leaders to change, the lesser is the resistance of employees to change”*.

Fear of job loss is another factor causing resistance to organizational change. Hundreds of examples can be found where an organization announced a change process and the only reason that made the employees resist the change was fear of losing the job [64]. When the interventions related to the introduction of new technology were implemented in Starbucks, employees resisted the change though they knew the new machine would help them perform better [60]. It was later found that the employees were relating the change to the last downsizing in the organization [33]. The result is that the organizations are trying to reduce the resistance of employees by guaranteeing that they would not lose their jobs as a result of the change [55] [56]. We propose: *“the greater the fear of job loss, the greater is the resistance of employees to change.”*

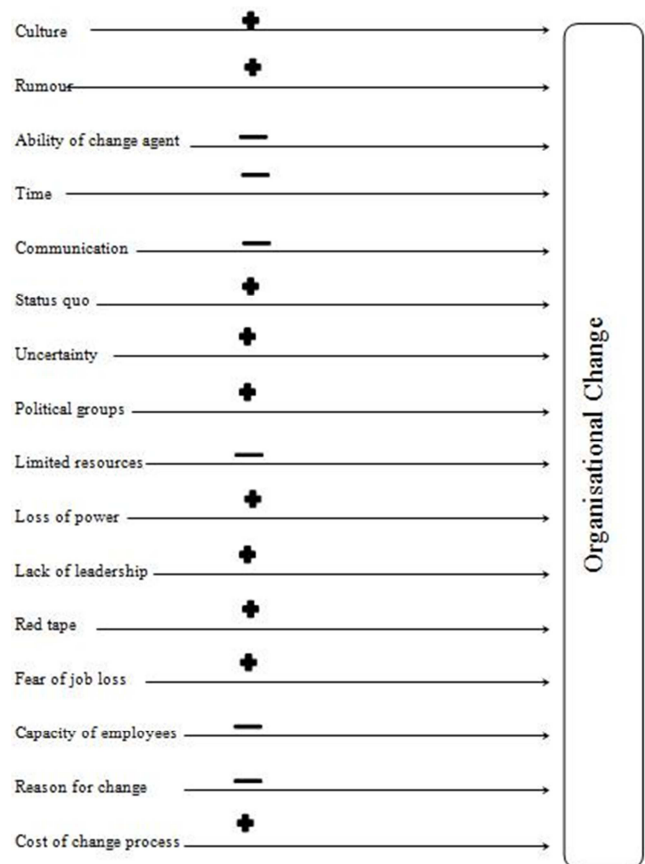


Figure 1. Potential change resistors and their relationship with organizational change.

Nowadays, emphasis is being focused on the ability of an organization to learn [69]. However, learning is not something spontaneous in nature [63]. An organization has to develop mechanisms to ensure that the employees have the

capacity to learn [57]. The employees should be trained in such a way that they have the competency to fulfill the future requirements of the organization [23]. We propose: *“the lesser the capacities of employees to learn, the greater is the resistance of employees to change”*.

Absorptive and learning capacities increase the probability of accepting change [52]. However, there are certain costs associated with the change process, which the management needs to keep in mind [25] [63]. If the cost are huge, the change management activity will be considered a waste of precious resources by the employees, who would like these to be diverted to more “productive” activities. We propose: *“the greater the cost of bringing about change in an organization, the greater is the resistance of employees to change”*.

These factors along with the positive and negative relationships with organizational change have been given in the Figure 1.

3. Research Methodology and Results

The research for this study is qualitative in nature and uses content analysis technique for data analysis. For this purpose, data collected from respondents was entered into NVIVO software based on similarity and was disaggregated into different themes. The focus of research is on local NGOs working in Islamabad. One NGO that had recently undertaken several change initiatives and was also willingness to participate in the research activity was selected for field work. The NGO had recently implemented some change initiatives. These were the revision of pay packages and the restructuring of organizational structure that resulted

in lower tiers. 12 interviews were conducted in the NGO. These were from different tiers in the organization including top (director), middle (program coordinator) and lower (assistant program officer) level management. The sample size was selected keeping in mind the fact that average size of mid-size NGO working in Pakistan is 30 to 35. This division allowed understanding of different perspectives from all cadres of the organization and to have a holistic view about change in the organization. While the top management initiated the change, the mid-level managed it and faced resistance from the employees. Sometimes, they themselves resisted the change. The lower level employees faced the most impact of the change process.

The tool used for collecting data was semi-structured questionnaire for conducting interviews. The researchers used an adapted version of “effective change questionnaire” provided by Potter (2001). Appropriate changes were made in the questionnaire to adapt it to local requirements. The questionnaire related to the change process implemented in the organization, what helped to implement the change process, what created resistance in the change process and how different factors causing resistance were dealt with. The employees were asked to refer to the change initiatives implemented in the organization in the last 2 to 3 years.

During the course of interviews, the respondents cited fifteen factors out of which 10 were cited by 5 or more respondents that are resistors to change. Each respondent was asked which factor he/she rated in order of priority. The factors and the number of respondents who cited them have been given in Table 1 and visually summarized in Figure 2.

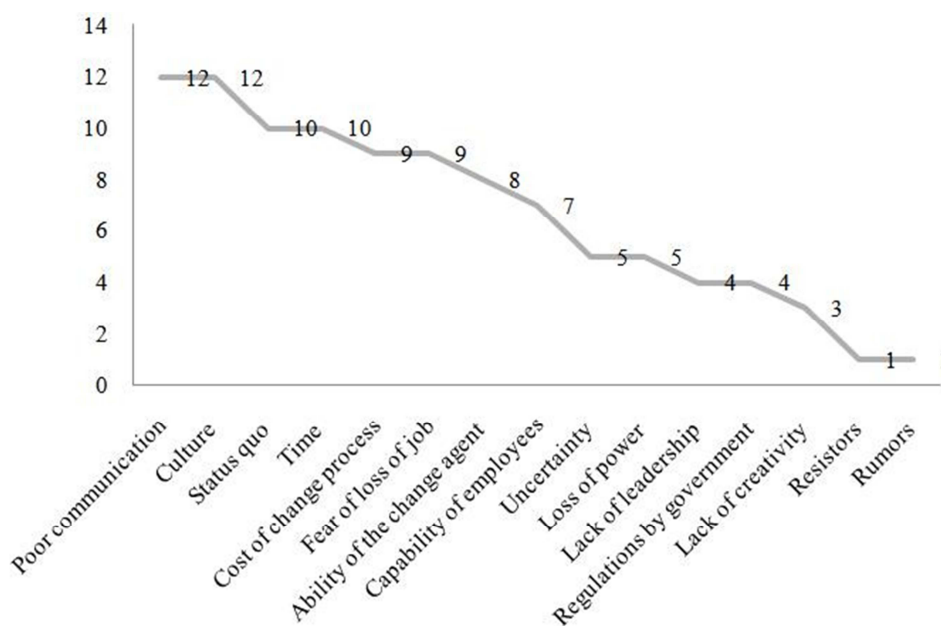


Figure 2. Number of respondents citing a theme.

Poor communication: Out of the twelve respondents that were interviewed, all cited poor communication as an important factor that creates resistance to organizational change. However, reasons given by different respondents were different. Five identified that if the change is not communicated properly, employees do not understand it. They said that change, being a complex process, should be communicated in detail: its different steps, their sequence and how these would be performed. “Every little detail related to the change process should be communicated”, they argued.

Table 1. Determinants of resistance to organizational change.

S. NO	Factors	No. of respondents	Percentage
1	Poor communication	12	100
2	Culture	12	100
3	Status quo	10	83
4	Time	10	83
5	Cost of change process	9	75
6	Fear of loss of job	9	75
7	Ability of the change agent	8	67
8	Capability of employees	7	58
9	Uncertainty	5	42
10	Loss of power	5	42
11	Lack of leadership	4	33
12	Regulations by government	4	33
13	Lack of creativity	3	25
14	Resistors	1	8
15	Rumors	1	8

* Only those factors that had 5 or more citations have been discussed.

The next three respondents brought out the issue of trust in change management and related it with communication. They argued that if the management did not communicate properly, it inadvertently sent the message that it did not trust the employees, who were the subject of change rather than its owners. Consequently, they develop resistance to change that is being implemented in a top-down manner.

The question of communicating the benefits of change was also mentioned by two respondents. If the employees believe that their organization is already performing well, they will not support the change. One of the respondents opined: “It is very important that the benefits of the change process both for employees and organization are identified beforehand. This can act as a motivator for employees to be a part of the change process”.

Culture: The next important factor identified by the respondents is culture. Like poor communication, all the respondents cited culture as being an important resistant to the organizational change process. Out of the twelve respondents, five identified that the success of change process in an organization is contingent upon its culture. One respondent said: “culture of our organization identifies what we can and cannot do. Whether we would accept a change or

not depends on the flexibility of our culture”. Four respondents mentioned that sometimes, organizations have such a rigid culture that employees start agitating at a mere mention of change. One respondent said: “it is very important that the culture of the organization is not rigid and accepts change”.

The remaining three respondents had different views about the change process and resistance to organizational change. They added that whether the culture of an organization, whether flexible or rigid, is affected by the culture of the country where it exists as a sub-set. If the national culture accepts/rejects change, so will the organizations. One respondent added: “Pakistan’s culture has influenced our organization’s culture. It includes our capacity to accept change as well”.

Status quo: The next factor cited by respondents was status quo. Out of twelve respondents, ten mentioned this as a contributory factor for organizational resistance. They said that the employees felt comfortable with the current way of doing things. This makes them confident about the possible outcome of certain decisions and activities. Some respondents added that if the management wants to change the status quo, it should ensure that the employees start doing things according to the new ways. One of the respondents added “only planning and implementing the change process does not get the job done. The success of change process depends on whether the change is reinforced or not”.

Time: The next factor that creates resistance to organizational change is time. It was mentioned by ten respondents, who were of the view that time is very important and should not be wasted in change management. It puts additional burden on the employees and distracts their attention from constructive and nation-building activities. One of the respondents said “we are here to work for the betterment of the society and not to implement changes in the organization. If we would do so, we would waste our time on non-substantial activities”.

Cost of the change process: In the list of factors causing resistance to organizational change, the next most cited factor (nine respondents) is the cost of change process. Cost is taken in its narrow sense as financial cost only. Respondents commented that NGOs were resource constrained and if they spent money on issues that did not benefit the society, the donors might withdraw their funding. One respondent said: “donors provide funds to help the affected members of the society, not to spend on fancy change processes”. Another one added “if donors would know that the capital they are providing is being spent on anything else other than betterment of society, it is highly likely that they would stop

providing funds”.

Fear of job loss: If the employees have the slightest feeling that the change process can result in downsizing, they resist it. One of the respondents said “whenever any change initiative is announced, fear of losing job is always there. Nowadays, organizations including NGOs are trying to become robust. For that, they introduce more and more change initiatives. Most if not all of them result in flattening of hierarchy and reduction of workforce. Being “hand to mouth”, it is necessary to make sure that we resist any change process that can get us laid off”.

Ability of the change agent: The next factor for ensuring successful change is ability of the change agent. This was cited by eight respondents. The future of change in a company depends not only on the kind of change being brought, but also how this is being managed. The latter part depends on the ability of the team bringing about change. The respondents added that the probability of the success of a change process could be forecasted by evaluating the number of change processes that were being implemented by the change agent team.

Capacity of the employees: Seven out of twelve respondents cited the capacity of employees as a factor that creates resistance to organizational change. Some respondents identified that employees working in an organization have a certain skill set, that the organization would like are regularly updated. One example given by one respondent to elaborate his point is: “Suppose the employees of an organization have skills A. organization wants them to have a set of skills named D. The best way to do this would be to go from A to B then to C and ultimately to D. However, if the organization wants to jump directly from A to D, this would create problems for both the employees and the organization. The employees when at Skills A and asked to perform according to D, would not be able to do so and would feel stress”. They, therefore, would resist any change initiative announced by the organization to update their skills. The organization should develop trainings in such a way which helps the employees to move step by step rather than taking big leaps.

Uncertainty: The next factor cited by most respondents (five) was uncertainty, which can jeopardize the success of the change process. However, those with a long track record with an organization may be able to pre-empt the outcome of a change initiative. One respondent said “working with an organization for this long helps us to forecast what can be a good change and what cannot be positive. Management should listen to us when making such decisions”.

Loss of power: The next factor that was cited by most respondents was loss of power. 5 out of 12 respondents cited the loss of power as a factor that created resistance to

organizational change. People form groups because they think that they would have more power and would be more successful if they would be around people who have power. One of the respondents added “people from the same caste and groups come together to form political groups. These political groups are informal in nature and are usually formed to gain or retain power. These groups are formed at places like cafeteria and informal get-togethers. The formation of these groups is mostly in such a manner that people from the lower tiers try to obtain good grace of their higher tier group members. In response, the higher tier managers look after them”.

This kind of behavior does not lie in groups only but also exist at the individual level as well. If the organization announces any change process and these change processes are designed in such a manner that they would take power from these individuals and would shift power to other individuals of the organization; thus it is highly likely that they would resist the change process. Power is something that is very important for the members of the organization. Power enables people to make decision in such a manner that these decisions would benefit them and their departments. Similar behavior can be seen at the top management level.

4. Conclusion

Out of the twelve factors that create resistance to organizational change, 2 factors were cited by all twelve respondents. These were culture and poor communication. Respondents identified that these two factors create the most resistance to organizational change. The next two factors, status quo and time, were mentioned by 10 respondents each. The next two factors that obtained 9 citations were cost of change process and fear of loss of job. The next factor that received the most citation was ability of the change agents (8). Capability of employees was the factor that received (7) citations. Uncertainty and loss of power were the last two factors and both received 5 citations each. In addition to the factors that have been identified, there are also many other resistors to organizational change, but these have not been discussed in detail in the study due to low citations received from respondents.

We conclude from this study that change management is a very sensitive and subtle process that requires care and ownership. This comes from a good communication strategy and confidence in the employees given by the top management. The reasons for change should be understood by all the stakeholders. This will happen when the employees understand that the time and cost invested in the change process adds value and they will be able to deliver their services in a more productive manner. Nurturing a culture

with that has an inherent ability to adapt is crucial for accepting change. Pre- and post-change process trainings to the employees ensure that the change process sticks and becomes a permanent part of the organization. Updating skills of the employees through training also gives confidence to the employees, removes apprehensions and uncertainty about the future and fear of job loss. Management should develop knowledge and merit based organization, where the employees are rewarded for this skills and competence. This will nurture strong and cohesive organization with minimum politicking and power games.

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