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Identifying critical HR practices impacting employee perception and commitment during organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – Prior research in the area of organizational change highlights the critical role played by HR practices during organizational change as it may require altering employee behavior to support the change direction. human resource (HR) function is considered to be well positioned to influence employee behavior by institutionalizing HR practices that support change. Further there is a significant body of literature that suggests that employee behavior is significantly influenced by the perceptions of HR practices during change. HR practices which create positive employee perceptions increase employee commitment to change. The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework that identifies critical HR practices that support organizational change and examines their impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

Design/methodology/approach – First, an extensive literature review on organizational change at macro level has been done to identify critical practices desired from key organizational members during organizational change. Second, a case for importance of HR function as a key organizational member during change is presented. Further literature on effectiveness of HR practices adopted by HR professionals during organizational change is examined to find out the gap areas. Third, literature on employee perception and commitment to change is examined to find out possible linkages to HR practices during organizational change. Finally, eight propositions are presented to build an integrated conceptual framework identifying critical HR practices during organizational change and their impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

Findings – The study suggests that HR practices undertaken in the area of culture, leadership, cross functional integration, training, communication and technology if introduced and implemented will positively influence employee perception reducing resistance and increasing commitment to change. Therefore assessing employee perception about critical HR practices at different stages of change initiation, implementation and consolidation can enable understanding about employee commitment to change. This would also help HR professionals understand how effective the HR practices implemented during change have been.

Originality/value – This framework can be used by the researchers and practitioners to study, guide, frame and model empirical research into the area of studying critical HR practices during organizational change. So far literature provides a generic view of desired organizational practices during change. Moreover there are few studies available on employee perception about HR practices implemented during organizational change and its impact on employee commitment to change. The framework presented in this paper would help explore the effectiveness of specific HR practices implemented during change by evaluating its impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

Keywords Change management, Organizational change, Change-related HR practices, HR practices during organizational change, Role of human resources during organizational change, Strategic HR

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Since the advent of globalization the business environment has undergone drastic changes both in terms of complexity and dynamism. Organizations are grappling with changes in market conditions, workforce demographics and diversity, technological innovations, increased focus on customer and quality, shortage of talent and economical changes (Noe, 2002). Thus it is essential for organizations to continuously modify their business strategy, policies and practices and align with the changing demands of business environment, achieve long-term sustainability and overall organizational effectiveness. In other words organizations are forced to make and manage change effectively on a continuous basis (Bridges and Mitchell, 2000; Kanter, 1985). Despite the growing need of organizations to manage change effectively 70 percent of the change efforts fail (Beer and Nohria, 2000) and this rate has been consistent over the years. One of the most commonly cited reasons of failure of change implementation is inadequately addressing people-related issues (Spiker and Lesser, 1995; Kotter, 1995). The importance of employees, their psychological responses and their behavior during organizational change has been acknowledged widely post 1990s (Tetenbaum, 1998), however, practicing managers fail to pay enough emphasis on these issues (Becker and Gerhart, 1996). This view is also echoed by others who have carried out empirical research in this area. For example Shum *et al.* (2008) did a study on implementation of a project on customer relationship management (CRM) in three banks in New Zealand and found that organizations focus on technological issues and neglect people-related issues.

Ulrich (1997) opined that since any change management activity is centered on people, human resource (HR) professionals can play a significant role during organizational change. This view has gained importance particularly in the last decade. A vast number of researchers have said that HR professionals can enhance employee's capability to manage change and facilitate effective change management (Kalyani and Sahoo, 2011; Fitz-enz and Davison, 2002; Ulrich, 1997). This is mainly because managing change involves managing employee behavior and prior research suggests there is a strong association between HR practices and employee behavior (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011). Prior research also highlights that HR practices have a positive effect on employees' attitudes and contribution to enhanced firm performance (MacDuffie, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994, 1998; Ichniowski *et al.*, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Delery and Doty, 1996; Youndt *et al.*, 1996; Huselid and Becker, 1996; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Delaney and Huselid, 1996). Since managing employee attitude toward change such that there is more readiness and less resistance remains a primary agenda for any change effort, this study proposes that HR professionals can add value by implementing HR practices which positively influence employee attitudes toward change. Previous research in the area of critical HR practices during change implementation is scarce. Researchers have presented a more generic view stating that HR should provide leadership and develop necessary capabilities within the organization during organizational change (Ulrich, 1997; Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). Similarly Brockbank (1999) said that HR should become strategically proactive by fostering innovation and creativity, facilitate merger and acquisition and lead in creating linkages between market requirements and internal capabilities during change. Tiong (2005) said that during organizational change human potential could be maximized through communication, supervisor and peer support, employee empowerment, active execution, training and educating employees to cope with stress and create more buy in.

Role of HRs during mergers and acquisition has also been highlighted by many researchers. For example Aguilera and Dencker (2004) felt that human side was much neglected during M&A and brought a framework to evaluate the interlinkages between HR strategies. Similarly Dauber (2012) emphasize the importance of culture during mergers and acquisition. Antila (2006) highlight importance of HR during M&A as it essentially involves many people related issues.

Therefore, identifying specific HR practices that are particularly effective during organizational change and how these impacted employee perception and commitment to change becomes a relevant area of investigation. This paper first highlights how and why over the years HR function has emerged as an important organizational function to facilitate change. It then highlights the significant change management practices drawn from macro change literature and links it to HR practices. It further examines the linkages between HR practices initiated during organizational change and employee perception and commitment to change. The paper finally presents a conceptual framework based on propositions which can become the base of empirical research in future.

Methodology
The purpose of this paper is to review literature in the field of HR practices impacting employee perception and commitment during organizational change. The sample of journals was drawn from the ABDC List which comprises 2,767 different journal titles, divided into four categories of quality, A*: 6.9 percent; A: 20.8 percent; B: 28.4 percent; and C: 43.9 percent journals such that it could be regarded as "certified knowledge." Certified knowledge describes knowledge that has been submitted to the critical review of fellow researchers and has succeeded in gaining their approval (Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). Keywords such as "Organizational Change," "Change Management," "Role of Human Resources during organizational change," "HR practices during organizational change," "change related HR practices," "HR as change agent," "perception and commitment," "émployee perception about HR practices," "HR practices and organizational performance" were used. The studies conducted were identified through online database of ProQuest published in English language. Papers published from 1998 to 2013 were considered for this review. At the same time to avoid the risk of excluding important and meaningful contributions in the field of HR practices during organizational change and employee perception and commitment, we analyzed and included frequently cited work (journals, books, magazines) found in the above selected papers. These did not appear in our search using above mentioned keywords yet were found meaningful and therefore included in this study. Papers, which did not include the terms "organizational change" or "human resources" in their text, were automatically excluded from this review as they were considered irrelevant for this review. Book reviews, interviews and article summaries were excluded in the review. We also did not include smaller, less cited, less known or very new journals in this study. A total of 133 journals were considered for this review.

1.1 Emergence of HR function as a change enabler
HR function has been a function in transition since almost last six decades largely because the nature of organizations has moved from industrial to knowledge based entities. This transition within the HR function over last many decades coupled with changing business environment has led to change in the roles, responsibilities,

expectations and positioning of HR professionals. Today HR professionals are expected to play a strategic role by moving from being reactive to becoming proactive (Budhwar *et al.*, 2009). This trend has transformed HR at every level making it critical for HR professionals to understand and implement organizational and cultural change (Anson, 2000).

Over the past two decades researches done in the area of HRM and organizational change have highlighted that change models and Human Resource Management (HRM) are interrelated (Rees, 2008; Rees and Johari, 2010). This is because HRM systems support management of employees, and employees are at the core of any change process (Tetenbaum, 1998; Wheatley, 1992). Also this interrelationship is required to ensure that today's HR is focussed on strategic alignment and impact and capacity for changes (Ruona and Gibson, 2004). An organization's functioning depends on the actions of its members and it can change only when members' behavior changes (Goodman and Dean, 1982). Since there exists a strong association between HR practices and employee behavior (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011), the HR function can become an important change enabler within the organization. Infact Ellis (2007) has opined that boundaries between HR activities and change management are increasingly becoming blurred.

The emerging significance of role of HR as change enabler is well documented and the early emphasis on the role of the HR manager as "changemaker" occurred in Storey's (1992) study . Later, Ulrich (1993) proposed a conceptual model focussing on value addition by HR and its movement from operational to strategic participation where one dimension was that of a change agent. Similarly Ulrich *et al.* (1995) suggested that the familiarity HR professionals possess about organizational culture and employees makes them good facilitators to support those who are responsible for managing change. Walker (1992) stated that apart from being responsive to management, customer centric and business partner, HR professionals need to lead and implement change by becoming an integral part of management.

That the HR function has an important role to play during times of change is strongly represented in prior research. However, it is also important to review how employees react to change. How employee's reactions can be managed positively during organizational change is an important area for review (Armenakis and Bedain, 1999). Tiong (2005) pointed out the importance of employee well-being during change which reduces employee stress, motivates them to work efficiently, engages them positively and creates organizational loyalty. Linking this to HR practices, Becker (2001) pointed out the need to establish the entire HR architecture with an emphasis on establishing a climate of trust in order to remove fear about the adverse impacts of change from employees' minds.

Multiple researches have been done on the role of HR as change agent and present a diverse view. For example, Caldwell (2001) suggested a fourfold typology of role of HR as change agent i.e. champions, adapters, consultants and synergists. He said that the role HR plays during organizational change could be categorized into soft model which considers vital need to integrate policies with objectives of business treating employees as important and the hard model which considers that HR policies, systems and initiatives should be closely integrated with business strategy. Becker and Saks (1996) indicated that HR through its practices should take advantage of their influential position in manipulating organizational change. According to him, HR should be more attuned to the ambiguities and uncertainties found in organizational change processes as well as sensitive to employees'

emotional encounters during change. Prior studies attribute successful and sustainable change to effectively addressing people's behaviors, underlying values and beliefs. This suggests that HR can play a critical role in attending to this need of influencing people behavior and attitude.

Change management literature also reflects the convergence of organization development and HR theory and practice during times of organizational change (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011; Becker, 2001; Barney, 1991; Conner and Ulrich, 1996, Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). Research suggests that HR practices can considerably shape the behavioral aspects of the change (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011; Rizvi, 2010; Barratt-Pugh and Gakere, 2013) engaging employees in change efforts, building commitment and thereby enhancing the organizations capability to change (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003). Research also suggests that leaders, managers, OD specialists and those actively involved in implementing change can foster effective change management by clearly communicating the organization's vision, carefully designing change initiatives, and engaging both top management and employees throughout the process (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003; Tiong, 2005; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Becker, 2001; Farquharson and Baum, 2002; Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Appelbaum *et al.*, 1998; Covin and Kilmann, 1990; Brisson-Banks, 2010).

Instead researchers point out that HR practices during change should be launched keeping in mind the organization's strategic perspective, understanding business priorities and being a part of leadership team (Rees and Johari, 2010). This goes a long way during change process if implemented well by giving HR managers an influential position. These studies also found that employees expressed that senior managers should clarify HR outcomes and how they contribute to organizational performance. Further HR should change its communication to engage employees in people-related processes, be more open, be initiators of ideas rather than followers and integrate organizational goals and HR strategies vertically (Rees and Johari, 2010; Armstrong, 2000; Wright and Snell, 1998). HR should identify potential resistors and reaffirm them throughout the change process (Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2009). Similarly some researchers have talked about specific HR practices identified during change such as managing conflict and acquiring knowledge about competitors, customers, products, technology and sources of competitive advantage (Long and Ismail, 2012). The vast array of research done in the area of change related HR practices, give a compartmentalized view. Therefore the authors of this paper felt the need to review the entire literature and categorize HR practices into specific areas which are critical for HR professionals to focus on during times of change. Above literature has been summarized and presented in a diagrammatical representation in Figure 1. Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the need and importance of role of HR as change enabler.

Based on the summary of above literature from prior research the authors make the first proposition of this paper as given below in *P1*. We borrowed from the work of Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Wright *et al.* (1994) and Ulrich *et al.* (2009) to operationalize HR practices as interventions/ initiatives and actions aligned with business strategy undertaken to develop, motivate and retain employees and used as a means to shape employee perceptions, attitudes and behaviors:

> *P1.* HR practices undertaken in the area of culture, leadership, cross functional integration, training, communication and technology if introduced and implemented during organizational change will positively influence employee behavior.
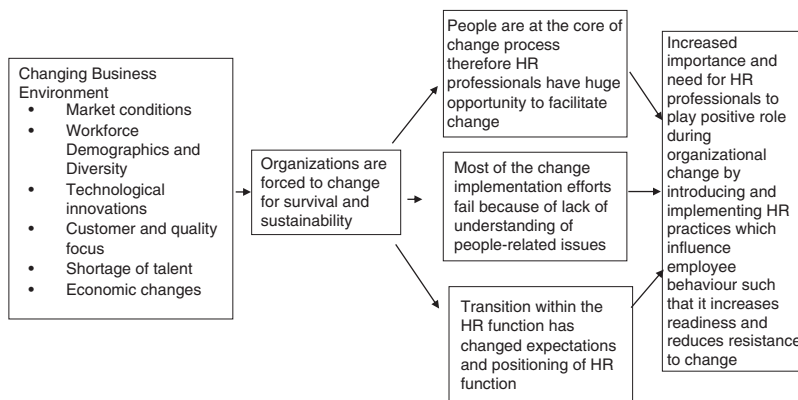
Identifying
critical HR
practices

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Figure 1.
Growing importance
of Human
Resources during
organizational
change

2. Employee perceptions about HR practices during organizational change

2.1 Perception as a concept

The fundamental nature of change where employee behavior and attitude play an important role evokes the formation of perceptions, which influences employees' response to change. Based on their perception, employees respond by altering their attitudes to the organizational change either accepting it willingly by showing readiness or resistance to change. Conceptually perception is defined as a process by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment (Robbins *et al.*, 2009). Through the processes of perception and attribution, individuals form beliefs regarding their environment that in turn regulates their behavior (Bernstein and Burke, 1989). The dominant role that perception of environment has on individuals' attitudes and beliefs was noted by (Spreitzer, 1996) quoting "people actively perceive their environments and are influenced by their perceptions rather than by some objective reality." The predisposition of employees to form reactions to change either by showing readiness or resistance to change too is largely influenced by these perceptions.

2.2 Perception and change outcomes

Linkages of employee perception and organizational change can be found in resistance to change literature. Employees respond to the happenings in their environment and make assumptions about the change process. These individually held assumptions and expectations comprise employees' perceptions about change and if developed positively are said to lead to commitment to change process, increasing readiness to change thereby reducing resistance. In their work "Creating readiness for organizational change," Armenakis (1993) observed that readiness is the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort and is described in terms of the employees perceptions (beliefs, attitudes, intentions). These perceptions either facilitate or impede the effectiveness of a change intervention (Armenakis, 1993). As demonstrated in the Coch and French (1953) experiment, creating readiness involves proactive efforts to influence the beliefs, attitudes and finally the behavior of a change target. Previously Nadler *et al.* (1980) stated the need to affect behavior in the change process and Robertson *et al.* (1993) found a positive relationship between individual behavior change and organizational change outcome.

Burke and Litwin (1992) emphasized on greater consideration of the importance of individual behaviors, needs, values and motivation in influencing the success of organizational change efforts. Bordia *et al.* (2004) conducted a research into employees' involvement in change which confirmed a positive influence of perceptions and acceptance of change. In addition, employees experiencing negative perceptions fail to take ownership of the change leading to resistance and implementation hurdles. Both Giangreco and Peccei (2005) and Oreg (2006) accounted that individual perceptions of both the personal and organizational implications and outcomes of the change directs their reaction to the change. Thus building positive employee beliefs, perception and attitude is critical for successful change interventions (Armenakis, 1993).

2.3 HR practices and employee perception in context of change

Previous research consistently shows the positive effects of HR practices on employees' attitudes and contribution to enhanced firm performance (MacDuffie, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994, 1998; Ichniowski *et al.*, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Delery and Doty, 1996; Youndt *et al.*, 1996; Huselid and Becker, 1996; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Delaney and Huselid, 1996). The linkages between HR practices and employee behavior are evident across the available volume of HR related studies. These studies present a univocal argument that HR can help to transform attitudes and perceptions and convert employees into partners in the transformation process.

Further there is a significant body of literature that suggests that employee behavior is not influenced alone by HR practices but also by the perceptions of these practices (Chang, 1999; Gartner and Nollen, 1989). Macey and Schneider (2008) suggested that employees' perceptions of HR practices are likely to precede the employee attitudes and behavior links in the causal chain. That is, in order for HR practices to desirably impact employee attitudes and behaviors, they first have to be perceived and interpreted subjectively by employees in ways that will translate HR practices into desired organizational outcomes. Iles *et al.* (1990), suggested that the degree to which employees positively perceive the HRM practices determines the strength of their recognition and association with the organization and its causes. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) acknowledged the role employee perceptions play in translating HR practices into desired outcomes. Schneider and Bowen (1985) suggested in their studies if employees have positive perceptions of the HR practices, they are likely to put more effort and resources in delivering desired output. This suggest that the impact of HR practices is not likely to be involuntary and direct, always as expected; instead, it will be determined by the meaning that employees affix to those practices.

The relationship between HR practices and employee perception, as well as organizational change, may ultimately depend on the attributions employees make about the HR practices they encounter. HR practices are observed to be employed toward employee wellbeing and hence become all the more evident and noticeable during times of change. Employees' perceptions of these HR practices during change are important because this perception is closely related to employees' acceptance of change during the period of change implementation. Eby *et al.* (2000) noted that employees' perceptions of organizational readiness for change can serve to facilitate or undermine an organizational change effort.

Prior research to some extent highlights that HR professionals have been slow to embrace the new roles particularly when it comes to creating an adaptive culture with a capacity for rapid change (Eichinger and Ulrich, 1996). Further, Zaccaro and Banks (2004) examined conceptual and empirical studies in the area of change and highlighted

gaps between research and practice. Researchers argued that the ability to manage change is critical for success, however, HR professionals do not consider it an important competency. There were a number of inconsistencies and ambiguities in the area of HR strategies, policies and approaches as they directed at and affected employees involved in managing change. Doyle (2002) in their research suggested that there is an overdue need for comprehensive HR strategy to manage those who manage change. Flannery *et al.* (1996) reported that line managers saw HR as a non-player in the change process, and a hindrance to effective organizational change, as they had no understanding of the strategic management issues.

Ogilvie and Stork (2003) reviewed the history of roles played by HR professionals starting from 1800s and concluded that HR has undergone varied tensions around what role it has in managing change and whose interest it should represent. The researchers argued that due to these tensions very often HR has played a reactive role trying to bring greater fit and stability by catering to the interest and issues of different constituencies as the sources of pressure changed. In this context researchers highlight that various groups like workers, managers and stakeholders must consider each other's preferences as they make decisions and plan action. Poon and Rowley (2010) state that HRM change pace in Asia has been slow and sporadic.

Past research has attempted to address how the HR function can add value during change. For example, Conner and Ulrich (1996), Lawler and Mohrman (2003) suggested that HR should provide leadership, develop necessary capabilities and implement change. Brockbank (1999) suggested that HR can become strategically proactive by fostering innovation and creativity, facilitate merger and acquisition and lead in creating linkages between market requirements and internal capabilities during organizational change.

To sum up, research suggests employees do not hold positive perception about the role played by HR function during organizational change or HR practices implemented during organizational change. Employees perceive HR practices during organizational change as slow and sporadic. This study thus focusses on the critical HR practices that the HR function should focus on while designing and implementing HR practices to support change.

3. Identifying HR practices critical during organizational change
Studies on HR practices during organizational change are more generic. There is a dearth of literature available on which specific HR practices were implemented during change and what was the result? Therefore, for the purpose of identifying HR practices critical during organizational change, the macro change management literature was examined.

Factors which create positive employee perception among employees during organizational change have been widely researched in the past. These factors can be categorized into six organizational factors which interact with employee perception about organizational change which can either be positive or negative thereby leading to success or failure of change implementation process (Shum *et al.*, 2008). Thus we suggest change related HR practices undertake in six specific areas, i.e. culture, leadership, cross functional integration, training, communication and technology will create positive perception amongst employees thereby reducing resistance and increasing commitment to change. The reason why these organizational factors have been considered important is discussed in detail as follows.

3.1 Culture

Organizational culture is considered to be an important driver of employee attitudes, organizational effectiveness and performance (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2004). In other words organizational culture has a great influence on individual attitudes, behavior and perception (Awal *et al.*, 2006). It should, however, be noted that a strong organizational culture is not always supportive and can be self-destructive. It could almost create change-resistant group of people (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2004). Thus organizations should have knowledge of organization culture which should form an integral part of the strategic process to gain competitive advantage (Jaarsveld, 2005). If an organization is aware of its current culture only then it can work toward removal of unwanted and unforeseen behavior and work toward desired future (Peccei *et al.*, 2011) creating positive employee perception. Research also proposes that a work environment conducive to innovation and change creates a receptive context for organizational change (Emery *et al.*, 1996; Glover, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Zammuto and O'Connor, 1992). Since success of both organizational change culture to support the change is largely dependent on employees attitude (Martin *et al.*, 2006; Kotter, 1995), HR function should design a comprehensive strategy to build HR practices that create a supportive culture (Liebowitz, 2010) during change which creates positive employee perception (Weber and Weber, 2001):

P2. HR practices initiated during organizational change by understanding current culture, removing unwanted behavior and reinforcing desired behavior thereby fostering work environment conducive to innovation and change will create positive employee perception.

3.2 Leadership

Appelbaum *et al.* reviewed six empirical studies related to influence of leadership on employee perceptions during organizational change. The study revealed that success or failure of any change implementation effort depended on leader's ability to gain support of the change from their employees. Employee resistance is a major obstacle in implementing change (Klaus, 1997; Kumar and Kamalanabhan, 2005) which can be reduced by using correct leadership style (Covey and Gulledge, 1994). Employee's commitment to change can be enhanced with the right role played by leaders. Leaders provide a vision for change. Leaders can provide clarity of goals during organizational change thus energizing successful implementation of change (Pater, 2011).

HR department is especially positioned for playing this role during organizational change. HR should provide leadership during change by defining and delivering HR strategy, understanding the cost drivers, leading by example and implementing change (Spence, 2009). Thus HR function with effective HR practices can provide leadership, reduce resistance and create employee positive perceptions during organizational change:

P3. HR practices initiated during organizational change to provide leadership by motivating leaders to provide a vision for change, clarify goals and lead by example will create positive employee perception.

3.3 Cross functional integration

Importance of cross functional teams during organizational change is well highlighted in previous research (Convey, 1994). Cross functional integration refers to a practice where individuals, business processes and information from two or more separated organizational functions are brought together for task completion (Ford and

Randolp, 1992). Cross functional teams increase employee participation and shared responsibility which leads to more effective organizational functioning (Bartunek and Moch, 1987). Research shows that individuals involved in cross functional projects share positive perceptions about their job and organizations (Denison *et al.*, 1996). Further the extent to which cross functional integration is done contributes to enhancing employee commitment (Shum *et al.*, 2008).

However, the success of any cross functional team depends on training, performance measurement techniques (Convey, 1994) and coordination amongst team members (Mat and Jantan, 2009). This can only happen when there is trust amongst members which in turn creates positive employee perceptions (Mat and Jantan, 2009). Therefore HR practices in terms of training, performance management and creating trust amongst team members can facilitate cross functional integration and result in positive employee perception:

P4. HR practices initiated during organizational change to increase cross functional integration through training, performance measurement techniques and coordination will create positive employee perception.

3.4 Training

Effective training can enhance employee commitment during organizational change (Beer *et al.*, 1990). Successful change implementation involves not only the training and development of employees in the use of tools and processes, but also the establishment of a learning environment conducive to future continuous learning. Extensive training enables employees to get clarity on how to achieve organizational goals and clarifies expectations from employees (Montes *et al.*, 2003). Training help employees overcome knowledge assimilation barriers which leads to increasing employee commitment during change programs (Robey *et al.*, 2002, Shum, 2007). HR function can play an important role in facilitating training and providing learning opportunities to employees (Zuzeviciute and Tereseviciene, 2010) which will create positive employee perception:

P5. HR practices initiated during organizational change to train employees continuously to establish learning environment will create positive employee perception.

3.5 Communication

Communication is an important factor for effective implementation of organizational change (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1986-1998; Lewis and Seibold, 1993; Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). If change communication is not managed well it can result into rumors and resistance to change, exaggerating the negative aspects of the change (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1986-1998; Smeltzer and Zener, 1998). Research suggests the creation of an atmosphere where trustful communication and collaboration can take place may be an important foundation for achieving organizational change goals (Bocchino, 1993; Dutton, 1992; Weisbord, 1992). Research also indicates that up to 70 percent of change programmes fail (Senge *et al.*, 1999; Beer and Nohria, 2000) and poor internal communication is seen as the principle reason for such failure (Murdoch, 1997). Thus during a change initiative, open communication is vital as it identifies issues and increases the likelihood of the best solution being selected (Sloyan, 2009). Since HR managers have complete information of employees we suggest they can play an important role in designing and adoption of communication during organizational change which in turn will lead to positive employee perception:

P6. HR practices initiated during organizational change to establish trustful atmosphere and collaboration through open communication will create positive employee perception.

3.6 Technology

We refer technology to HR Information system which is defined as a system which integrates HR practices and processes with information technology (IT) through Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software to make it more user friendly. Using technology establishes clear goals for the change effort, helps in communication and training efforts and promotes opportunities for employee participation (Weber and Weber, 2001). Technology improves connectivity thereby leading to successful change implementation (Evans and Wurster, 1997; Leverick *et al.*, 1998). Technology facilitates employee's performance (Black and Lynch, 2001), encourages employee participation and reduces role ambiguity during organizational change (Karimi *et al.*, 2001).

Use of technology by HR professionals especially during organizational change can ease off their burden of administrative work and give them enough room to focus on strategic issues thus leading to business excellence (Kumar and Pandya, 2012). We suggest that designing and implementing HR practices by leveraging technology will help HR focus on strategic issues thus reducing employee resistance to change and creating positive perception amongst employees:

> *P7.* HR practices initiated during organizational change by leveraging technology to handle administrative issues, improve connectivity and increase employee performance and participation will create positive employee perception.

4. Perception and commitment

Interestingly, perception is also found to have significant relationship with commitment. The association between perceptions and commitment is multifaceted. Researchers have explored the impact of perception of various job-related factors on commitment (Loi *et al.*, 2006) as well as the impact of perception of commitment on other dependent variables (Shore *et al.*, 1995). Benson and Lawler (2003) suggested that employees have stronger commitment to their organizations when they perceive that their organizations are genuinely committed toward their welfare.

Similarly various researchers have talked about interrelationship between positive perception and employee's commitment to organizational change. (Lau and Woodman, 1995) argued that perceived benefits of change leads to high commitment and willingness to accept organizational change. Chawla and Kelloway (2004) studied the mediating role of perception of procedural justice to predict openness and commitment to change. Oreg's (2006) model of employee perceptions of organizational change too discussed significant linkages with commitment. Janet *et al.* (2008) included perceptions of organizational performance and change implementation success as outcomes of employee commitment to change. Thus, knowing that change significantly alters individual perception, it is important to understand how these perceptions may strengthen or weaken individuals' commitment to change.

A number of researchers have also studied employee perception of HR practices during organizational change and its influence on employee's commitment to change. For example Nishii *et al.* (2008) defined HR perceptions as "causal explanations that employees make regarding management's motivations for using particular HR practices" and maintain that employees' HR perceptions have important consequences on their commitment and satisfaction. Thereby, HR practices can serve as a reflection of managerial commitment toward supporting employees to embrace change and lead to successful organizational change efforts.

Similar view is shared by a number of HR experts (Beer *et al.*, 1984, 1985; Guest, 1997) who opined that HR practices are a significant predictor of employee commitment. Chang (2005) examined whether HR practices are associated with an employee's overall perception measured at the individual level, and whether the overall perception influences their organizational commitment. Wang and Phwang (2012) explored employee perceptions of the HRM system with individual commitment toward the organization set as an outcome variable in an empirical study in Taiwan. Kinicki *et al.* (1992) found that the relationship between HRM practices and employee attitudes was influenced by perception of the organization's commitment to HR activities that benefited employees. Thus literature indicates that the perception of HR practices was found to significantly impact commitment in general.

Significant and comprehensive review and analysis of commitment has been conducted in the works of Meyer *et al.* (1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 1998a, b, 2002, 2007, 2010), Allen and Meyer (1990, 1996), Meyer and Smith (2000) which was further reviewed by Jaros (1995). For the purpose of this study we define commitment as per Meyer and Allen (1991). They defined commitment as a psychological state that binds the individual to the organization. They further studied commitment and determined that an individual experiences commitment as a multi-layered phenomenon. This experience is related to emotional attachment, obligation toward the organization, and perception of unaffordable loss in case of non-commitment. Accordingly, they classified commitment as affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. Meyer and Allen additionally suggested that it is important to analyze all three components simultaneously and that each component should have a bearing on the individual's intention and decision to commit to the object. Meyer and Allen (1991) also found a positive relationship of affective commitment to the organization and higher levels of performance. Thus commitment to change encompasses both intention and action to change which is broader than perception to change which refers to individual's interpretation and impressions (Robbins *et al.*, 2009). Commitment is also conceptually distinct from readiness for change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993), openness to change (Wanberg and Banas, 2000) and coping with change (Judge *et al.*, 1999).

However, studies on employees' perception of change related HR practices seems fragmented in specifying effective practices which could enhance employee commitment to change even though there are previous studies available on best practices in HRM (Barney and Wright, 1998; Chew and Chan, 2008). Furthermore, Chew and Chan (2008) also suggested that more studies are desired to find out associations between HR practices and different forms of commitment.

Given the pervasiveness of organizational change, commitment to change would have critical implications for successful implementation of change efforts. The increasing significance of the role of HR and contribution of HR practices in managing change makes it important to study the manner in which these practices are perceived by employees, and further explore the relationship of these perceptions with commitment to change. Wright *et al.* (2003) propose that evaluating HR practices is critical to understand employees' perception of the HR practices.

The examination of extent to which employees positively perceive the HRM practices of their organization during change would therefore determine their commitment to change:

P8. Positive employee perception of change related HR practices will increase employee commitment to change.

Research model

The eight propositions led to a research model to study role of HR function as change enabler (see Figure 2).

In this paper we suggest that HR function can play positive role during organizational change by introducing and implementing critical HR practices which influence employee behavior such that it creates positive employee perception and increases employee commitment to change. Change-related HR practices have been identified. Constructs of HR practices could be measured by asking employees about the quality of change related HR practices. Employee perceptions about HR practices could be attained through a questionnaire and finally commitment could be measured by using Meyer and Allen (1997) commitment questionnaire with some modifications as per the organizational context. Effectiveness of change is very difficult to assess unless a longitudinal study on an organization experiencing change is done as retrospectively effectiveness of change could be influenced by other factors too.
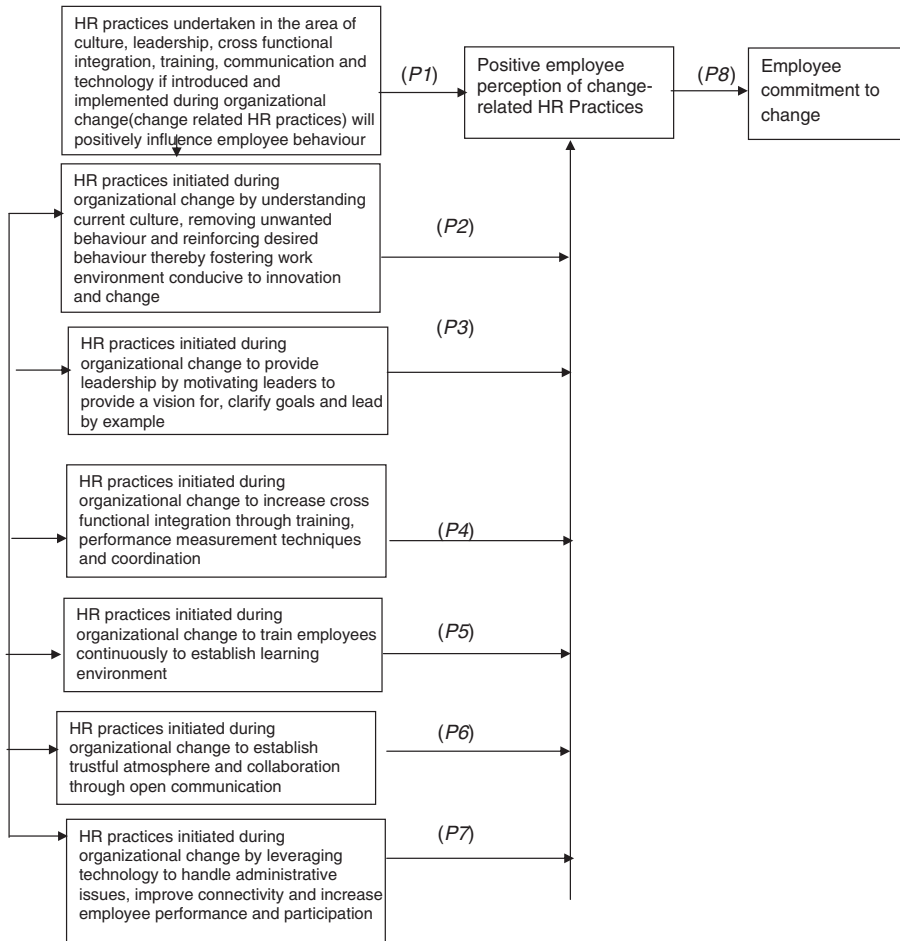

Figure 2.
Integrated research model of studying role of HR as a change enabler

5. Conclusion

Barney's (1991) resource based view emphasizing HRs when applied to the field of organizational change, stresses the unique contribution the employees can make to organizational change processes. In light of this theory, HRM should implement practices that will enable such a contribution. Wright *et al.* (2003) state that measuring HR practices is crucial to know about employee perception. For HR to fulfill its role of a change agent, it is thus important to understand employee perceptions about HR practices undertaken to support change and its effect on employee commitment toward change. Although there have been previous researches on best practices in HRM leading to organizational commitment, overall perception of HR practices and role of HR during change; specific attention needs to be paid to the role of HR practices during organizational change. More importantly, the role of employees' perception of these change related HR practices and its further impact on commitment to change needs to be investigated.

This paper provides theoretical contributions with a relevant impact on organizational change literature focusing on change related HR practices. Since not paying enough attention to people-related issues is the main reason of change failure, this paper highlights six important change related HR practices which address people related issues and have important implications for managing change effectively. The study contributes to scholarly work on organizational change through six propositions identified in the paper which can be used as a framework to study change related HR practices and its impact on employee perception and commitment to change. Further study using the framework proposed in the paper will provide deep insights to industry practitioners about managing change effectively keeping HRs at the core.

6. Implications, future research and limitations

This paper makes a useful contribution by first, highlighting specific change related HR practices which HR professionals can look at while designing and implementing change. Second, it tries to showcase the importance of positive employee perceptions about HR practices implemented during change which in turn increases employee commitment to change. An attempt was made to identify six organizational elements where HR practices can make a useful contribution during times of change. To the researchers knowledge there have been studies on organizational change and its influence on employee perceptions and commitment to change but studies on specific change related HR practices and its effect on employee perception and commitment to change has not been studied.

The framework presented in this paper can be used as a foundation to carry out future research. Future research can be carried out by examining which change-related HR practices lead to positive employee perception, increase commitment and reduce resistance of employees within the framework of six change related HR practices identified in this paper. Effectiveness of change-related HR practices can also be assessed by studying employee perception about HR practices in the above mentioned six areas. Such empirical research could also lead to building meaningful empirical models useful for industry and academia. The research will help HR professionals focus more on those practices which create positive perception amongst employees and increase their commitment to change which is the single most influential factor for successful change implementation.

The framework provided in the paper is based on literature review that does not cover vast body of literature available in the area of change-related HR practices

completely and therefore is a limitation of this study. At the same time this paper first identifies critical areas within an organization where HR as a change enabler should concentrate on and then looks at specific HR practices in each area, therefore change-related HR practices identified in this paper are also limited and empirical research using this framework would add more light and substance to this research. The framework could guide empirical research, however, a longitudinal research focussing on real life change experienced by organizations could provide huge insights about HR practices to support change, employee perception and interconnectedness with commitment to change. To an extent this is also a limitation of this study. The researcher also acknowledges the challenge and limitation of finding such an organization which agrees to willingly share the data as most of the change activities are considered confidential.

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