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Shifting the paradigm: reevaluating resistance to organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to challenge the existing paradigm of resistance to organizational change by offering a novel, interdisciplinary perspective. More specifically, this paper seeks to detach from traditional formulations of resistance to change and introduce a new paradigm, reevaluating resistance through the Good Lives Model (GLM) and the concept of Primary Human Goods (PHG).

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper uses contemporary literature on resistance to organizational change to make the case that the existing paradigm is one of negativity and deficiency. The authors define resistance, as currently formulated, subsequently offering a new perspective through the GLM. The etiological underpinnings of the model are provided and the concept of PHG is defined to illustrate relevance in reevaluating resistance to change.

Findings – The paper illustrates that resistance behaviors are not individual problems of employees, which must be overcome for successful change. Rather, resistance behaviors are the manifestation of disruptions to the achievement of PHG. Moreover, the paper demonstrates the pursuit of PHG is an innately positive, human activity that change strategies should take into account. The Dialogic Organization Development approach is also integrated as a means to uncover priority goods and disruptions that may impact them.

Originality/value – The paper provides a novel reevaluation of resistance to change through the interdisciplinary application of the GLM and PHG. Further, the paper uses the model to integrate several fundamental theories of human motivation into one cohesive, consistent framework.

Keywords Organizational change, Resistance, Dialogic, Good Lives Model, Primary Human Goods

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Organizational change remains a popular topic in the extant literature. Given the nature of our dynamic organizational environments, change, as the saying goes, is inevitable if organizations are to remain competitive. However, there are recognized challenges with organizational change that are also popular topics in the literature. Resistance is such a topic, as the mitigation of employee resistance has been identified as an important factor contributing to the success or failure of organizational change (Agboola and Salawu, 2011; Bovey and Hede, 2001; Hon *et al.*, 2011; Mariana and Violeta, 2011). However, the negative and deficiency based approach used to frame the subject of employee resistance to change seems counter-productive to the end goal of learning how to positively address resistance and implement change successfully. For instance, Lawrence (1969) describes employee resistance to change as one of the most "baffling and recalcitrant of the problems which business executives face" (para. 1).

Agboola and Salawu (2011) discuss employee resistance to change as deviant behaviors, implying resistance is not just an impediment to change, but also antisocial. Bovey and Hede (2001) describe resistance as anxious reactions to change that hinder an individual's ability to cope and adapt. With such a negative emphasis, it must be exhausting for managers and leaders to tackle and address resistance behaviors.

Dent and Galloway Goldberg (1999) assert the existing paradigm of resistance to change is an unproductive mental model that has persisted since Coch and French (1948) introduced the concept more than 60 years ago. This existing paradigm paints resistance to change as a problem precipitated by employees that managers must eradicate. Thus, resistance as currently formulated in the organizational literature is an inherently negative phenomenon that must be eliminated for organizational change efforts to be successful. Dent and Galloway Goldberg (1999) argue that this view of resistance to change is flawed in that individuals do not actually "resist" change, rather they do not fully embrace change due to a variety of barriers and impediments. They include organizational structures, such as poor reward mechanisms, personal investments in the existing status quo, and of course internal ability challenges that make adopting the change individually difficult. It is important to understand that these impediments to embracing change are not the manifestations of resistance; rather they are the reason for so called "resistance." Thus, Dent and Galloway Goldberg (1999) posit that resistance to change is better described in terms of the specific impediments that are encountered rather than as an overarching phenomenon that management must defeat.

This perspective of resistance to change is counter the vast majority of both the historical and contemporary literature. For instance, Dubrin and Ireland (1993) identify three factors that largely contribute to an individual's resistance to change. They include: individuals' fear of the unknown, individuals' identification of faults in the change and the problems those faults will produce, and individuals' fear of poor outcomes that will impact them personally (more work, less money, etc.) (Dubrin and Ireland, 1993). These factors are identified as problems belonging to the individual. Thus, they formulate resistance as an employee problem that must be overcome for change to be successful. Continuing with this formulation, Oreg *et al.* (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 79 studies that investigated the relationship between individual characteristics and reactions to change efforts. They found a large amount of the studies focussed on individuals' characteristics as predictors of reactions to change, including personality traits, coping styles, and even demographics. Additionally, they found that "a key determinant of whether change recipients will accept or resist change is the extent to which the change is perceived as personally beneficial or harmful" (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 493). Again, resistance to change as viewed through this lens attributes it directly to the individual as a problem that must be overcome for change to be successful. Thundiyil *et al.* (2015) investigated change cynicism and its impact on organizational change outcomes. They found that individual employee factors such as positive affectivity, negative affectivity, psychological capital, openness to change, tolerance for ambiguity, and change beliefs were all moderate to strong predictors of change outcomes. Ultimately, they concluded that change cynicism "is problematic for change interventions […]" (Thundiyil *et al.*, 2015, p. 439), similarly implying that such resistance to change is attributable to the individual and must be overcome to achieve positive change outcomes.

This paper rejects the existing, dominate paradigm of resistance to change as an individual problem that is inherently negative. Rather, it adopts the perspective of Dent

and Galloway Goldberg (1999) – viewing resistance as the result of the barriers that contribute to individuals not fully adopting or embracing organizational change. However, this paper moves one step further and offers a more holistic model of resistance to organizational change. That is, this paper offers the Good Lives Model (GLM), a humanistic framework that when applied to organizational change helps explain employees' "resistance" behaviors as the outward manifestations of a disruption to the pursuit of their Primary Human Goods (PHG) (Ward, 2002). Ward (2002) defines PHG as "actions or states of affairs that are viewed as intrinsically beneficial to human beings and are therefore sought for their own sake rather than as means to some more fundamental ends" (Ward, 2002, p. 515). It is the pursuit and achievement of these PHG that when disrupted by organizational change lead to observable "resistance" behaviors. Treating resistance as individual misconduct or as conflict only decreases employees' perceptions that the organization is providing the supportive environment necessary to pursue, and eventually achieve, priority PHG. Instead of viewing resistance as a negative contribution by the employee, it is necessary to examine how change has impeded the pursuit and achievement of PHG so barriers can be removed and change implementation strategies modified.

The remainder of this paper will provide an introduction to the GLM explaining how it can be used to better reframe resistance to organizational change. The case will be made that "resistance" is actually the outward manifestation of the disruption to the pursuit and achievement of PHG caused by organizational change efforts. Finally, the dialogic approach will be offered as a strategy to help leaders better facilitate change by identifying effected PHG and by uncovering how their achievement may be impacted by change efforts.

The GLM
In order to reframe resistance to organizational change we have borrowed the GLM from the clinical mental health discipline, where it originated as a framework to treat and supervise offenders. The GLM presupposes that to reduce criminal offending, new and healthier ways of achieving PHG are necessary. Of course this paper is not making the connection between resistance and criminality; however, the underpinnings of the GLM help to change the paradigm as it relates to better understanding and addressing resistance behaviors. As previously defined, PHG are "actions or states of affairs that are viewed as intrinsically beneficial to human beings and are therefore sought for their own sake rather than as means to some more fundamental ends" (Ward, 2002, p. 515). That is, PHG are the intrinsic and common needs or life goals that are sought by all humans in pursuit of their overall physical, psychological, and social well-being (Ward, 2002; Yates and Prescott, 2011). PHG are driven by established, fundamental motivators of human behavior – the facts of the body, the self, and social life (Kekes, 1989; Ward, 2002). Facts of the body involve physiological needs being met; facts of the self involve the psychological capacities necessary to function and thrive; whereas facts of social life involve the social arrangements in life that contribute to the fulfillment of PHG (Kekes, 1989; Ward, 2002). These "facts" are similar to the psychological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs theorized by Maslow (1943). Maslow's (1943) perspective on human motivation is ensconced in the humanistic view of organizational change similar to the GLM. However, Maslow (1943) conceptualized his hierarchy in such a way that accomplishment of the lowest basic need must occur prior to accomplishing the next higher basic need (i.e. one must accomplish love before accomplishing esteem), indicating all people inherently prioritize and achieve needs

the same, which contradicts the GLM. Using Maslow's (1943) conceptual framework as a guide, Alderfer (1972) consolidated the hierarchy of needs into three interrelated need categories: existence, relatedness, and growth, or the ERG Theory. Existence incorporated the first two levels of Maslow's hierarchy (physiological needs and safety); relatedness incorporated the third level (love); and growth incorporated the fourth and fifth levels of the hierarchy (esteem and self-actualization). However, Alderfer (1972) theorized that each need does not simply act as a stepping stone to the next; rather they are interrelated and connected to all others and the movement between them can be multidirectional based on the individual and their unique idiosyncrasies. In other words, people prioritize and achieve their needs differently. Alderfer's (1972) theory was followed by Kekes (1989) and Ward's (2002) conceptualizations of the "facts" of the body, the self and social life, introducing the concept of PHG instead of needs. Guided by Alderfer (1972), they assert that all people pursue the same PHG to achieve a fulfilled and "good life"; however each individual prioritizes PHG differently. Thus, no specific PHG is more important than another; rather each's importance is relative according to the person pursuing them. Ultimately, it is this conceptualization of human motivation that provides both the theoretical framework of the GLM and the detailed listing of PHG that in the aggregate are necessary to achieve "the minimum conditions for human welfare" (Kekes, 1989, p. 28). The following 11 PHG, when achieved, fulfill the facts of the body, the self, and social life:

(1) life – healthy living, functioning, and safety/security;

(2) knowledge – how well informed one perceives they are about things that are important to them;

(3) excellence in play – mastery of personal hobbies and recreations;

(4) excellence in work – mastery of occupation and/or vocational pursuits;

(5) excellence in agency – autonomy and power over oneself;

(6) inner peace – freedom from emotional disruption and stress;

(7) relatedness – intimate personal, romantic, and familial relationships;

(8) community – links to broad social groups;

(9) spirituality – finding individual meaning in life;

(10) pleasure – feeling good about things in the here and now; and

(11) creativity – ability to express oneself through alternative forms (Purvis, 2010; Purvis *et al.*, 2011; Yates and Prescott, 2011).

Again, the GLM asserts that all humans pursue these PHG according to what they hold as priorities in their individual lives and achievement of PHG contributes to the fulfillment of a good life. This is the concept of scope, or the premise that all goods are important to the achievement of well-being, though every individual will pursue them differently according to their preferences and life focusses (Purvis *et al.*, 2011; Ward, 2002).

With this understanding of the etiology of the GLM, it becomes clear that the model helps to establish a powerful new paradigm of employee resistance to organizational change. Employees who are viewed as "resistant" in the traditional paradigm may simply be responding to a disruption to their ability to achieve PHG, caused by organizational change. Although the pursuit of PHG may be counter-productive to or conflict with an organizational change effort, the pursuit and

ultimate achievement is inherently positive nonetheless and should be affirmed rather than defeated. With an acute awareness of PHG and the disruption to their achievement that change may cause, leaders can better formulate and deploy targeted, PHG sensitive change strategies.

PHG and organizational change

The new paradigm created by the GLM sets the stage for a positive approach to addressing resistance to organizational change. This is accomplished by affirming the innately positive, human activity that is the pursuit and achievement of PHG. By affirming an employee's need to achieve priority PHG, leaders can avoid attempts at fixing or overcoming deficiencies within employees that do not exist. Rather, the focus is placed on how the change can be better aligned to facilitate, rather than impede, employees' ability to achieve PHG.

Organizational change can involve a variety of alterations that impact the way employees are supervised, the way they work, communicate, and even relate with one another. These changes can disrupt employees' ability to achieve their PHG leading to conflict that forces a problematic choice: continue the positive human pursuit to achieve PHG or sacrifice that pursuit and embrace the organizational change. Certainly, when presented with such a choice the achievement of PHG will prevail. The GLM unlocks the black box of resistance by helping to uncover this conflict and illuminate the disruption to PHG that is driving resistance behaviors.

The main type of disruption to the achievement of PHG is a disruption to capacity. Capacity refers to circumstances or conditions both internal and external to the individual that impede their ability to achieve PHG (Purvis et al., 2011). Internal capacity barriers include three primary types: cognitive barriers, such as a lack of knowledge or intelligence; psychological barriers, such as a lack of self-esteem; and behavioral barriers, such as a lack of ability to control one's impulses. For instance, an employee who is an expert at their job and holds excellence in work as a priority PHG might have difficulty embracing a change to the core process that drives their activities. A new process might require additional skills and knowledge the employee lacks. Thus, they would lack the immediate capacity to both embrace the organizational change and achieve their PHG of excellence in work. As a result, the employee may embrace the status quo in conflict with the change in an attempt to continue fulfilling the PHG of excellence in work. This status quo behavior would certainly be viewed as resistance, when in reality it is simply the employee pursuing a priority PHG. External capacity issues involve challenges external to the individual, such as a lack of training infrastructure available to provide new skills and knowledge. For instance, the same employee from above who holds excellence in work as a high priority PHG and lacks the skills and knowledge necessary to master a new organizational process may seek training to obtain the additional skills. However, they may lack access due to poor organizational infrastructure or a lack of available training funds. Although not driven by the employee, this external capacity barrier nonetheless impedes their ability to achieve the PHG of excellence in work. Thus, they may resort to the status quo process, which they mastered, conflicting with the aims of the change effort.

Effective utilization of the GLM requires an ideological shift in the processes used to implement change so methodologies are explicitly and purposefully focussing on PHG and how they are impacted by change efforts. The GLM focusses on both the internal

PHG and priorities of organization members and the organizational or external resources and opportunities available to assist the change process (Ward, n.d., para. 5). This is accomplished to better facilitate the internal capacity of employees, while also ensuring the organization itself is not disrupting external capacity. To decrease the perception of resistance which is rooted in the disruption to capacity, both employees and employers must consciously understand which PHG are held as priorities and may be impacted by change. If employees understand which goods they hold as priorities, then they are more aware as to how change can negatively impact their personal situation, making it easier to articulate to leaders. Similarly, if organizations have clarity about what PHG are held as priorities both at the individual and collective levels, they can better mitigate their impact through the adoption of appropriate change strategies.

It should be understood, however, that it is nearly impossible for an organization to satisfy all 11 PHG for each employee. Thus, it is important for organizational leaders to uncover priority goods using an approach that allows for the development of narratives, stories, and themes that represent the collective experience of all organization members. Engaging in dialogue with employees prior to, during, and after change implementation helps understand how they perceive the impact of change and what disruptions to PHG may occur. When employing the GLM to address or prevent resistance to change, the Dialogic Organization Development (Dialogic OD) approach facilitates this process.

PHG and Dialogic OD
Dialogic OD is an approach to OD that has emerged recently in the literature as an alternative to the positivist or diagnostic approach used in traditional OD practice (see Bushe, 2009; Bushe and Marshak, 2009, 2016; Marshak, 2015; Marshak and Bushe, 2013). Marshak (2015) describes Dialogic OD as "the convergence of recent thinking about how language creates social reality combined with concepts of emergence and self-organizing applied to organizational change" (p. 47). Dialogic OD begins from the premise that organizations are entities of social construction, built upon the stories, narratives, experiences, and interactions of its members. Individuals within organizations construct these social realities through the process of emergence. Kozlowski and Klein (2000) explain that any phenomenon is emergent "when it originates in the cognition, affect, behaviors or other characteristics of individuals, is amplified by their interaction, and manifests as a higher level, collective phenomenon" (p. 55). The process of emergence consists of two primary components: content and interaction. Content refers to the raw inputs upon which cognition, perceptions, and mental models are built and interaction is the process through which content becomes shared among organizational members (Ostroff *et al.*, 2003). Interaction is key, as this is how stories, narratives, and experiences are shared between employees, forming the foundations of their social realities. Thus, for change to occur, they must be altered. Using traditional diagnostic techniques in an attempt to change those realities can lead to undesirable results, as traditional OD approaches are rooted in positivism and inaccurately assume that objective and empirical data can be used successfully in processes of social discovery (Bushe and Marshak, 2009). Dialogic OD encourages the understanding that human beings are innately programmed to base their perspectives upon the emergent nature of their experiences and this tendency is what is important in the generation of narratives and change, whether or not they can be touched or measured according to the empiricist's standard (Gergen, 1985).

When facing resistance behaviors it is critical that the dialogic approach be employed to better understand how priority PHG may have been negatively impacted. Bushe (2009) asserts that positive organizational change can only happen when people

understand the stories and narratives that exist within their socially constructed environments and how they contribute to their experiences. From the dialogic perspective, it would be difficult to attempt to address an employee's resistance behaviors without first understanding the specific narrative that explains how they experienced the change and how that change impacted their priority PHG. Dialogic OD is crucial to this goal, as it encourages narratives to flow freely, which provides insight into important experiences and perceptions about organizational change. It is through this type of dialogue that leaders become keenly aware of just how organizational change has specifically impacted PHG.

For instance, one of the authors recently facilitated the implementation of an organizational change initiative in a non-profit human services agency. The change radically altered the way case managers developed and delivered case plans to clients. Shortly after implementation, leaders within the organization expressed they were dealing with a significant amount of "resistance." Dialogic implementation, an implementation approach rooted in Dialogic OD and driven by the core components of implementation science (Fixsen *et al.*, 2009), was employed using informal, individual, and group interview sessions with case management personnel. Through this process an important theme about the collective experience of the organizational change effort was uncovered. Namely, a majority of case managers perceived that the change restricted their ability to make decisions about case plans and limited their ability to be creative in their development. These negative experiences of the change and the subsequent interactions among the case managers cultivated foundational narratives that became their social reality. Additionally, the experiences were directly tied to the case managers' priority PHG of creativity and excellence in agency, as the change disrupted their ability to express themselves in alternative forms (case plans) and their perceived autonomy over their own work. In response, case managers navigated around the change, usurping the process in order to continue feeling the achievement of those PHG. However, once the disruption was uncovered, leaders were able to better understand the behaviors they were encountering and in turn affirm the case managers' innately positive pursuit of their PHG. This affirmation cultivated new narratives of collaboration, support, and acknowledgment within the organization that acted as the foundation for a new social reality. Without uncovering the prevailing narratives that drove the experiences, perceptions, and ultimately the "resistance" behaviors of the case managers, their behavior would certainly have continued to be viewed and treated as overt resistance to change, resulting in poor outcomes for all involved.

Discussion
Resistance to change remains an important topic in the organization and management literature given the dynamic nature of our world and the necessity for organizations to be adaptive to change. This paper sought to contribute new information to the body of knowledge through the application of the GLM, a novel conceptualization of resistance to change. The GLM provides a more appreciative framework for understanding resistance behaviors, changing the paradigm from one of negativity to one focussed on the affirmation of the pursuit and achievement of PHG. This new paradigm can help organizations better prevent and address resistance behaviors by crafting better change management strategies that not only avoid disrupting PHG, but also the assumption that resistance is a problem that must be defeated. In addition to shifting the paradigm on resistance to change, this paper also significantly impacts future practice and research.

Implications for practice

For practitioners in the field, the GLM framework helps to simplify the way resistance is viewed and the manner in which it is attended, as it provides a simplified, holistic framework to address and prevent resistance to change. It does this by marrying long-standing theories of human motivation, laying them out in an uncomplicated and straightforward manner through the concept of PHG. Existing paradigms of resistance are not as simple or as useful, as they not only view resistance as inherently negative, but also lack specific focusses on the drivers of resistance behaviors – namely, disruptions to PHG. That is, current approaches and explanations of resistance largely flex a litany of mixed motivational and behavioral theories that discuss resistance in complex terms of affective and cognitive processes (Bovey and Hede, 2001), intrinsic motivational stages measuring buy-in to change (Mathews and Crocker, 2016), individual and organizational readiness for change (Self and Schraeder, 2009), and even as a form of dissent (Giangreco and Peccei, 2005). With such a broad, mixed view of resistance, it becomes difficult for practitioners to establish cohesive and consistent strategies that address and prevent resistance behaviors. The GLM addresses this challenge by integrating these fragmented perspectives and rooting them in fundamental human motivation theory. It then better conceptualizes resistance to change as the manifestation of a disruption to PHG. This is critical, as under the GLM framework all people innately seek to achieve PHG, thus practitioners have a clear and unambiguous target for intervention strategies in all organizational contexts and among all organization members. Additionally, the model is inherently suitable to the use of Dialogic OD to uncover the narratives and experiences related to PHG. Ultimately, leaders and practitioners in the field can immediately apply the GLM to their own organizations to better fashion future change strategies, while also using the framework to uncover existing disruptions to PHG that are resulting in resistance behaviors.

Implications for research

With new conceptual additions to the body of knowledge comes the need for further research and empirical investigation. Toward this aim, three main research directions are recommended: first, an evaluation of the GLM and its application in a real-world context; second, an investigation of the perceived intensity of resistance behaviors and their connection to specific PHG; and third, further conceptual research that seeks to integrate the GLM framework with contemporary change management models.

Investigating the application of the GLM in a real-world change context is critical to evaluating its utility in terms of identifying priority PHG, identifying root causes of resistance behaviors, and properly addressing those resistance behaviors. The case study approach is best situated to provide this insight. However, it is important that any case study seeking to investigate application of the GLM involves an organization currently undergoing significant change or that is expecting significant change to occur in the immediate future. This will help to ensure that important connections between the change and disruptions to PHG are captured appropriately.

Additional research should also seek to uncover any relationship that may exist between the intensity of resistance behaviors among employees, as perceived by organizational leaders, and the underlying PHG as explained by the employees. This type of investigation likely requires a qualitative approach that allows leaders and employees to offer specific stories about their individual experiences. It is through the extrapolation of these experiences that the relationship between perceived intensity of resistance behaviors and PHG will emerge. This relationship may help to inform the field about specific PHG and how their disruption can manifest more prominently as outward resistance behaviors.

Through such an exploration, specific change strategies can be developed targeting "high risk" PHG, mitigating disruption, and leading to better change outcomes.

Finally, future research should also seek to conceptually examine whether there are specific overlaps that occur between the GLM framework and contemporary change management models. There are a variety of change management models that are wildly popular and widely used throughout the OD discipline. Thus, it is worthwhile to explore how the GLM framework may be cohesively integrated within them to better address encountered resistance behaviors. This is also important, as integrating the GLM can work to inform researchers and practitioners that the use of the framework does not replace current models; rather, it plugs-in to better elucidate the root cause of resistance contributing to the development of better and more informed change strategies. Thus, the GLM may be an important add-on to existing change management models.

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