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Changes in commitment to change among leaders in home help services

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore the development of commitment to change among leaders in the home help services during organizational change and to study this development in relation to workload and stress. During organizational change initiatives, commitment to change among leaders is important to ensure the implementation of the change. However, little is known of development of commitment of change over time.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews with ten leaders by the time an organizational change initiative was launched and follow-up one year later. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the interviews.

Findings – Commitment to change is not static, but seems to develop over time and during organizational change. At the first interview, leaders had a varied pattern reflecting different dimensions of commitment to change. One year later, the differences between leaders' commitment to change was less obvious. Differences in commitment to change had no apparent relationship with workload or stress.

Research limitations/implications – The data were collected from one organization, and the number of participants were small which could affect the results on workload and stress in relation to commitment to change.

Practical implications – It is important to support leaders during organizational change initiatives to maintain their commitment. One way to accomplish this is to use management team meetings to monitor how leaders perceive their situation.

Originality/value – Qualitative, longitudinal and leader studies on commitment to change are all unusual, and taken together, this study shows new aspects of commitment.

Keywords Leaders, Management development, Commitment, Elder care

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The home help services sector is an important part of Swedish public elder care that has been subject to many organizational changes over the years. In recent decades, home help services have increased in both absolute and relative terms compared to, for instance, residential care (Savla *et al.*, 2008; Szebehely and Trydegård, 2012). This has led to an increased concentration on the elderly with the greatest need (Meinow *et al.*, 2005; Savla *et al.*, 2008), and it has been argued that this concentration, along with organizational changes, has resulted in a more strenuous and stressful working environment (Brulin *et al.*, 2000). Leaders in elder care and home help services have been shown to play a key role in the working environment of their staff and in improving the organization (Smith *et al.*, 1994; Arts *et al.*, 2001; Jeon *et al.*, 2010; Antonsson *et al.*, 2012), but research has also found that leaders are sometimes absent and that there is a lack of



leadership (Albinsson and Strang, 2002). Leadership in a changing organization calls for leaders to be available (Saksvik *et al.*, 2007). Oleg *et al.* (2011) concluded in a review on organizational change that a management perceived as fair, committed and competent renders positive reactions from the employees' toward the change. Organizational commitment has been associated with higher levels of trust and fairness. Leaders are also mediators of organizational support-which has been shown important to employee commitment (Guest *et al.*, 2010) and leadership behavior has been related to employees' commitment, but few studies have addressed the commitment of the leaders. The present study concerns commitment of leaders in home help services during a period when they were not only expected to spearhead organizational change but also to develop a new leadership role closer to the staff.

The development of organizations, leaders and leadership processes is a complex endeavor (Iles and Preece, 2006; Spiers *et al.*, 2010), and it is vital that leaders are committed to change to achieve a positive result. According to Herscovitch and Meyer (2002, p. 475), commitment to change can be defined as "a force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative". These authors developed a three-component model that includes affective, continuance and normative commitment to change. In short, affective commitment reflects an individual's desire to support the change (want to), continuance commitment reflects recognition that it would be costly not to be supportive (have to) and normative commitment reflects an obligation to support the change (ought to). Commitment to change has been shown to be related to positive change outcomes such as support for change, successful implementation, learning and job performance, but also to outcomes such as perceived stress and emotional exhaustion (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Cunningham, 2006; Parish *et al.*, 2008; Ning and Jing, 2012). Although commitment to change is recognized as a valid construct, as argued by Jaros (2010) in a critical review, there is a lack of research concerning its development and more attention should be devoted to the timing of its evaluation. That is when, in a change process, commitment is actually measured. Jaros (2010) suggested longitudinal studies to capture how commitment to change itself alters during a change process in an organization or workplace. Most studies on commitment are surveys based on quantitative data. A qualitative approach exploring the development of commitment to change over time may provide new insights.

Aim

The aim of the current longitudinal qualitative study was to reflect on commitment to change during a process when first-line leaders in home help services were changing their leadership role simultaneously to spearheading organizational change.

Organizational change is often experienced as stressful and increasing employees' workload, and there is reason to believe that the home help services sector is no exception and, therefore, experiences regarding workload and stress were explored.

Changing the leadership role and the organization in municipal home help services

The background of this study was a thorough organizational investigation initiated by the management of Social Services in an average-sized Swedish municipality. The

investigation was carried out to improve processes within the organization. All employees met in groups and discussed how to improve work-related issues and which areas required development most urgently. These investigations showed that employees in home help services wanted to have more contact with their first-line leaders and that they lacked opportunity to enhance their level of competence. In addition, the management concluded that a new structure was needed to achieve more efficient working practices and to focus these on the users of home help services. In regard to the proposed changes, three major areas were addressed:

- (1) *The leadership role:* The first-line leaders had many administrative tasks that occupied their time and which left little or no time for social contact with employees or users. The aim was therefore to separate administrative and leadership tasks into two different functions. The first function, termed the centralized function, consisted of three leaders who were dedicated to working solely on administrative tasks. The second function, first-line leadership, included the managerial aspects of leadership and contacts with employees and users. The description of the type of leadership envisaged relied on theories of transformational leadership. A transformational leader is a role model who inspires, motivates, stimulates and shows consideration (Bass, 1985). In addition, the management introduced coaching as a concept to the leaders and suggested relevant literature that they might access. Coaching-based leadership is expected to facilitate employees' learning, growth and development, and the leader should be a good communicator and build effective relationships with both employees and customers (Moen and Federici, 2012). The leaders attended a course on coaching held by consultants. This course, spread over a couple of months, included five group seminars and two sessions with personal coaching over the telephone. The course focused on practical training in coaching but there were also some theoretical parts. The leaders were, in their new role, expected to spend more time with employees and make personal visits to new users.
- (2) *Contact persons and person-centered care:* To improve the quality of care, the intention was to develop the system of contact persons further. A contact person works in case management and is responsible for issues that concern the users to which they are assigned as contact person. The organization had, some years earlier, given one-day courses to the employees on how to become a contact person, and the concept was used although not fully practiced. There was no additional formal training during the organizational change, but the employees were given instructions from their leaders and written information about the assignment and what was expected of them.
- (3) *Geographical and work group changes:* To coordinate contact persons, users and leaders, a change in geographical boundaries was made, resulting in nine areas with one or two workgroups and one leader in each. The workgroups were then reorganized to reduce their size (on average, 12-15 full-time workers in each group) to promote learning and active participation in the group, as well as to increase the potential of leaders to execute transformational and coaching leadership behavior.

To handle the changes in the organization and the new leadership role, the first-line managers met every second week together with their superior manager, the management developer and the three individuals working as administrative leaders in the centralized function. In these meetings, all issues concerning the change were discussed, and the leaders reported that the discussions sometimes could be intense.

Research questions

- RQ1.* What are the main themes in the leaders' description of the change and can these themes be related to commitment to change at the beginning of the organizational change?
- RQ2.* What are the main themes related to commitment to change in the leaders' description of the change after one year?
- RQ3.* Can perception of stress and workload be related to different types of commitment to change?

Method

The design was a qualitative interview study with an initial semi-structured interview at the time the change was about to be launched (T1) and a follow-up one year later (T2).

Participants

The first interview included nine first-line leaders (L1-9), and the second included eight leaders. At the second interview, one participant from the first interview was on maternity leave and another had quit her job. A new leader who was not employed at the time of the first interview participated in the second (L10). This means that seven participants took part in both interviews. All, but one, were female and their mean age was 39 years (range 25-47) at the time of the first interview and they had been working as managers for between 0.5 and 16 years. At the time of the first interview, the leaders had experienced most of their education in coaching leadership, and the organizational change was about to be put into practice.

Data collection

All first-line leaders agreed to participate in the interview study. They were informed that the material was going to be analyzed and used in research and that participation was voluntary, and that they could at any moment terminate the interview and refrain from further participation. The interviews were conducted and recorded at the participants' workplace, and were transcribed verbatim. In addition, the leaders were asked to estimate their workload and their experience of stress on a ten-point scale, ranging from 0 = not at all to 10 = maximum.

The first interview contained questions about why they were interested in changing their leadership role and what expectations they had for the coming year. The participants were also asked to describe what they saw as positive and as negative about the proposed change. The second interview contained questions about how they had experienced their first year in the new leadership role and the process of change, and whether their expectations had been fulfilled. They were also asked to express their current expectations of the change and what they now saw as positive and negative. On both occasions, the interview manual also contained questions about support,

communication and cooperation within the organization and with actors outside the organization. For the purposes of the current study, these sections were omitted from analysis, as they were not related to the present aim.

Data analysis

The responses to the selected interview questions were coded in a number of steps according to qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis procedures (Schilling, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step was a line-by-line descriptive open coding for each participant, and the next was to sort the codes into meaningful themes. These themes were compared and checked in relation to the coded extracts, and the most dominant themes were labeled as the main themes or core categories. The main themes for each participant were then compared to the definitions of the three different types of commitment to change and using the commitment to change scale (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002) as a guide to support the analysis, a deductive category application (Mayring, 2000). Examples from the questionnaire included: "I believe in the value of this change" (affective), "I have no choice but to go along with this change" (continuance), and "I do not think it would be right for me to oppose this change" (normative). The fourth step was to compare the viewpoints within the themes and types of commitment given in the first and second interviews for each participant and among the whole group. Finally, the ratings of stress and workload given at the first and the second interviews were compared to types of commitment. Both authors coded sections of data independently and compared the correspondence in interpreting the different types of commitment to change. In addition, the preliminary results were corroborated at a meeting with the participants.

Results

RQ1. What are the main themes in the leaders' description of the change and can these themes be related to commitment to change at the beginning of the organizational change?

At the first interview, the leaders expressed a wide range of attitudes toward the change. Although several themes could be found in each interview and these themes could be related to both positive and negative expectations, there were distinct main themes that could be linked to each leader.

Four of the leaders were very positive to the change. Their main themes were labeled "professionalism", expressing the view that change was in tune with their view of professional leadership, and "change-orientation", indicating that they personally liked change. The statements expressed attitudes that could be related to a strong affective commitment – that is, the anticipated change was in line with a personal desire for change.

Three of the leaders described the changes as being imposed by others and their main theme was "skepticism", their statements reflecting a continuance commitment. The changes had to be executed due to compelling forces within and outside the organization, and it was not a personal choice.

Finally, there were a couple of interviewees who expressed a view that the organization and their work situation were ineffective and that something had to be done. The main theme was "system deficits". These statements can be related to a

normative commitment to change, in that the leaders recognized that the changes ought to be carried out to facilitate a functional organization (Table I).

RQ2. What are the main themes related to commitment to change in the leaders' description of the change after one year?

At the second interview a year later, the leaders' descriptions were much more closely aligned than at the first interview. The main theme was "transition", and all leaders expressed this in various ways. They described how the goals had not yet been reached, but statements expressing viewpoints such as "we are on our way" were common (L1, L2 and L6). There were statements to the effect that the pace of change was slow (L5, L10) and the only thing to do was to keep on trying (L7).

The transition theme could be divided into both *negative* and *positive transition aspects*. The positive transition aspects were expressed as cognitive changes by one leader: "I think in a different way as a leader now" (L4, L5) and as leader behavior-that it was legitimate to be a more hands-on leader (L1, L2, L7 and L8). Justice and equality in the quality of care and in leadership were also perceived as positive aspects in the transition (L6, L9). Most leaders also expressed support for or faith in the overall goals, and some stressed that they did not want to "go back to how it was before" (L1, L4).

The negative transition aspects mainly concerned the division of administrative work tasks that had not been fully implemented between first-line leaders and centralized functions. This affected the first-line leaders' perception of workload and control. Some expressed how they were now doing more work than before, that they were still responsible for a major part of the administrative tasks in addition to their new leadership role (L1, L2 and L10). There were statements showing that they felt it was easier and quicker to perform some administrative tasks rather than transferring them

Examples of statements (T1)	Themes (T1)	Commitment (T1)
"I really want to work close to the staff to be able to see personal growth and increased quality among the users" (L5)	Professionalism	Affective
"I want to be a leader that is visible and close to my staff" (L8)		
"I have high expectations and we are absolutely on the right track here" (L2)	Change orientation	Affective
"I think it is going to be very good" (L3)		
"I don't know if this is my choice and I think it is going to be really hard" (L6)	Skepticism	Continuance
"The staff has asked for a close leadership[. . .]but it is hard to see how it is going to work" (L7)		
"Our society changes so much and we have to compete, therefore we have no other choice than develop and change" (L9)		
"It doesn't function today in this organization [. . .] I cannot do my job" (L1)	System deficits	Normative
"I do not need support because it is the work situation that ought to be altered[. . .]It has been ineffective" (L4)		

Table I.
Statements, themes
and related type of
commitment at the
first interview

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to centralized functions (L5, L6 and L7), and that they needed to have control over certain issues (L1, L7 and L10). There were also statements to the effect that their role as a leader had been eroded in the eyes of others, and they had received comments that they were becoming work group leaders rather than managers with wider responsibilities concerning budget and administration as well as staff (L2, L5).

The main theme, “transition”, with its positive and negative aspects, could be related to affective and normative commitments to change. However, the statements related to strong affective commitment were muted, although most leaders clearly stated that they concurred with the goals. The overall impression was that the leaders’ attitudes toward change were similar and that even if expectations were somewhat reduced, their statements could be related to an affective commitment to change. The statement related to normative commitment showed that the leaders reflected on aspects of the change and its consequences, and there were doubts about whether they were doing the right thing in regard to those aspects (Table II).

The theme “transition” could not be related to continuance commitment. No longer were there statements that expressed the viewpoint of being compelled or feeling forced to take part in the changes. One leader who had clearly expressed a commitment to continuance in the first interview had since left her job. However, there were two more leaders at T1 whose main theme was related to continuance commitment to change and who was also participating in the second interview.

RQ3. Can perception of stress and workload be related to different types of commitment to change?

On an individual level, it was not possible to find a consistent pattern in the ratings for perceived workload and stress related to the different types of commitment. For instance, two of the leaders who were very positive and expressed affective commitment in both interviews had very different experiences of stress. Leaders who changed from mainly continuance to affective or normative commitment did not differ from those who had not changed their type of commitment. In regard to perceived stress, the total average mean was lower at T2 than at T1. The first ratings of stress were high, on average eight on the ten-point scale, but the second ratings were lower, at 5.3 on average.

Examples of statements (T2)	Theme (T2)	Commitment (T2)
“I believe in what we have decided when we started but we are not there yet” (L1) “The expectations are not fulfilled but it is not a failure and we are still on our way” (L2) “I trust this change” (L7) “I have always liked change even though it is hard” (L8)	Transition	Affective
“I have responsibilities as a manger and it is hard to let go of that” (L1) “Is this really right to move everything to the centralized function?” (L5) “It is hard to coach but it is good with increased awareness” (L6)	Transition	Normative

Table II.
Statements, themes and related type of commitment at the second interview

One leader's score suffered a dramatic drop but all others, except one who reported a slightly increased stress level, also rated their experience of stress on a lower level at T2 than at T1. The perceived workload remained at a high level, on average 8.8 and 8.4 at T1 and T2, respectively. The interviews contained few expressions of stress *per se* but the workload was frequently addressed. As mentioned above, the division of work tasks had not been fully implemented at the time of the second interview, and this affected the total workload, as the leaders tried to execute both previous and more recent work tasks.

Discussion

The main themes in the initial interviews showed a more varied pattern, in terms of reflecting different types of commitment to change, than those at the second interview. At the second interview, the leaders showed a more shared attitude toward the changes. There were no expressions that could be related to continuance commitment to change, and it was sometimes hard to segregate expressions related to affective commitment and normative commitment to change on an individual level. Such difficulties were also found in earlier quantitative research on the consequences of commitment to change. There may be several reasons for this, and differences in culture between countries, and use of slightly different measurement scales have been suggested (Jaros, 2010). Commitment has been used to predict behavior before change as well as a consequence of change (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Oleg *et al.*, 2011). The results from the present longitudinal qualitative study imply that an individual's commitment alters over time as the process of change proceeds. This indicates that commitment is not a stable mind-set but can be viewed as a process as well. However, the question remains: What influences this?

Changes over time in organizations are often ascribed interventions. Leadership training as an effective intervention has been discussed by Kelloway and Barling (2010), who suggested that the reason why there are so few intervention studies in this area is because they are difficult to conduct and because the impact on employees is indirect. However, in a meta-analysis on leadership interventions, Avolio *et al.* (2009) showed that interventions do in fact have an impact on a variety of outcomes, and matching the leadership model used with the expected outcome in the intervention was an important ingredient. In the current study, the leaders participated in a course on coaching leadership. At the time of the first interview, they were about to complete this course, but participation does not seem to have molded their differences in regard to expectations and commitment to change. A year later, the differences were less obvious and the leaders' views appear to have become more uniform. During the previous year, they had met every second week with the management team to discuss and work on issues related to the changes. It is likely that these meetings, sometimes described by the leaders as conflicting and tedious, had been the most important ingredient in addressing the changes and in bringing their expectations and experiences more in line. The most eager leaders with a strong affective commitment faced the obstacles of change in practice, while those that felt forced into the changes had accepted and to some extent embraced the process. Frustration and disappointment in regard to the slow progress of change is not uncommon, and a study on leadership development in cancer care (Spiers *et al.*, 2010) showed very similar results to the present study in this respect. The conclusion was that it takes considerable time and effort to accomplish changes in leadership culture.

In connection with organizational change the differences between focusing on developing leaders' individual skills and competence or the leadership processes in context have been addressed in research. [Cummings et al. \(2013\)](#) showed that leadership development interventions have to be incorporated into the organization's processes and structure to render sustainable results and maintain the leaders' trust. Furthermore, organizational support has been considered as a key aspect in leadership development ([Snell and Dickson, 2010](#)). In the present study, the results show that the leaders developed or maintained their trust in the change even if the transition took more time than expected. Again, this may be related to the organizational support in terms of recurrent meetings and discussions during the change.

Earlier research has shown that initial commitment to change is related to outcomes such as stress and emotional exhaustion ([Meyer et al., 2002](#); [Ning and Jing, 2012](#)). The findings from the present study indicate that both levels of stress and types of commitment alter over time. However, there was no consistent pattern on the individual level to demonstrate a relation between stress levels and change in types of commitment. It is possible that the differences in stress reported between T1 and T2 were related to high initial stress levels that were reduced during the process as the leaders adapted and the changes became better known and familiar. It may be that there are other factors involved, however, and this indicates the need for further research on these relations.

The variation in commitment to change did not seem to affect the experience of having a heavy workload, which remained at a high level. Although there was still conflict in regard to the division of labor between administrative and leadership tasks after the first year, the conflict was more focused on the division of tasks between the leaders and their centralized functions rather than on being among the leaders themselves. The core duties of working as a leader in home help services and elderly care have been debated for a long time. Recognized dilemmas include the ability to balance administrative tasks, development strategies and leadership duties and handling conflicting expectations from within as well as outside one's organization ([Westerberg and Lindberg, 1992](#); [Nordström, 1998](#); [Wolmesjö, 2005](#)). For instance, [Wolmesjö \(2005\)](#) found that politicians expected their leaders to be managers focusing on administrative tasks, while their staff asked for leaders that focus on the relational aspects. Divergent opinions on the professional identity and core duties of the occupation have also been found in studies on perceived illegitimate work tasks not viewed as part of the profession's remit ([Björk et al., 2013](#)). The present study shows that the balance between different work areas is not easy to amend, even in the presence of an explicit ambition to achieve this.

Limitations and future research

Because this study was conducted within a single organization and with a limited number of participants, the results should be interpreted with caution. Comparison between qualitative (commitment to change) and quantitative data (workload and stress) may be inadequate, although the overall results are reasonable in terms of a continuing high workload but reduced stress. Furthermore, there were no questions in the manual specifically relating to commitment. However, recent research has revealed relations between employee expectations and commitment to change. [Portoghese et al. \(2012\)](#) found that positive expectations of change were strongly linked to affective commitment, while negative expectations were linked to continuance commitment, with

similar results found by Ning and Jing (2012). These findings support the relation between the data and the construct commitment to change. To strengthen the analysis, both authors coded sections of data independently and compared the correspondence in interpreting the different types of commitment to change. Further research should focus on furthering our understanding of how commitment to change changes over time. Also, factors that can explain when and why this change occurs would be of interest.

Conclusions and implications

Our study findings indicate that commitment to change can alter during the process of change. This means that reliance on training and education before the process starts is inadequate if the organization wants to capitalize on benefits from commitment. It is important to support change continuously. The findings from this study indicate that an essential ingredient may have been the management team meetings held every second week. Furthermore, the study showed that in spite of lofty ambitions and the establishment of a new structure, change in behavior takes time – and often more time than expected. Finally, a qualitative approach can reveal aspects that may not be revealed in the traditional survey investigations that are commonly used in studies of commitment to change.

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