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# Multilevel Readiness to Organizational Change: A Conceptual Approach

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**ABSTRACT** *One area of emerging research focuses on readiness to change, which has a strong impact on many decisions in a change process such as planning, implementation, communication and institutionalization. However, the term 'readiness' still creates confusion as it is presented in a simplistic way. This conceptual article aims at increasing our understating of readiness impact on change success by examining various levels of this concept, namely, micro-individual readiness, meso-group readiness and macro-organizational readiness, and their dynamics. This article ends with a discussion of how to create multilevel readiness to change for both planning and implementing organizational change.*

**KEY WORDS:** Individual readiness, group readiness, organizational readiness, organizational change, multilevel readiness to change

## Introduction

Organizational change is considered an integral part of organizational life. However, there is evidence that up to 70% of all major change initiatives fail (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006; Washington & Hacker, 2005). A number of authors have observed that recipients' reactions to change play a key role in its potential success (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). In this context, recipients' beliefs and perceptions of their organization level of readiness have an impact on their acceptance and adaptation to change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Armenakis, Bernerth, Pitts, & Walker, 2007; Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). As a result, change initiatives may not produce the intended results because recipients are simply not ready (Armenakis, *et al.*, 1993; By, 2007; Neves, 2009).

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Although beliefs, attitudes and intentions are basically the filters through which individuals decide whether there is a need for change or whether the organization is capable of implementation, the concept of 'individual readiness' as a stand-alone concept in an organizational context does not appear in the literature. The term 'readiness' is used to reflect three different concepts: individual readiness to change such as confidence in one's abilities (self-efficacy); perceived organizational readiness to change, such as confidence in organizational ability to manage the change; and the actual organizational readiness to change, which is the organization's ability to implement change. Thus, readiness to change is conceptualized as a broad construct, reflecting a combination of a number of factors that indicate the likelihood that someone will start or continue being engaged in behaviours associated with change such as support and participation. For example, an employee may be more likely to engage in change, if he or she feels ready and willing to support change, has confidence in his/her ability to succeed in change, perceives his/her organization as ready and capable of implementing the change, and perceives his/her group or social environment as supportive of such initiative(s).

There are three issues of concern here. First, the literature does not differentiate between individual and organizational readiness to change, which shows lack of definitional and conceptual clarity and creates confusion for both research and practice. Second, individuals are likely to resist organizational change that is not supported by group norms and expectations (J.N. Cummings, 2004). Although groups can have a powerful effect on members' behaviour, beliefs and values, group readiness to change is neglected in the literature. Third, neglecting the dynamics between the various levels of readiness contributes to the development of a partial approach to both theoretical and empirical work.

This article aims to look at readiness using a macro-, meso- and micro level of analysis, distinguishing between individual readiness to change, group readiness to change and organizational readiness to change. The macro level refers to an organization's capability of implementing change, the meso level refers to a group's capacity and decision to support change, and the micro level refers to the individual's perception of change (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999; Oreg, 2003; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Individual readiness to change is a critical success factor because 'organizations only change and act through their members and even the most collective activities that take place in organizations are the result of some amalgamation of the activities of individual organizational members' (George & Jones, 2001, p. 420). The aim here is to examine readiness through a multilevel approach trying to define the various levels and add clarity to their interrelationships and readiness dynamics. This process is designed to assist change researchers and practitioners in realizing various levels of readiness in a more holistic way, which will enable them to design more effective change interventions.

### **Defining Readiness to Change**

According to the work of Armenakis *et al.* (1993, p. 683), readiness is defined as the 'cognitive precursor to the behavior of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort.' Readiness is 'a mindset that exists among employees during the

implementation of organizational changes. It comprises beliefs, attitudes and intentions of change target members regarding the need for and capability of implementing organizational change' (Armenakis & Fredenberger, 1997, p.144). This is a widely used definition of readiness to change that does not, however, differentiate between the three levels of readiness to change – micro-level or individual readiness, meso-level or group readiness, and macro-level or organizational readiness to change. The following aims at clarifying these three levels.

#### *Individual Readiness to Change*

Organizational change cannot be effectively implemented without change recipients' willingness to change themselves and support the suggested organizational change programme/initiative. These changes cannot occur if employees are not ready for it. In other words, individual or organizational change will be facilitated by a high level of individual readiness to change, which is a malleable trait based on psychological predispositions and is shaped by the organizational and change context.

To explain the malleability of the self, social psychologists argued for an integrationist approach to behaviour, which is based on the view that the self is influenced by both personality and situational characteristics (Markus & Kunda, 1986). Markus and Kunda (1986) also explained that the malleability of the self is dynamic, which means that a particular set of traits must be activated when the person decides to take up a particular role in a situation. In the context of organizational change, dispositional characteristics, such as openness to change, self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control and positive affectivity, were found to act as antecedents of positive attitudes to change (Oreg *et al.*, 2011). These dispositional characteristics become accessible if they were activated before a change event, evoked by a past experience (e.g. a past change programme) and if they have been elicited by the social situation (e.g. the organizational context). When made accessible, the characteristics are subsequently shaped by situational characteristics, such as high or low trust, high or low organizational commitment, opportunities to participate in the change planning and implementation and the perceived impact of change (for a detailed analysis of the situational characteristics found to have an impact on change recipients' attitude formulation, please see a review by Oreg *et al.*, 2011).

Describing an individual as ready to change means that he/she exhibits a proactive and positive attitude that can be translated into willingness to support and confidence in succeeding in such an initiative. The readiness level may then vary on the basis of the situational characteristics of the change event. To illustrate, a change recipient may be willing to support change according to what he/she perceives to be the balance between costs and benefits of maintaining a behaviour and the costs and benefits of change. This preparation for action/support depends on whether the perceived benefits of change outweigh the anticipated risks for change. Individual readiness to change is based on the interaction of enduring predispositions and situationally induced responses, which are affected by individual's cognitive and affective processes. The outcome of this

interaction will result in formatting supportive or non-supportive behaviour toward change.

Is individual readiness to change different from resistance to change and positive or negative attitudes to change? Shein (1979, p. 144) argued that ‘...the reason so many change efforts run into resistance or outright failure is usually directly traceable to their not providing for an effective unfreezing process before attempting a change induction.’ Following this argument, Armenakis *et al.* (1993, p. 682) explained that ‘readiness for change may act to pre-empt the likelihood of resistance to change, increasing the potential for change efforts to be more effective.’ Based on these arguments, resistance and positive or negative attitudes towards change is considered as an outcome variable of high or low individual readiness to change.

#### *Group Readiness to Change*

Group readiness to change is based on collective perceptions and beliefs that: (1) change is needed, (2) the organization has the ability to cope with change effectively, (3) the group will benefit from change outcomes and (4) the group has the capacity to cope with change requirements. Group readiness to change needs to be analysed and discussed along with individual readiness and organizational readiness for two main reasons: first, following Coghlan’s (1994, p. 18) argument, which states that ‘articles that focus on how individuals resist change tend to be deficient or one sided in that they deal with individual in isolation from the groups with which an individual may identify,’ Thus, individual readiness to change has to be explored along with group readiness to change in the future. Second, although there are some empirical evidence linking groups and readiness to change (cf. Pond *et al.* 1984), there is no clear definition and analysis of this concept.

On the contrary, groups and resistance to change have been analyzed in the literature. The work of King and Anderson (1995, p. 167), for example, identified ‘group cohesiveness, social norms, participation in decision-making and autonomy for self determination of actions’ as sources of group resistance. They also identified similar ways in which teams function to resist change, which are team solidarity, rejection of outsiders, conformity to norms, conflict and team insight (King & Anderson, 1995, 2002). To overcome this resistance and prepare teams for accepting organizational change, the change management literature offers many insights such as getting members directly involved in understanding the need for change, engaging members in understanding their own situation, creating ownership of the design and implementation phase, and involving members in the decision-making process (J. N. Cummings, 2004).

#### *Change Recipients’ Perceived Organizational Readiness to Change*

Although perceived organizational readiness to change is crucial because failure to analyse readiness ‘can lead to abortive organization development effort’ (Beer, 1980, p. 80), little empirical research has focused on this construct (Armenakis, *et al.*, 1993; Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000). An employee’s

perception of an organization's readiness may influence their attitude toward change (Eby *et al.*, 2000). Research shows that positive attitudes to change are found to be vital in achieving organizational goals and in succeeding in change programmes (Gilmore & Barney, 1992; Iacovini, 1992; Oreg *et al.*, 2011; Vakola, Tsaousis, & Nikolaou, 2004). By contrast, negative attitudes to change are associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). The perception of organizational readiness is seen on a continuum ranging from viewing the organization as capable of successfully undertaking change (high perceived organizational readiness to change) to realizing that the organization is not ready to be engaged in such an effort (low perceived organizational readiness to change) (Eby *et al.*, 2000).

*Is There a Relationship Between Employee Perceived Organizational Readiness to Change and Actual Organizational Readiness to Change?*

An employee's perception of readiness may be indicative of the organization's ability to successfully change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). To illustrate, on an organizational level, the organizational culture literature shows that culture, which reflects a set of beliefs, expectations and shared values, guides the behaviour of an organization (Hatch, 1993). On an individual level, the study by Schneider and Bowen in the banking industry (1985) showed that employees' perceptions of their organization's service climate correlate with customers' perceptions of the quality of service. Schneider and Bowen (1993) argued that employees' positive perception of internal organizational climate reflects on their behaviour, and as a result, customers report more positive service experience as a result of this psychological and physical closeness that is involved in service encounter. Betten-court and Brown (1997) argued that bank tellers perceiving fair pay rules were likely to receive higher supervisor ratings for extra-role customer service behaviours. The argument here is that when employees perceive their organization as ready to change, this will reflect on their behaviour, thus enabling their organization to actually implement changes.

Perceptions of organizational readiness to change may be affected by the state of individual readiness to change. According to Eby *et al.* (2000, p. 425), 'an individual who perceives him or herself as adapting easily to change may be more perceptive to organizational change efforts and be more likely to view an organization's readiness for change as favorable.' Eby and colleagues continued providing indirect evidence from Lau and Woodman (1995) who found that individuals who perceived themselves as having control over a changing situation tended to have positive beliefs about change, in general, and about their reactions to a specific type of change.

*Organizational Readiness to Change*

Organizational readiness to change is seen as similar to Lewin's concept of unfreezing (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Following this rationale of phases, unfreezing–moving–refreezing (Lewin, 1947), that organizations go through to successfully implement changes, the readiness phase involves realizing the need for



change and securing mechanisms, such as communication or culture, that will support change in the adoption and institutionalisation phases. To immediately begin doing things in a different way and to use these ways on a permanent basis may be a shock to the organization. Therefore, a state of readiness needs to be established in order to ensure that the organization is indeed capable of undertaking the proposed change successfully (R. A. Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005). Organizational readiness refers to the existing mechanisms, processes or policies that can encourage or disrupt change such as organizational structure, culture, climate, leadership commitment, etc. For example, if an organization wants to change its culture to a more customer-oriented one, a rigid and hierarchical structure and poor communication will most likely hinder this process. These two elements are signs of an organization low on readiness to change because such initiatives will not be supported by existing mechanisms.

### **Exploring Readiness Dynamics**

#### *The Relationship Between Individual and Group Readiness*

Kozlowski and Klein (2000) suggested that a lower level individual-based phenomenon, such as a dispositional characteristic or a psychological state, emerges into a higher level phenomenon through composition, a linear combination similar to an additive effect, or compilation, which represents nonlinear interactive combination similar to dominance. Group dynamics research suggests that combinations of group member dispositional and other characteristics have been conceptually associated with group processes and performance (Barry & Stewart, 1997). For example, George (1990) found that individual characteristics are associated with the level of positive or negative group affectivity and with the overall emotional tone of group interaction. Haythorn (1953) also suggested that groups function more effectively when all members are adaptable and accepting of others. Teams that do not have disagreeable or introverted members were found to be higher performing (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). These findings indicate that individual phenomena aggregate to form collective phenomena.

Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

Proposition 1: Teams with greater proportion of members with high individual readiness to change will report higher levels of group readiness to change.

#### *The Impact of Group Readiness to Change on Individual Readiness to Change*

Following the work of Kuhn and Corman (2003) who suggest not overlooking the complex interactive forces that influence planned change, it is important to discuss the impact of group readiness on individual readiness to change. Groups can have powerful effects on members' behaviours, beliefs and values, exerting pressure on members to conform to norms, which govern group behaviour (J.N. Cummings 2004). Group norms are the 'informal rules that groups adopt to regulate and regularize group member's behaviour' (Hackman, 1976) and Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985) indicated that such norms are one of the least visible but most

powerful forms of control over individual action and behaviour. For example, individuals within a social network who claim to be open to new ideas and accept changes can in fact act against any change if perceived as being a threat to their existing relations (Macri, Tagliaventi, & Bertolotti, 2002).

Feldman (1984) notes that norms develop in four ways: members carry over past situations; team members and leaders make explicit statements; critical events occur; and primacy effects make early patterns difficult to alter. Previous experiences may influence individual predispositions, and statements are manifestations of such. Critical events and primacy effects suggest that initiatives such as change can have an impact on groups' level of readiness. Group readiness to change forms as group members collectively acquire, store, manipulate and exchange information about each other's attitudes toward change and about their task, context, process and past behaviour related to change. Through processes of interaction, this information is combined, weighted and integrated to form group readiness. The level of group readiness to change is shaped by group norms, which have a strong impact on the promotion and adoption of behaviours within an organizational change context. Therefore, in this conceptual framework, it is suggested that group norms will influence and sometimes shape perceptions, beliefs and attitudes toward change if the individual strongly identifies with the group. This view is supported by Jimmieson, White, and Peach (2004) who suggested that perceptions of group norm predicted intentions only for those employees who identified strongly with their reference group. Hence, subjective norm, which reflects perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour, and is one of the three independent determinants of the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), should be particularly relevant to both individual and group readiness to change. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

Proposition 2: The more favourable the subjective norm with respect to support of change, the stronger the positive influence on change recipients' individual readiness to change.

#### *The Relationship Among Organizational Readiness and Individual Readiness and Group Readiness*

Employees' perceptions and beliefs about readiness may be indicative of the organization's ability to successfully change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Research suggests that resistance is a social systemic phenomenon, which is maintained by the background conversations of the organizations (Ford & Ford, 2009). Beliefs and perceptions of organizational readiness to change may be affected by the state of group readiness to change, which in turn is constantly being influenced by the readiness of individual members. These interpersonal and social dynamics within one's work group may impact organizational readiness to change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993).

Proposition 3: Organizational readiness to change will be positively influenced by a high level of individual readiness to change.



Proposition 4: Organizational readiness to change will be positively influenced by a high level of group readiness to change.

### **Creating Multilevel Readiness to Organizational Change**

Successful change is viewed as dependent on a certain degree of organizational readiness to change (By, 2007; Madsen, Miller, & John, 2005; Peach, Jimmieson, & White, 2005; By, 2007). As a result, any change programme may consider diagnosing the readiness level and introduce it by a series of steps to create and enhance individual, group and organizational readiness to change. Rather than creating readiness each time the organization attempts to implement change, readiness could be perceived and 'invested' in as a constant state, which is conceived as a core competency to cope with continuous changing external, as well as internal, conditions. Up to now, readiness has been conceived as a pre-change concern neglecting the need of maintaining readiness throughout the change process and beyond.

Change readiness should be incorporated at macro, meso and micro levels. Starting with the macro level, such readiness should be incorporated into the strategic plan because through the creation of constant change readiness, organizations gain flexibility and adaptability. Furthermore, it is important to build an environment of trust, which has an impact on formulating positive attitudes toward organizational change. At the meso level, high readiness facilitates change implementation because, through the diagnostic stage, those responsible for change can create a feasible change plan addressing the organization's specific needs. More specifically, at a meso level, change interventions could put emphasis on creating and fostering favourable group norms through in-group identification. On a micro level, readiness is a malleable trait and, therefore, can be identified and developed through employee training and development programmes, in performance appraisals, and in change agent selection processes, to name a few.

#### *Trust Building*

When considering readiness to change, one should look at trust building as a way of creating readiness and managing change. Trust is not a new concept and it is found to be positively related with various work behaviours and organizational results such as sharing of information and participation in task completion (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990), superior levels of performance, and more positive attitudes and actions (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; G.R. Jones & George, 1998; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). More recently, trust was identified as the factor that yielded the strongest relationship with change reactions (Oreg *et al.*, 2011; Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2005) as it was related with greater acceptance and willingness to cooperate towards achieving change (Coyle-Shapiro & Morrow, 2003; Kiefer, 2005; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000). Organizations are advised to foster perceptions of trust among employees by encouraging open communication with emphasis on feedback, accurate information, adequate explanation of decisions and open exchange of thoughts and ideas (Butler, 1991).

Managers can consider involving employees in organizational processes, such as decision-making or determination of work roles, as this is found to positively influence the development of trust (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

#### *Fostering Favourable Group Norms*

There is evidence to suggest that change management interventions should foster favourable group norms and strengthen in-group identification to develop stronger intentions to support a specific change event (Jimmieson, White, & Zajdlewicz., 2009; R.A. Jones *et al.*, 2005). In combining with other theories of how to develop group norms (Feldman, 1984), this finding suggests that it is important to develop group norms supportive to change. For example, leaders or change agents need to define the specific role and task expectations to individual group members. Reducing uncertainty in a context of an imminent change will support the development of favourable group norms. Also, the first behaviour pattern that emerges in a group often sets group expectations (Feldman 1984). If, in the early days of a change programme, speaking up is not encouraged and organizational silence prevails, then the group will expect that this climate will continue to exist. This expectation may have an impact on beliefs and intentions to act. It has to be noted here that the impact of favourable group norms depends on the strength of in-group identification.

#### *Individual Readiness Profiles*

One way of making change efforts more successful is the diagnosis and assessment of individual readiness to change of those involved or affected by the change. It would be useful for organizations which are undergoing change or are interested in creating a high state of readiness to assess managers and change agents for readiness to change. Assessing the dispositional aspect of individual readiness contributes to creating profiles to select employees for those positions and assignments that inherently entail changes, or employees who will become responsible for change implementation in their roles as change agents, managers and leaders.

Oreg *et al.* (2011), in their 60-year review of the relevant literature, have identified a number of dispositional characteristics that contribute to change recipients' attitude formulation. This information can be used as the basis of assessment, which will lead to individual readiness profiles. For example, locus of control, which reflects individuals' beliefs of their responsibility for their own fate, was positively related with positive reactions to change (Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007; Lau & Woodman, 1995; Naswall, Sverke, & Hellgren, 2005). Also, higher levels of self-efficacy were associated with increased change acceptance (Wanberg & Banas, 2000) and increased commitment to the change (Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007). Other dispositional traits identified in this review were the increased sense of control over the change, which was related with greater acceptance (Wanberg & Banas, 2000), and positive affectivity was related to coping with (Judge *et al.*, 1999) and accepting change (Iverson, 1996).

Furthermore, these profiles may be used to identify employees who could benefit from a training programme in which coping with change strategies will be the main focus. Training programmes and interventions can be designed and tailored for individual employees in accordance to their profile. For example, programmes can include emotions management because managing emotions created by change, such as excitement and enthusiasm as well as fear, anger and resentment, is fast becoming a necessary tool for change leaders and is a required competency to become a change agent (Vakola *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, individual profiles based on readiness assessments may support strategy formulation regarding dealing with resistance to change. Employees who do not feel confident about their ability to perform their job – especially after a change event – may be supported through adequate training and mentoring before developing symptoms of resistance.

#### *Diagnosing and Assessing Readiness to Change*

Armenakis and Fredenberger (1997) suggested that readiness assessment should be based on observing, interviewing and administering questionnaires. They continue by describing how this information can be obtained ‘...by asking broad questions about organizational strengths and weaknesses and employee attitudes and expectations, followed by more specific probing questions, change agents can assess an organization’s readiness for change’ (Armenakis and Fredenberger, 1997, p. 144). Although the literature does not support the use of climate surveys to diagnose readiness levels, practice confirms that external consultants or change agents use climate surveys as readiness assessment tools. In a change context, a climate survey is particularly useful because it assesses the current situation showing the gap between, for example, the existing decision-making practices, employee responsibilities and information systems, and the future ones that the change aims at establishing. These results are critical because they show the level of alignment between the existing and the desired state. Hence, defining the change action plan. Although climate surveys can give realistic results about the existing situation, readiness assessment methodology could be enhanced by adding several scales aiming at measuring specific constructs such as trust, related to readiness (e.g. L. L. Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). Furthermore, administering questionnaires specifically designed and validated to measure readiness (e.g. readiness scale developed by Holt *et al.*, 2007) may also enhance the methodology.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

This conceptual article addresses the need for a multilevel approach to readiness of change by exploring this concept at a macro, meso and micro level and identifying some of the dynamics among these levels. However, empirical research needs to take place to assess these concepts and their interrelationships. There are some important concerns when considering readiness to change. First, it is important to further clarify and empirically test the relationship between individual, group and organizational readiness to change and behaviour toward change.

Second, research is required in order to shed light on and determine whether individual readiness to change is a malleable trait. This article perceived individual readiness to change as a malleable trait, which is based on certain dispositional characteristics, but is shaped and influenced by specific organizational and change context. Longitudinal studies can clarify and identify which predispositions are stable over time and which can be conceived as amenable to training.

Third, it is essential to examine the impact of individual, group and organizational readiness to change, answering critical questions such as: What is the relationship between individual readiness to change and job performance? What is the relationship between organizational readiness to change and organizational effectiveness? Can a lack of readiness to change be added to the list of potential failure factors in change implementation?

### Conclusion

To sum up, in examining readiness to change, researchers and practitioners are presented with a conceptual article that provides a structure for further understanding the macro, meso and micro levels of readiness to change. Diagnosing, assessing and creating individual readiness for change should be viewed as an integral part of planning, implementing and evaluating organizational change. Moreover, creating a multilevel readiness may be the answer to some important phenomena such as resistance to change. Models and theories of change at a higher level must be informed by an understanding and analysis of change at macro, meso and micro-levels.

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