PROFESSIONAL RESISTANCE TO CHANGE:
THE BARRIER OF JURISDICTIONAL AUTONOMY

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This paper develops an alternative perspective of the concept of resistance to change. The perspective emerged from a qualitative analysis of change programs across an array of businesses and industries. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze interview data gathered from participants and principals involved in a variety of organizational change programs. In contrast to the traditional construal of resistance as a psychological, individualistic response to a specific change, or as a psychological predisposition to resist all change, the current qualitative data identify a form of structural resistance stemming from professional perceptions of jurisdiction.1

There is almost universal agreement that individuals dislike change and therefore resist it (Harrison 1999; Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Resistance is so commonplace; it is seen as a “natural by-product” of change programs (Jansen 2000). Failure to overcome resistance to organizational change is often seen as the reason for the failure of efforts to produce planned organizational change (Coetsee, 1999; Kotter, 1995; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995). Even when change programs are initially successfully implemented, latent and unresolved feelings of resistance are seen as the cause of long-term erosion and slippage in revised processes and structures, leading to the ultimate failure of change efforts (Judson, 1991).

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Recent research has focused on resistance to change across a wide array of organizations including formally state-owned enterprises in East Germany (Breu, 2001), intercollegiate athletics (Kadlecek et al. 1999), state agencies (Witherspoon and Wohlert, 1996) travel agencies (Clemons and Hann 1999). While the contexts of the research on resistance vary, most research is based on the concept of resistance as arising from individuals’ reactions to a particular change or to individuals’ general resistance to all change. There has been little attention focused on identifying and analyzing systemic or institutionalized forms of resistance (Agocs, 1997).

Method
The Interview Protocol. MBA students at a large Northeastern university conducted structured interviews as part of a multi-year research project on organizational change. The interviewers used a standardized protocol to gather informants' descriptions of the processes and outcomes of large-scale change efforts in their organizations. The interview protocol asked for information about the vision for change, the role of change champions, communications during the change, resistance to change, and evaluations of the effectiveness of the change. Interviews typically lasted from 1 to 1 1/2 hours. For the current research, the important interview questions were concerned with resistance to change. Specific questions were asked about who resisted change, how they resisted, and what actions were taken to deal with resistance.

The Sample. The research sampled actors, organizations, and change programs. A total of 50 organizational actors were interviewed, ranging from top-level managers and owners to first-line employees. The interviewees served as informants on change programs that had been implemented in their organizations. Generally, three informants were interviewed in each organization in order to test for convergence in the information about each change program. As will be seen in the analyses, the informants within organizations often differed in their descriptions of the organizational change process and in their evaluations of the change program.

Interviews were gathered from a total of 18 organizations. The sample included 5 health care organizations, a health insurance company, a public university, a state agency, 3 manufacturing companies, 2 private, national professional firms, one regional and one national wholesale distributor, a retail drug chain, a public utility, and a large multi-divisional manufacturing and services organization.

In addition to the variety of actors and organizations, there also were differences in many key characteristics of the programs described by the individual informants. Some changes involved structural reorganizations, such as decentralizing management, flattening the hierarchy, reorganizing into a team structure, and shifting from functional operations to business units. Other changes involved process innovations such as automation of functions, re-engineering procedures, and quality improvement programs.

Analysis. Agreeing with DeVault (1990), that interviews are “by their very nature a form of social interaction grounded in talk” we approached the data as “productive sites” where informants would “establish subjective meanings” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) and began an analysis of the content of this collection of open-ended interview data. An open coding process (Straus, 1987) was applied to the qualitative data to enable a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to be used in analyzing responses to the interview protocol. The goal was to identify themes concerning causes and forms of resistance to change, as well as organizational responses to resistance. An inductive theory building process was used to construct a conceptual framework that would explain the forms of resistance identified in differing organizations and in differing types of change programs. Content and patterns were
abstracted from the interview data rather than imposed prior to data collection (Janesick 1994).

Results and Conceptualization
Analysis of the interviews first showed us that our sample of informants occupied a variety of differing roles with respect to the change program under discussion. Some could be classified as “change architects,” (the management change agents responsible for designing the change program); others were “focal employees,” (whose duties, schedules, evaluation systems or some other work aspect would be changed as a result of the change); some were “managers in the middle,” (charged with implementing the “change architects” plan upon the “focal employees”); others occupied roles we have called “innocent bystanders” (persons affected by the change in unexpected ways), and “flag wavers” (advocates for the change). In addition to occupying a diverse set of roles, informants also differed in their evaluation the effectiveness of the change program and in their perceptions of implementation mechanisms. Despite the differences reported by informants concerning many of the aspects of the change programs, resistance to change in some form or another was described by 47 of the 50 respondents in all organizations. In addition, the common elements among informants' descriptions went beyond the mere presence of resistance and extended to an unexpected commonality in how resisters were characterized by the informants. First, resisters often were identified, not as isolated individuals, but rather as coherent work cohorts, such as “older employees”, “line employees”, “nurses”. Upon closer examination, we noticed that many of the resisting groups typically carried professional identification such as “engineers”, “pharmacists”, “physicians”, etc. We also noted that the "professionals" seemed to resist even when the change was primarily directed at other groups. For example, in the case of a Public Transportation Agency, volunteers were asked to participate in employing Computer Aided Design and Drafting (CADD) software as a replacement for manual drafting. Resistance was demonstrated by the non-participating drafters (who were not effected by the program). Informants reported that the non-participating drafters, who felt that using CADD system caused a loss of “control” over drawings by drafters, deliberately misrouted drawings away from the volunteer CADD groups. What explained the resistance to change of professionals who were not directly affected by the change? It is our conjecture that resistance by some organizational members was rooted within the claims of expertise and autonomy made by certain groupings of "professional" workers and others with similar situations of expertise and autonomy.

Prior Conceptualizing of Resistance to Change
The basic paradigm of research on resistance to change can be traced to studies performed at Harwood Manufacturing by Coch and French. Harwood Manufacturing employed a piece-rate salary system and was faced by the fact that experienced workers, when transferred to new jobs, resisted their new assignments through absenteeism, reducing their output, and expressing hostility towards management. The investigations showed that the experienced workers were resisting change because of their perceptions that a pay loss would be suffered due to a reduction in productivity at the early stages of the learning curve of the new job. Coch and French (1948) sought to determine whether participating in discussions about the changing work assignments would affect the worker's resistance to change. Workers were assigned to either a participative (experimental) or non-participative (control group). Coch and French summarized the results of their field-experiment as:

It is possible for management to modify or to remove completely group resistance to changes in methods of work and the ensuing piece rates. This change can be accomplished by the use of group meetings in which management effectively communicates the need for change and
stimulates group participation in planning the changes. (p 531)

The story of overcoming the resistance of the manufacturing employee’s at Haywood still provides the central model for understanding resistance to change. That is, employees whose work will be impacted by change are expected to resist implementation because of the fear that is generated from the unknown effects of the change, or a lack of understanding concerning the personal and organizational benefits of a change. The concept that resistance is based on fear or misunderstanding remains dominant in the literature. It is employee fear and misunderstanding that managers are exhorted to address and overcome in order to “sell” change efforts (Pollock, 2000).

There have been attempts to break down the concept of “fear” to more precise affective and cognitive components. Thus, resistance to change has been seen as caused by “self-interest, misunderstanding, and (an) inherent limited tolerance for change” (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997) “the loss of status, pay, or comfort” (Dent and Goldberg, 1999) “the work that change requires” (McCallum, 1997), “an individual’s self-interest being threatened” (Clarke, Bateman, and Rugutt, 1996) and “uncertainty and the perceived loss of control” (Fox, Amichai-Hamburger and Evans, 2001). In addition, the feelings that ultimately manifest themselves into resistance to change are not always rational, causing employees to resist even when proposed changes are in their best interests (O’Toole, 1995).

**Cooperation through Education**

Resistance to change is envisioned as the result of cognitive processing (learn-do-feel) and the classical model of resistance to change proposes that resistance stems from a mis-learning that leads to mis-feelings resulting in the mis-behavior of resistance. The intervention prescribed to mitigate resistance has also changed little from the original conclusions of Coch and French, namely, communication and participation. By introducing new (proper) information relating to the proposed change, change agents will be able to foster the formation of positive attitudes that will lead to new non-resistive behaviors. That prescriptive guidance can probably best be characterized as the “cooperation through education” strategy of overcoming resistance, and is summarized by Downes (1998) quoting Eadie (1997)

...make absolutely clear the ties of planned changes to organizational values, vision, and mission; build ownership of change initiatives; keep the change program realistic in scope and pace; maximize individual benefit and minimize loss; reward cooperation while not rewarding resistance; and communicate, communicate, communicate. (p. 192):

If resistance is the key barrier to change and the steps required to overcome resistance are well known and documented, then why do so many organizations meet resistance when attempting to institute planned organizational change? Why is it that researchers estimate that less than one-third of all organizational change efforts are successful (Trahant, Burke & Koonce, 1997). Recent commentaries have criticized the long history of research addressing change (and the resistance to it) as “not significantly advanced our understanding of the processes and sequences of events that unfold during an organizational change” (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). The very term “resistance to change” has come under attack from those who claim that resistance is not strictly a function of a particular change program, but rather is a response to rewards, compensation systems, and structures that do not support the change (Kotter, 1995), (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). We agree with Davidson (1994) that resistance to change may be a symptom, a manifestation of organizational (not simply individual) factors that are worthy of attention. We believe that an exclusive focus on individual attitudinal and personality variables inherent in the accepted
paradigm of resistance to change may disguise the structural forces that underlie resistance in many organizational contexts.

The concept of “resistance to change” seems, in itself, resistant to change. Even when theorists call for reconceptualizing resistance (for example Piderit, 2000) the roots of the concept as individual cognitions, affects, and behaviors are maintained. We agree with both Kotter (1995) and Dent and Goldberg (1999) that there are structural conditions that generate what may appear to be resistance to change. Based on our analyses of informants' descriptions of resistance and resistors in the current research, we put forth the proposition that one important structural component of resistance lies within the construct of professionalism and its corollary construct of jurisdictional autonomy.

We employ the term professional in its broadest sense to describe those situations where experts possess both authority and autonomy as they apply esoteric knowledge on a case-by-case basis (Abbott 1988, pp. 99-100). That view of professionalism includes groups and jobs that may not have achieved accreditation status, share common training, or possess external legitimation of their professional status. In fact, whenever employees (regardless of they are classified as "professionals") can exert a claim of autonomy within their area of expertise, the potential exists for them to become a barrier to change programs. The early shop floor ethnographies of Crozier (1964) and Dalton (1959) bear testament to the concept that the characteristic of professional autonomy can be possessed and enacted by work groups not traditionally associated with professionalized work. Skilled workers in the maintenance and repair departments, described in detail in The Bureaucratic Phenomena and Men Who Manage, were able to mount resistance to change in their respective contexts that generated barriers insurmountable by management.

In our current data there were four programs where informants identified resistors as “senior” or “long-term” employees. While it is believed by many that senior employees demonstrate resistance to change due to their age—“the resistant older worker”- we believe that experienced workers may resist, no out of an inability to change, but out of an ability to assert autonomy. It would be expected that more senior workers are more likely to perform their long standing tasks with greater autonomy than junior counterparts.

The nature of what we refer to as professional resistance differs from the normal conceptualization of resistance. When resistance stems from assertions of professional autonomy, resistance is resistance to any change (as opposed to a particular change) that effects the nature of work. And is based upon group norms (as opposed to individual reaction). Thus, resistance in such situations is a product of a role, not a function of attitudes, personality, or individual differences. Unlike their non-professional counterparts who often must be passive recipients of management definitions of work practices, professionals are “active agents” (Hodson, 1995) capable of shaping the nature of their work. Hoff and McCaffrey (1996) concluded that professions concluded that professionals possess “various resources and talents” that they employ to protect their autonomy against organizational “encroachments.” In one of the change programs analyzed in our current research, revisions in store operating procedures were caused by the buyout of one pharmacy chain by another. Although most of the revised procedures were aimed at the general merchandise (non-pharmaceutical) functions, it was the pharmacists who were identified as the main resisters. “Pharmacists just don’t like to be told anything” was the observation of a regional vice president.

Identifying resistance as stemming from professional claims of autonomy over work is not a new concept. Wholey, et al (1993) traced resistance to the formation of HMO’s as stemming from the perceived threats to physician's autonomy. Blumenthal (1995)
identified the “entrenched resistance” from physicians and other professionals from “any interference from administrators” (italics ours). Covaleski, et al. (1998) demonstrated how the jurisdictional control of work by accountants in big six accounting firms served as a basis for resistance to change in establishing MBO programs in the firms. Professional autonomy can be conceptualized on a continuum. Not only do different types of workers possess different levels of autonomy (physicians versus architects versus auto mechanics), but the same titular category possesses differing levels of autonomy when performing in different contexts (the full professor at most research university, versus the full professor at most community colleges). We propose that resistance stems from jurisdictional autonomy, not formal professionalism per se.

Managing Professional Resistance to Change

The “cooperation through education” model of dealing with resistance to change may have little effect at the upper end (higher levels) of the professional autonomy continuum. At those upper reaches one strategy for managing resistance is akin to Douglas McArthur’s “Island Hopping” strategy in the Pacific Theater of World War II. Macarthur, determine to make good on the “I shall Return” pledge he had made to the Philippine people, devised a plan to bypass fortified Japanese islands in his move northward in the western pacific. Macarthur felt that once bypassed, the strongly garrisoned islands would no longer be a factor in a defense of Japan and that, once bypassed, they would die on the vine without resources. This concept of “island hopping” provides an analogy for implementing planned organizational change in the face of professional resistance. Within the island-hopping framework, “avoiding resistance” acknowledges the inherent presence of significant resistance and bypasses it.

Bypassing pockets of significant resistance is evident in the field. The implementation of Continuous Quality Improvement programs in health care organizations is attributed to implementation plans that circumvented physician resistance (Wilson & Porter-O’Grady, 1999). Similarly, authors have often suggested rolling out change programs in isolated and separate arenas (e.g., Kotter, 1995), where, due to a lack of resistance, successes can build up momentum for wider organizational implementation. This by-passing approach was also evident in one of the change programs we studied. A private hospital in our sample successfully implemented a Continuous Quality Improvement program in the face of resistance from physicians who criticized the program as “pushing cookbook medicine”. Management’s strategy was to implement the program in departments where physician power was not a factor (dietary, housekeeping, maintenance). As one employee reported “they would dangle a carrot and celebrate any success.”

An interesting perspective on the concept of professional resistance is provided by 5 of the 18 change programs in our study. All five of the programs were cost reduction programs that centered around centralization and automation of tasks combined with resultant staff reductions. We view these programs as almost “perfectly non-professional” since procedural centralization and automation are the opposite of case-by-case application of esoteric knowledge. Not only was it not required to bypass resistance in these cases, it seems it was not even necessary to address it. All five of these change programs were evaluated as successful by the interviewees. Although informants in these programs reported moderate levels of resistance, they also reported no reaction to the resistance on the part of management. The change programs were described as “an edict”, “set in stone”, “a done deal”. Perhaps the most revealing comment on how resistance is dealt with in these situations came from the manager who reported:”people either got on board or were run over.” Some change programs, in other words, are so powerful (or some employees are so powerless, or some combination of the two) that resistance is neither bypassed nor managed.
Discussion

This qualitative study develops a structural model of resistance from a different perspective than its usual portrayal as an individual reaction to a specific change program. The model has both theoretical and practical relevance (Pettigrew, 1997).

The prevalence of professional resistance can be expected to increase in the future as organizations adopt flatter structures with higher levels of autonomy and empowerment and begin to look more and more like professional organizations. Organizational change in such organizations may be particularly problematic if approached from the traditional individualized model of resistance.

From a practitioner standpoint, island hopping may provide a strategic alternative for the implementation of change efforts in some contexts.

Our identification of resistance avoidance as an alternative to resistance management raises a question for future research. Specifically, at what point on a continuum of professional autonomy will resistance be of sufficient strength that attempts at managing or minimizing resistance should be abandoned in favor of a bypass strategy? Perhaps a subset of Hall’s (1968) scale of professional identity could be employed to quantitatively identify the point where strategies should be changed.
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