

Purposeful Resistance Leadership Theory

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Abstract

A new leadership theory is suggested and pertains to the general topic of power whereby mid-level organizational leaders resist organizational change for the purpose of retaining their position of power in the organization. The purposeful resistance theory relates to the power dimension of leader role behavior in the context of the organizational setting. The topic is especially salient given the frequency of organizational change events within the contemporary business environment.

Key words: Organizational leadership, organizational management, leadership theory, organizational downsizing, organizational change

1. Introduction

Leadership is a critical component of an agency's organizational context and has an important influence on an organizational change strategy and how it impacts the organization (Appelbaum, Close, & Klasa, 1999). Business trends in the early part of the 21st century include more organizational changes for the purpose of streamlining operations to better adapt to the dynamic business environment characterized by a technology-driven global economy. A new theory of leadership specific to this context is proposed, known as the purposeful resistance theory of leadership whereby mid-level organizational leaders resist organizational change for the purpose of retaining their position of power in that organization. While *power* is defined as "the capacity or potential to influence," *position power* involves "the power a person derives from a particular office or rank in a formal organization" (Northouse, 2001, p. 6). Organizational leaders participate in collective emotions including "invitations to accrue power" (Heifitz & Linsky, 2002, p. 166). Although the organizational change process "has traditionally been conceptualized as a problem of changing technologies, structures, and the abilities of employees," of significance is that the "organization ultimately resides in the heads of the people involved" and may include "resistance, resentment, and mistrust" (Morgan, 1997, p. 150). This transcends to levels of organizational leadership where the potential for disturbed behavior on the part of the leader exists.

2. Background

The purposeful resistance theory relates to the power dimension of leader role behavior in the context of the organizational setting. Purposeful resistance leadership contradicts Northouse's (2001) belief that "the component common to nearly all of the theory classifications is that leadership is an influence process that assists groups of individuals toward goal attainment" (p. 11). The basic principles of purposeful resistance theory are derived from certain aspects of the style approach to leadership, psychodynamic approach to leadership, and contingency theory.

The style approach emphasizes the behavior of the leader and focuses on what leaders do rather than who leaders are. Alternatively, the psychodynamic approach presumes that leaders are not conscious of the organizational consequences of their behavior (Northouse, 2001). Contingency theory is concerned with "styles and situations" and suggests that situations can be characterized by assessing position power. Martin (1992) offered a contingency approach to organizational change whereby "organizational culture will develop a certain set of characteristics in order to adapt to a particular internal and environmental configuration, in accord with the specifications of one cultural perspective rather than another" (p. 170).

To this end, purposeful resistance sheds light on the existence of a dysfunctional type of behavior as it relates to *style*. Related to psychodynamics, purposeful resistant leadership is focused on the leader *behavior* for the benefit of the leader as opposed to the benefit of the organization during change. This behavior could be unconscious or deliberate. Finally, the organizational change event serves as the *situation*.

3. Theory Explanation

Kaplan (as cited in Bacharach, 1989, p. 500) defined constructs as “terms which, though not observational either directly or indirectly, may be applied or even defined on the basis of the observables.” Furthermore, “a construct may be viewed as a broad mental configuration of a given phenomenon, while a variable may be viewed as an operational configuration derived from a construct.” Related to purposeful resistant leadership phenomenon, constructs are the organizational dynamic (change) and the leader behavior while variables derived from the leader behavior construct include dysfunctional behavior, subversive behavior, and resistance to change. Variables derived from the organizational dynamic construct include change in varying magnitudes (e.g., changing the corporate logo to actual realignment of departments) and strata applications (e.g., intra-division to organization-wide).

3.1 Relationship

Bacharach (1989) portended, “The theorist must incorporate in propositions and hypothesis an explicit statement of whether the antecedent is a necessary, sufficient, or necessary and sufficient condition for the consequent” (p. 506). In purposeful resistance theory, there is the necessary existence of an antecedent-consequent relationship between the organizational dynamic and the leader behavior. This is analogized in Northouse’s (2001) illustration of the relationship between leader behavior and follower behavior exhibited in transformational leadership. However, in the case of purposeful resistance, the organizational dynamic influences dysfunctional behavior by the leader as opposed to the positive follower behavior resultant from the transformational leader behavior. For example, the organizational dynamic of institution-wide change in communication of policy has shown to result in filtering behavior by mid-level leadership. This was illustrated during the restructuring of International Business Machines (IBM) when a regional manager purposely blocked from his staff emails from the Chief Executive Officer that were addressed to all IBM employees (Gerstner, 2002).

3.2 Logic

Theory logic can be expressed in terms of process and outcomes. Leadership processes are “the types of social influence processes that operate and the psychological dynamics underlying them” (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996, p. 15). Purposeful resistance leadership theory forces mid-level leadership to assess their behavior during an organizational dynamic such as change. Moreover, purposeful resistance theory serves as a warning or “red flag” to top-level leaders to the potential existence of dysfunctional leadership behavior from subordinates that could serve as barriers to organizational change.

In purposeful resistance theory, outcomes are defined in terms of the outcome of the organizational change dynamic in which leadership is exercised. Significantly, of all the corporate reengineering and cultural change programs started each year, 70% ultimately fail because of employee resistance (Reynolds, 1994, p. 17). Barriers to change, such as resistance, must be identified and then eliminated, bypassed or neutralized (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Northouse (2001) contended that while researchers have not been able to associate leader behavior with outcomes such as morale, job satisfaction, and productivity, “a leader who understands his or her style will be more effective than one who is blind to it” (p. 199). In this vein, in the case of organizational change, contingency theory forces leadership to consider the impact of situation on mid-level management. Fiedler and Chemers (1974) wrote that the situation plays a “substantial role in shaping behavior” while the leader’s individual intent “plays a lesser part” (p. 97). This influences the outcome of the change event. As such, purposeful resistance theory is outcome-oriented.

3.3 Boundaries

Theories with a higher level of generality may be relatively unbounded in both space and time or that some are more bounded by one than the other (Bacharach, 1989). Spacial boundaries are “conditions restricting the use of theory to specific units of analysis” (p. 499). The purposeful resistance leadership theory is unbounded in space given that it can be applied to many types of organizations.

For example, Gerstner (2002) described dysfunction behavior by mid-level leaders at IBM (private sector) during organizational change. The author personally witnessed dysfunctional behavior by mid-level leaders in multiple organizations during organizational change that included hostile tirades, intentional failure to carry out change-related policy, and passive-aggressive behavior such as criticism of those policies in front of employee groups. For example, a mid-level leader ignored change-related guidance from the organization's director and criticized the director publicly during all-employee meetings. The leader's behavior related to an impending loss of positional power and the leader attempted to undermine the change-process and the credibility of the senior-level leadership threatening the loss of power.

Conversely, purposeful resistance leadership theory is temporally bounded. Temporal boundaries are those "specifying the historical applicability of a theoretical system" (Bacharach, 1989, p. 499). As exemplified in literature and personally observed by the author, an organizational change dynamic must be in play for mid-level leadership to manifest the purposeful resistant behavior.

3.4 Underlying Assumptions and Values

Underlying assumptions for this theory were constructed from personal experiences of, and observations by, the author. Unlike other leadership approaches, such as contingency theory and situational leadership, purposeful resistance leadership does not provide a clearly defined set of assumptions. However, four underlying assumptions are evident: (1) certain mid-level managers will resist relinquishing power during an organizational change event; (2) certain mid-level managers will mask the expression of their true feelings from their superiors so as not to jeopardize their position of power during an organizational change event; (3) mid-level managers who use the passive management-by-exception model traditionally resist organizational change; and (4) certain leader's needs for positional power and prestige are deeply ingrained and virtually impossible to change in any way (unless they undergo some sort of spiritual conversion).

Values as related to theory are "the implicit assumptions by which theory is bounded" (Bacharach, 1989, p. 498). The overarching value inherent in purposeful resistance theory is that the organizational change dynamic can negatively affect leader behavior. Additional values inherent in purposeful resistance theory are: (1) leaders with a high need for power derive psychological satisfaction from that power (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1995); (2) the need for power is expressed by the leader through socialized power as opposed to personalized power (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1995); (3) some leaders have a disproportionate need for control (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002); (4) the leader's model is the passive form of management-by-exception (Northouse, 2001); and, in a spiritual sense, (5) dysfunctional leadership behavior may be the "underworld" of the soul, as described by Baskin (1998), is actually brought alive and surfaces as a reaction to the frustration and fear that organizational change invokes in these people.

3.5 Coherency and Utility

Bacharach (1989) lamented, "The problem with organizational studies is that theories are often stated in such a vague way that theorists can rebut any discrediting evidence" and pointed out that falsifiability is the determinant as to "whether a theory is constructed such that empirical refutation is possible" (p. 501). While the generality of purposeful resistance leadership theory is its weakness, the theory is coherent enough to be refuted given the clarity of the constructs of leadership behavior and the organizational change dynamic. Further, the variables lend themselves to measurement through an open index Likert-type questionnaire, thereby offering a certain degree of empirical evidence. Finally, the theory is easily refutable given the paucity of research conducted in this specific area of study.

Utility is "the usefulness of theoretical systems" and "the core connecting theory and research are explanation and prediction" (Bacharach, 1989, p. 501). To this end, the predictive quality of purposeful resistance theory is based on limited observation and limited reference in literature. For example, one of the theory's predictions is the greater the organizational change, the greater the dysfunctional behavior demonstrated by mid-level managers. The explanation of this prediction, in terms of how and why, is that the resultant leader behavior is rooted in a need for power and the fear of loss of that power caused by organizational change. Strictly speaking, even though the observations and literature are limited, the theory is useful because "it can both explain and predict" (Bacharach, p. 501).

4. Summary

Purposeful resistance theory approach examines leader behavior as it is influenced by the organizational dynamic of change occurring in the social-cultural environment. The approach is leader-centered with an emphasis on leader perceptions and attributions in the social-cultural environment within which the leader operates. As such, this theory is important for four reasons. First, organizational leadership must recognize that employees, including leadership at certain levels within the organization may want to retain the present system. And while some organizations encourage employee dissent in the spirit of openness in discussions of organizational operations, dissent may ultimately translate into resistance.

Second, leaders must recognize that organizational dynamics may influence their behavior instead of the other way around, thereby involving a paradigm shift in their thinking (Barker, 1992). Third, leaders must be cognizant of their behaviors, including those that are dysfunctional. To wit, “Leaders are more effective when they have insight into their own psychological makeup” (Northouse, 2001, p. 189). Finally, the approach of this theory beckons us to explore the psychological underpinnings or explanations of the fear of power loss in the leader-organizational relationship.

Kunungo and Mendonca (1996, p. 26) listed “the task context, the follower characteristics, and the social-cultural environment in which the leader operates” as the contingencies that need to be explored in future research. Accordingly, purposeful resistance leadership theory explores the cultural environment as it affects leader behavior. To date, research associated with this theory by the author has been limited and anecdotal given that observations have been limited to certain levels of management undergoing significant organizational change and limited examples exist in literature. As such, the aspects of the theory that need to be broadened include the study of an increased number and variety of organizations as well as different layers of leadership within those organizations. Additionally, future research should include an examination of the relationship between the magnitude of the organizational change event and the mid-level leader behavior.

Purposeful resistance leadership theory can make a significant contribution to the existing leadership knowledge base through its suggestion that leadership behavior can be affected by the organizational dynamic of change. The leaders of 21st century business must be able to effectively lead change in order to remain competitive in the marketplace. This is extremely critical and timely in light of today’s rapidly changing and uncertain business environment characterized by frequent corporate downsizing, consolidation, and merger events.

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