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Messages on “Resistance to change” in German change management approaches

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Abstract

“Resistance to change” is one of the most important topics of change management in organizations. The paper investigates the analytical framing of „resistance“ and the „resistant employee“ in established German literature on change management. The analysis reveals three main messages referring the characteristics of resistance and the resistant change recipient. These are 1) that resistance is a „natural“, nearly inevitable phenomenon in organizational change processes, 2) that every behavior of employees in change processes is potentially resistant and thus often „false faced“, and 3) that resistance often is based on „irrational“ and “emotional” motives. From a critical standpoint, this appears as a rather problematic understanding of (employee) agency and resistance. The result once more point to the overdue reconceptualization of “resistance to change” within the change management discipline and raise general questions referring to the high popularity of the analyzed segment of literature.

Introduction

The efficient management of organizational change is one of the most prevailing topics in firms and public organizations. Recent large surveys on German firms found, that nearly 90% of them evaluate change management as “important” or “most important” management task (Claßen 2010). Accordingly, there are numerous publications on the theme reaching from mainly application-oriented contributions to those explicitly addressing theoretical questions about organizational change.

“Resistance to change” like “counter argumentation”, “ritualism”, “passivity”, “weariness” or “making jokes” has been always a dominating topic of change management (Ford/Ford/D´Amelio 2008; Prasad/Prasad 2000) and appears as a permanent problem to change managers. Thus, in German empirical surveys and conceptual publications on the theme, “resistance” is one of the most mentioned explanations for the failure of organizational change processes (Claßen 2010: 47; Lauer 2010: 41). This way, “resistance to change” constantly reveals the necessity to understand organizational

change itself as independent problem which needs independent (change) management.

The paper takes this situation as initial point to investigate the conceptual foundations of change management-approaches. In particular, it explores the conceptualization of „resistance“ and the discursive construction of the „resistant “change recipient” in established German change management-approaches. This way, the paper presents a secondary analysis of 31 of the German best-selling monographs on change management published over the last 10 years. The body of analysis contains well established text books widely used at universities as well as consultant-oriented publications, and thus presents literature which is explicitly pedagogical and practical guiding in character.

The semantic analysis of these publications reveals three main “messages” referring the characteristics of resistance. These messages are 1) that resistance is a „natural“, nearly inevitable phenomenon in organizational change processes, 2) that every behavior of employees in change processes is potentially resistant and thus often „false faced“ in character, and 3) that resistance is often „irrational“ and “emotional”.

These results point to some general and partly hidden characteristics of the conceptual foundations of the analysed management-approaches presented in the literature. These are for instance the general tendency to objectify the motives and behavior of employees, to personalize resistance and to provide it with a pathological connotation. In general, the results confirm the critical diagnosis about change management being “change-agent-centric” and “one-sided” (Ford/Ford/D´Amelio 2008) and describing change and resistance as “objective” reality (Tsoukas/Chia 2002). From a critical standpoint, this appears as rather problematic understanding of (employee) agency and resistance.

Deriving from this, the paper further concentrates on the concealed modes of the discursive de-legitimisation and disempowerment of “resistance to change” in the analyzed approaches. Hence, the implicit degradation of resistance by framing it as “emotional” and therefore “irrational” barrier to

change located in the single individual is an example of such a discursive degradation. A rather contrary example is the admonition of the potentially "false-faced" character of resistance. Thus, "rational arguments" brought into discussion by employees, get de-legitimated as "pretended" arguments hiding the "real motives" for resistance.

Finally, the results once more point to a necessary and overdue reconceptualization of "resistance to change" in the literature on change management. Moreover, the results motivate questions on the high popularity of these monographs as well as on the general philosophies of management education referring to "resistance" in organizations.

Methodological remarks

In the following the paper presents main results of a semantic analysis of well established German literature on change management referring to its analytical approach to the phenomenon of "resistance to change". At the beginning the analysis concentrated on the discursively represented definitions of resistance, explanations on the motives for resistant behaviour and suggestions for the management of resistance. But during this first time of surface analysis, some dominant and partly implicit patterns of assumptions concerning the general character of resistance and the resistant employee grew more and more into sight and thus soon developed to the main object of a deep analysis. Hence, this analysis aimed at the reconstruction of the implicitly transported understanding and evaluation of human agency and opposition to change. This way, the analysis revealed three main messages directed to practitioners and students, which bear a general degradation and reductionism of agency and resistance. The messages can be read as aggregation of several statements that can be found in the analysed literature. Some of them are quoted below and are all translated by the author.

The body of analysis comprises 31 monographs dealing with the topic of organizational change management in general and inter alia with "resistance to change". They were selected from more than 100 monographs,

which resulted from a general search for German literature on change management published from 2000-2010 by browsing catalogues of diverse German university libraries. Main selection criteria were the explicit as well as implicit addressing of "resistance" (problems, barriers) in organizational change or innovation processes. Thereby, about 10 of the 31 monographs deal with resistance to a larger extent and as discrete topic among others (e.g. in a particular chapter). They mainly comprise popular textbooks used in academic education as well as more application and consultant oriented literature and present the main body of analysis referring to the deduction of the messages in this paper. A predominant majority of all monographs is published in the second and much higher edition (e.g. 7th, 9th, 10th) pointing to the high popularity among practitioners and academic lectures.

Messages on "Resistance to change"

To give a general impression of the direct results of analysis, it seems surprising that the vast majority of all monographs (26 out of 31) abstain from an explicit definition of "resistance" or "resistant behaviour". Although often described as one of the most important topics of change management, resistance often gets simply described by metaphors like "barrier" and "force" against change (e.g. Hauschildt/Salomo 2007; Klose 2009) or as "absence of change acceptance" (Krüger 2009: 160f.). Further, it gets indicated by typical behavioural symptoms reaching from "ritualism", "counter argumentation", "making jokes", "putting out rumors" to "sabotage" and "sickness" (see for instance Doppler/Lauterburg 2002: 326). Generally, resistance is defined as a kind of backward or stability focused orientation potentially hindering change (see also Bouckenooghe (2010: 504) on the international context). On the individual level, the motives for resistance to change are mainly seen in the threat of economic interests on the one hand and in "psychological motives" (e.g. emotions like "fear" and felt "uncertainty" or a kind of "natural" human inertia) on the other hand (e.g. Doppler/Lauterburg 2002: 135ff.; Krüger 2009: 165ff.; Lauer 2010: 41ff.). On the organizational level, motives for resistance are seen in collectively shared rules of thought and interaction (e.g. Lauer 2010:

47) as well as in bad project management like an insufficient management of the communication of change (e.g. Brehm 2009). Corresponding suggestions for the management of resistance are rather unspecified and to a great majority focusing on the management of information and communication and the importance and necessity of strong leadership (e.g. Rosenstiel/Commellie 2003; Krüger 2009: 145ff.).

Besides these general results the analysis revealed some more implicit patterns of assumptions on the character of resistance and the agency of resistant change recipients:

1. Message: Resistance is a „natural", nearly inevitable phenomenon

The practitioners and students who are interested in change management and who read the analyzed, established German literature on the topic generally get confronted with the message that organizational change always implies "resistance to change". Resistance is interpreted as irrevocable and "normal" (Doppler/Lauterburg 2002: 323) phenomenon which arouses nearly "naturally" following "nearly physical rules" as Hauschildt/Salomo (2007: 183) put it in their text book on the management of organizational innovation processes. Also, Rosenstiel/Comellie (2003: 186) write in their well established text book on leadership and change: "There is no organizational change without resistance and there will be no one without resistance". Thus, instead of ignoring resistance it is seen rather necessary to acknowledge it as a fact and to deal with it in the right manner.

2. Message: Every behaviour is potentially resistant and thus often "false faced"

In absence of an explicit definition many authors are inclined to describe resistance by specific behavioural symptoms. In this way "counter argumentation", "silence", "restlessness" and "tiredness" are all possible symptoms of resistance. Thus, Doppler/Lauterburg (2002: 323) generally describe a perceived "diffuse rejection" as being symptomatic for resistance to change. Thereby, the focus and main task of change management is seen

in the activation of rather passive attitudes to change (e.g. Krüger 2009: 30f.) which are partly co notated as a kind of passive resistance. Here, often the association comes into play, that humans rather tend to defeat changes and that people generally are a kind of "creature of habit". Thus, Lauer (2010: 49) points out that people rather are "naturally inertial" when they are confronted with change initiatives.

The message that nearly every behaviour of change recipients possibly indicates resistance to change further often implies the admonition that resistance is often false faced, thus potentially hiding behind a seemingly neutral or affirmative behaviour. In this way, a "rational" behaviour in the sense of technical discussions, factual argumentation and enquiries is seen as particularly suspicious for being a rather profound resistance which is very difficult to manage. For example Hauschild/Salomo (2007: 183ff.) point out, that "rational arguments" against innovations often are only "ostensible" arguments that hide the real motives of actually resistant behaviour (see also the preface of Scheer et al. 2003 and Cacaci 2009: 47).

3. Message: Resistance is often "irrational" and "emotional"

This last message gives some more hints on the assumed motives and the "nature" of resistance to change. The notion of the "irrationality" of resistance generally derivates: 1) from contrasting "rational" and "irrational" motives for resistance in the sense of utilitarian motivated behaviour on the one hand and "emotional" and "psychological" motivated behaviour on the other hand, and 2) from the assumption, that organizational change processes mostly are "objectively" necessary and therefore "rational", which means that any opposing behaviour that is not grounded in economic interests is necessarily "irrational". These two patterns of assumptions are mostly interwoven with each other, but further reveal the general tendency to refer to "emotions" in the sense of "irrationality" and vice a versa.

As stated above, an important motive for opposing change is seen in the threat of economic interests. This kind of resistance is often declared as not in need of explanation and therefore not in the main focus of the originally

change management activities (see also Schreyögg 2003: 485). For example Lauer (2010: 44) writes: “More important to change management is the resistance in need of explanation, hence not the resistance that is grounded in objective disadvantages by the new situation of change, but resistance that is grounded in psychological factors.” Generally, the literature often differentiates between resistance which can get “objectively” and “rationally” explained by utilitarian criteria and resistance which is based in subjective, “psychological” and mainly “emotional” factors and therefore rather difficult to understand and manage (e.g. Klose 2009: 69ff.). Thus, resistance, which cannot be explained by these assumed, “rational” criteria is necessarily seen as kind of “irrational” behaviour. For example Doppler/Lauterburg (2002: 325) explain in the 10th edition of their consultant oriented monograph on change management: “If normal intelligent and rather not disturbed people are opposed to seemingly reasonable arrangements, they have some concerns, apprehensions or fear. There are no logic arguments or factual thought, but emotions.” This quotation further points to the tendency to describe change initiatives as objectively necessary and rational and therefore any opposing behaviour as obviously irrational. Thus, also Krüger (2009: 28) sees a main challenge of change management to get the “objectively necessary things [the change] perceived on the subjective level [change recipients] too.”.

Discursive degradation of “resistance” and “resistant agency”

The three messages can get interpreted as a general, discursively transported degradation of “resistance to change” and the agency of employees, who are addressed as main subject to change management initiatives.

The degradation of “resistance” seems at most obvious in the third message, indicating the “irrational” and “emotional” character of most of the resistant behaviour. Thus, resistance which is not based on “objectively” transparent utilitarian motives gets indicated as irrational and rather emotional problem of single individuals. This way, other criteria for being resistant to organizational change, e.g. the threat of social values, values of environmental protection,

or solidarity with colleagues, are generally disregarded in their original political sense.[1] Further, the indirect labelling of every planned change in organizations as objectively right and rational degrades any other opposing opinions as necessarily irrational from a managerial point of view and therefore not worth to take into account in a serious manner. Moreover, the admonition of the potentially false faced character of resistance, given by the second message, bears the notion that change managers are rather objects of a quite unfair game that change recipients play by hiding their real destructive motives behind a collegial and rational mask. Besides the degradation of the rational arguments of change recipients, this implies a further degradation of resistance by generally co notating it as a kind of incorrect behavior that breaches with socially accepted norms of interaction.
The used discursive modes in dealing with "resistance to change" further imply general assumptions about the character of agency of the (resistant) change recipient. This directly derives from the discursive framing of the character of resistance. First, opponents to change are simply divided into the frame of utilitarian oriented actors on the one side or - if that motive is not obviously given - into the frame of rather emotionally driven individuals on the other side. From a critical point of view, this seems a rather reduced approach to understand agency, in that it neglects the potentially interwoven character of these two motives as well as other motivations, and bears a general degradation of the role that emotions play in social interaction. Second, the assumption about the potentially false faced character of any behaviour and action of change recipients delivers a notion of their rather malicious nature of agency, which neglects general social standards of interaction. Finally, the assumptions that resistance to change arouses nearly "naturally" as well as the notion of an "objectively" right change initiative, point to degradation of agency in the sense of describing change recipients as generally predictable supernumerary in a reality that is only objectively transparent to change managers. This way, the analysed

[1] Which indicates a degradation of ascribed „utilitarian" motives as well by decoupling them from these other motives.

literature on change management generally ascribes different kinds of agency to change managers on the one side and change recipients on the other side. Change managers indirectly are indicated as “objective”, “rational” and able to control their emotions, necessarily reflecting their own feelings and action when managing the change recipients. In contrast, resistant change recipients are seen as rather “irrational” and “emotional” and rather not willing to act in a self-reflexive and cooperative manner.

These disparate ascription of agency to different groups of actors, fits with the diagnosis about change management approaches for being “change agent-centric” and “one-sided” (Ford/Ford/d`Amelio 2008): “This change agent-centric view presumes that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents) of an objective reality (resistance by change recipients)”. (ibidem: 362) Moreover, viewing opposition to change as rather dysfunctional by defining it as irrational and emotional refers to the one-sided view of resistance, which neglects its possible contribution for effective change (ibidem: 363). Moreover, these aspects point to the general negligence of processes of social interaction and the social embeddedness of all actors in organizational change processes: Thus, “Rather, resistance is portrayed as an unwarranted and detrimental response residing completely “over there, in them” (the change recipients) and arising spontaneously as a reaction to change, independent of the interactions and relationships between the change agents and recipients.” (ibidem: 362)

In summary, the results of the short literature analysis presented in this paper verify the critical conclusions about approaches to change management.

3 First Conclusion and Questions

Without doubt, the analyzed monographs present a quite critical approach to „resistance to change”. That critique refers to their analytical framing of resistance (development, motives, character, direction) as well as to their implicit moral disregard of resistance and the agency of change recipients. In consideration to the elaborated theories and concepts on agency and resistance in organization theory, critical management studies, and labor

process debate (e.g. Kondo 1990; Jermier/Knights/Nord 1994; Thompson/Ackroyd 1998; Fleming/Spicer2007) this seems rather not a problem of absence of adequate theory and corresponding studies. In fact, it raises questions, why these findings don´t find their way into the popular literature and why that kind of literature is popular among practitioners and scholars. These questions seem even more important, as the popular textbooks used in management education as well as the application oriented literature directed to practitioners play a crucial role in helping to produce and reproduce managerial practices (French/Grey 1996).

Considering the German context, a first hint to answer the questions could lay in the instrumental orientation that still dominates the management education at universities and colleges of higher education. Thus, the application of traditional, linear economic thinking necessarily bears a kind of reductionism in framing and dealing with social phenomena in organizations. Further, one can assume that practitioners understandably feel more comfortable with consultant literature that delivers clear philosophies and instrumental devices on the complex and contradictory reality of organizational change (Claßen 2010). Of course, in both cases these skills and techniques don´t shield actual and prospective practitioners against different and difficult experiences within organizational change. The growing number of personal guidebooks for managers (e.g. Doppler 2011: “Changing oneself and others” (own translation)) and biographic field reports of managers running change (e.g. Haldemann/Stettler/Fischer 2007) are possible indices for those difficulties and the managerial requirement for self-insurance. In this way, it seems paradox that the messages on “resistance to change” sent by the established literature on change management, aim to provide managerial security by delivering clear interpretations and instruments on the one hand, but on the other hand arouse more practical problems and potential uncertainty for managers who apply them to the reality of change. Thus, the general expectation, that resistance will occur “naturally”, or that every behavior of change recipients is potentially resistant, influences managerial frames of interpretation and potentially results in rather

inappropriate managerial action against change recipients. This way, change recipients possibly get initially pushed into resistance by the change manager. Thus, the managerial expectation of resistance potentially becomes a "self-fulfilling-prophecy" (see also Ford/Ford/D´Amelio 2008).

Contrary to this assumption, one can argue, that change managers and alumni are more self-reflexive and thoughtful in their day-to-day practices as the popular literature in the field might suggest. Nevertheless, in both scenarios we have to turn to the academic scholars and their philosophy of management education and academic research on organizational change. Nearby questions refer to their general approach to education, assumptions on students and collegial expectations of the content of teaching, or possible conflicts between the role of an academic lecturer in management studies and economics and the role of a social scientist.

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