

Large-Scale Organizational Change:
Leader Influence on Follower Engagement, Commitment and Satisfaction

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Capital markets are now changing at a more rapid rate than organizations, and consequently, are forcing organizations to be progressively more innovative, creative and adaptive. Organizations that fail to align with shifts in the competitive global environment are quickly replaced by new business entries in the market. Accordingly, to remain competitive in the market is to change with it (Burke, 2002; Foster & Kaplan, 2001). The overarching theme of my research pertains to the role that leaders play in mobilizing their organizations during times of change. More specifically, my dissertation seeks to illuminate the way in which leaders may influence followers' engagement, commitment and satisfaction during organizational change initiatives and their attitudes about the work involved. By extending past research with a limited focus on leaders' style (Burke, 1986; Burns, 1978; Zaleznik, 1977) and/ or their communication of change initiatives (Bies & Shapiro, 1993; Bies, Shapiro & Cummings, 1988), my dissertation research utilizes regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) to study the following research question:

Will congruence between a leader's arguments for change and followers' regulatory focus orientations positively influence followers' engagement, commitment and satisfaction during large-scale organizational change initiatives and their attitudes about the work involved?

RATIONALE

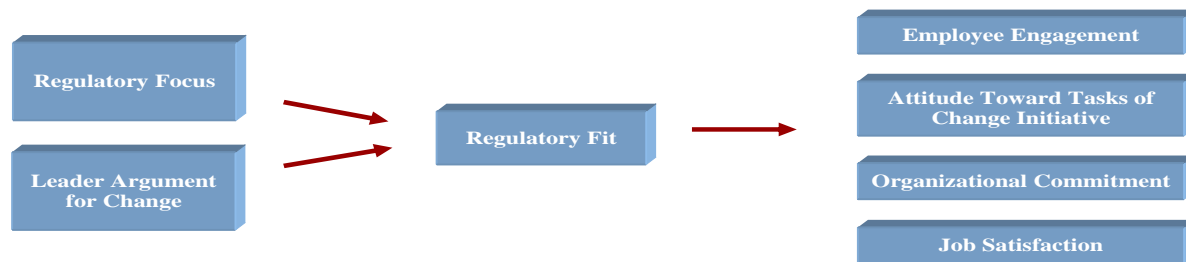
As the pressure for organizations to adapt to the changes in the competitive global environment increases, the focus turns toward the ability of the leadership of organizations to motivate followers to engage in change. A primary way in which leaders can affect follower attitudes toward change is through their communication of the reasons or arguments for organizational change (Bridges, 1991; Burke, 2002; O'Toole, 1995; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). Despite the general finding that followers' interpretations of the reasons for change influence their reactions to it (Shapiro, Buttner, & Barry, 1994) and the past focus of theory and research on the relationship between leadership style and organizational change (Burke, 1986; Burns, 1978), scholars have devoted much less attention to understanding *how* a leader's arguments for organizational change may affect follower attitudes toward change and ultimate engagement and commitment in organizational change initiatives. Focusing on the congruence between a leader's arguments for change and follower characteristics

may provide a more in depth understanding of this process.

One characteristic of followers that has been overlooked in organizational change research is regulatory focus orientation (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), grounded in social psychology, distinguishes between two regulatory focus orientations, promotion and prevention, and the strategic means through which each orientation is pursued. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), when applied to organizational change, provides a lens through which we may further investigate employee attitudes toward organizational change and the mechanisms through which employees may overcome their resistance to change. Through the framework of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), my dissertation research examines the way in which congruence between a leader’s arguments for change and employees’ regulatory focus orientations may positively influence employees’ engagement in and commitment toward organizational change initiatives and their attitudes about the work involved.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & HYPOTHESES

Through the framework of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), my dissertation research proposes and will empirically test the following model:



Gersick (1991) underscored that two factors, *urgency* and *optimism*, must be present for all members of an organization to engage in a transformational change initiative. To that end, transformational leaders must adequately communicate both urgency and optimism in their arguments for the transformational change initiative to garner the level of motivation required to move the entire organization beyond its equilibrium state (Gersick, 1991). For the purposes of this study, two commonly used terms are proposed to describe these two types of arguments: burning platform and vision. The *burning platform* argument communicates the urgent need for change to avoid a negative outcome from happening whereas the *vision* argument communicates

optimism by illustrating what the future can be through a depiction of a desired future state (Koppel, 2004; Kotter, 1996).

Regulatory focus has been shown to be a reliable individual difference variable, in that people are, in general, either predominantly promotion or prevention focused (Higgins, 1998). Individual regulatory focus is determined by a person's needs, goals and the type of outcomes that are most salient to him or her. People with a promotion focus have growth and advancement needs that motivate them to work to achieve their ideals, hopes and goals of aspiration. By contrast, people with a prevention focus have security and safety needs that motivate them to attain alignment with their own sense of duty, responsibility and obligation. As such, potential gains are more salient for individuals with a promotion focus, whereas potential losses are more salient for individuals with a prevention focus (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Brockner, et. al, 2004; Higgins, 1998, 2000, 2002).

Regulatory fit occurs when the strategic means that a person uses to pursue a goal are aligned with his or her regulatory orientation (Higgins, 2000, 2002). I propose that regulatory fit results when employees engage in organizational change initiatives via means that are aligned with their individual regulatory focus orientations. Leaders' arguments for change (i.e. either a vision or burning platform message) reflect strategic means for pursuing change initiatives. As such, regulatory fit is posited to result from congruence between a leader's arguments for change and followers' regulatory focus orientations. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1a: Promotion focused followers will experience regulatory fit when their leaders communicate vision arguments for change because they connote a means of eagerly approaching gains.

Hypothesis 1b: Prevention focused followers will experience regulatory fit when their leaders communicate burning platform arguments for change because they connote a means of vigilantly avoiding losses.

Further, recent research indicates that regulatory fit influences the strength of people's engagement during goal pursuit, the retrospective positive feelings people have about past decisions, and the prospective positive feelings people have about future decisions (see Higgins 2000; Shaw, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). There is also evidence that regulatory fit increases people's enjoyment of tasks, perceived success on tasks and willingness to repeat tasks (Freitas & Higgins, 2002) and that it produces a feeling of importance and correctness about the activity in which one is engaged (Camacho, Higgins & Luger, 2003; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel & Molden, 2003). It is therefore proposed that regulatory fit will positively influence

followers' engagement in the goals of organizational change initiatives and their attitudes about the work involved. Followers' organizational commitment and overall job satisfaction are also expected to increase under conditions of regulatory fit. To that end:

Hypothesis 2: Regulatory fit is directly related to outcomes of increased follower engagement in organizational change initiatives and positive attitudes among followers about the tasks involved.

Hypothesis 3: Regulatory fit is directly related to the outcomes of increased organizational commitment and job satisfaction among followers.

Since there will be considerable variability across the regulatory focus orientations of followers in an organization, Gersick's (1991) postulate that *both* arguments must be clearly communicated to motivate all employees to engage in a transformational change effort should be supported. Therefore:

Hypothesis 4: Leaders must effectively communicate both a burning platform argument and a vision argument to motivate all followers to engage in the pursuit of large-scale change initiative goals and to positively influence their attitudes toward the work involved.

METHODOLOGY

I will study the relationships in the model via a cross-sectional survey research design that utilizes an online questionnaire. Senior leaders of a top (Fortune 50) global pharmaceutical company have agreed to distribute the survey to at least 500 employees in their organization at two different times— immediately before and eight months after a significant change initiative has been launched. I have also received an invitation to share my study proposal with a major publishing company and will be seeking additional organizations that may be willing to participate in the study. Regulatory fit will be analyzed via polynomial regression.

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