
Engagement and Trust: Implications for Change Efficacy

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Organizations must engage in change initiatives to remain competitive in a world where the rules governing success and organizational demands are constantly being redefined. As such, researchers have postulated a variety of models to aid both leaders and organizational development consultants in fostering effective change (e.g., leadership behaviors, communications processes and information flows, simulation, organizational design interventions; Kotter, 1996; Lyons, Jordan, Faas, & Swindler, 2011; Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008). Yet, despite these approaches, there remains little guidance to understand which employees might experience success within a change context.

The current study demonstrates the value of engagement and trust in identifying which employees will respond favorably to the challenge of organizational change. It is expected that the combination of engagement and trust in one's supervisor will shape employees' perceived ability to successfully engage in the change initiative. This supports a recent review by Oreg, Vakola, and Armenakis (2011), which called for increased attention to potential moderating variables within the context of organizational change. Indeed, research has neglected to evaluate the interactive effects of trust in one's supervisor and employee engagement on change-related reaction variables, in this case, change efficacy beliefs.

Per Oreg et al.'s (2011) classification of organizational change variables, prechange antecedents include change recipient characteristics (e.g., traits, coping styles) as well as internal context factors (e.g., job characteristics, internal support structure). Prechange antecedents may operate as resources for employees during an organizational change as these are resources that would be brought into a change situation. The current study focuses on the impact of internal context factors (i.e., prechange antecedents) on cognitive (i.e., change efficacy) and behavioral (i.e., in-

tentions to support the change) reactions. Indeed, Oreg et al. (2011) argue that internal context factors may have the greatest practical utility. In sum, the current study sought to extend the organizational change literature by demonstrating the interdependence of two prechange context factors (employee engagement and trust in one's supervisor) in predicting change-related efficacy beliefs. Engagement and trust may both serve as resources for employees that shape their attitudes and behavior related to the change.

Background and Hypotheses

Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) contends that individuals are motivated to protect, acquire, and maintain resources (objects, conditions, personal characteristics, energies) when under stress. Notably, individuals with higher resources may experience a greater tension to protect their resources relative to those with lower resources (Hobfoll, 2001); thus, individuals with higher levels of engagement and trust may be motivated to maintain those resources within the context of an organizational change. As discussed below, high engagement and trust of one's supervisor represent resources that could be perceived by the employees as sources of emotional energy and socioemotional support when forming efficacy-based beliefs relating to the change.

Engagement

Work engagement is defined as the degree of vigor, dedication, and absorption that one experiences while at work (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Employee engagement represents the employee's perceived contribution to the organization and the personal meaning/challenge that they derive from work (Alarcon, Lyons, & Tartaglia, 2010). This energy, sense of meaning, and experience of personal challenge may be viewed by employees as a resource when considering their reactions to organizational change

initiatives. Additionally, participation tactics such as supporting the planning and implementation of the change tends to be an effective way to increase change readiness and acceptance of the change as well as reduce negative emotions and anxiety associated with the change (Amiot, Terry, Jimmieson, & Callan, 2006).

Engagement relates to the resources identified by Hobfoll (1998) such as: feeling valuable to others, sense of pride in one's self, experiencing challenges routinely, and having a sense of personal meaning. Highly engaged employees are likely motivated to preserve these resources when under stress (Hobfoll, 2001). Thus, it is likely that engaged employees will support organizational change initiatives in an effort to protect their positive work-related resources. More specifically, engaged employees are likely to also perceive that they have the ability to succeed in change initiatives. These individuals will seek to maintain high-quality performance and challenge in their work, despite an organizational change. However, engagement is likely not enough to ensure success within a change environment; we contend one must also experience the right conditions within the workplace to support risk taking and psychological safety (i.e., experience high trust in their supervisors).

Trust

Trust, or an individual's willingness to make him/herself vulnerable to the actions of others with the expectation of positive outcomes (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), is perhaps the most predictive variable of change resistance (Oreg, 2006). Trust is associated with a greater emphasis on team versus individual goals (Dirks, 1999), greater team cohesion (Lyons, Stokes, & Schneider, 2011), more risk-taking behavior (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Serva, Fuller, & Mayer, 2005), and more extrarole behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Supporting an organizational change could be characterized as an extrarole behavior. Thus, employees with higher trust in their supervisors may be more likely to take the risk of engaging in the change, may be more likely to put the collective good in front of their own, and may seek to maintain cohesion in the workplace.

As noted above, engaged employees are likely motivated to maintain their resources during a stressful change. One way to protect work-related resources may be to engage in a change initiative. However, this may be particularly

beneficial for engaged employees when they concurrently experience a trusting relationship with their supervisor, as this high engagement may generate the protective motivation to engage in change, and trust may help to foster the optimal conditions to thrive within a change context. In other words, trust may represent a resource that helps to obtain other resources (e.g., social support, concern/understanding from one's supervisor; Hobfoll, 1998). Engaged employees may benefit more in a change context from having supervisors that are highly trusted, and this interactive effect may be most pronounced for reactions variables such as one's perceived ability to successfully handle the demands of the change.

Hypothesis 1: Engagement and trust will interact to predict change efficacy beliefs such that change efficacy will be the highest when engagement and trust of one's supervisor are both high.

Change Efficacy

One method to assess the motivational readiness of employees to support a change is to gauge their *change readiness*, defined as the cognitive precursors that either thwart or support change initiatives (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). Change readiness predicts employees' intentions and behaviors to support change initiatives (e.g., Holt, Armenakis, Field, & Harris, 2007; Lyons, Swindler, & Offner, 2009). In essence, change readiness may also be a resource within a change context that can motivate actions to preserve and acquire additional resources.

One particularly germane aspect of the Holt et al.'s (2007) change readiness model is the concept of *change efficacy*, or one's perceived ability to handle change in a given situation and to maintain one's job performance despite the change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Consistent with COR theory, change efficacy has been linked to greater acceptance of change initiatives (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Efficacy beliefs (like change efficacy) are thought to be malleable (Chen, Gully, Whiteman, & Kilcullen, 2000). Thus, change efficacy beliefs may be shaped by engagement and trust during a change initiative.

The current study will help to identify which employees may respond to change initiatives favorably. The first year of the change initiative involved an extensive communication campaign to garner employee buy-in and now the "informed" employees were faced with the decision of

whether or not to act on their new guidance. Indeed, organizational tactics to improve change efficacy should be employed following initial vision development actions to better align change management tactics with the readiness of the employees (Levesque, Prochaska, & Prochaska, 1999). Thus, change efficacy may be a fruitful aspect of change readiness on which to focus. As predicted by COR theory, employees with higher efficacy perceptions regarding the change initiative (i.e., higher resources) should evidence greater motivation to protect this resource, which may be manifested through higher intentions to support the change.

Hypothesis 2: Change efficacy will be positively related to behavioral intentions to support the change.

Method

Participants and Procedure

One-hundred civilian and active-duty IT professionals, business managers, and software engineers at a Midwestern U.S. Air Force base were involved in an ongoing organizational assessment targeting progress toward a process and cultural change. This was the second year of a 5-year plan within the organization, and the objectives of the assessment were to examine employee reactions to and attitudes toward a technology change within the organization. An initial message was sent to all civilian and military employees of this organization introducing the assessment. Then, a web link to the assessment was sent via e-mail requesting their voluntary participation. All items were rated using a 6-point response scale.

Participants ($N = 65$; 65% participation rate) were mostly civilian (70%), followed by active-duty Air Force (18%), and active-duty Navy (6%). Participants' average tenure in the organization was 5.48 years. Seven respondents failed to provide complete data for the psychological variables and were therefore removed from further analyses ($N = 58$). Demographics (age, sex, etc.) were not assessed because they did not have a strong link/justification to the larger organizational assessment goals.

Measures

Engagement. An established engagement scale was used to assess employees' perceived contributions to their organization, motivation to contribute, and their experience of challenge in their current work role (Alarcon et al.,

2010; $\alpha = .86$). An example item is, "My work challenges me."

Trust. Trust in one's supervisor was measured with a 4-item scale (Mayer & Davis, 1999; $\alpha = .76$), which assessed the degree to which participants would place themselves in a vulnerable situation in relation to their supervisors. An example item is, "I would be comfortable giving my supervisor a task or problem which was critical to me, even if I could not monitor their actions."

Change efficacy. One item taken from the efficacy subscale of the Holt et al. (2007) change readiness measure was used to assess change efficacy beliefs ("I believe I have the skills to perform effectively in a [insert specific term from the host organization's change initiative] environment."¹). Only one item was used because arguably this single item best represented the concept of change efficacy (i.e., one's beliefs that efforts to engage in a change would be successful). Although not ideal, use of single-item measures is acceptable in some circumstances (i.e., unidimensional construct, purpose transparent to the respondents; Wanous & Hudy, 2001; Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997).

Behavioral intentions. Four items asked participants about their intentions to support the change initiative (e.g., "I plan to use the [new process] in my daily work," "I have thought about how to incorporate the [new process] into my job"; $\alpha = .86$).

Results

See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and correlations. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the interaction of engagement and trust when predicting change efficacy (see Table 2). Step 1 regressed change efficacy onto organizational tenure. Step 2 regressed change efficacy onto engagement and trust. Finally, Step 3 regressed change efficacy onto the interaction of engagement and trust. As shown in Table 2, engagement and trust accounted for 7% of the variance in change efficacy, though this did not reach statistical significance, $F_{change}(2,54) = 2.03, p = .14$. The interaction of engagement and trust accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in change efficacy, which was

¹ Specific language associated with the host organization's change initiative was excluded in the current manuscript to protect the identity of the organization.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3
1. Engagement	4.54 (.83)			
2. Trust	4.06 (1.12)	.43**		
3. Efficacy	4.88 (.94)	.23 [†]	.10	
4. Intentions	4.10 (1.05)	.40**	.06	.22 [†]

[†] $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$.

statistically significant, $F_{change}(1,53) = 4.23$, $p = .04$. Individuals reported higher change efficacy when both engagement and trust were high (see Figure 1). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. There was also some support for Hypothesis 2; individuals' change efficacy beliefs were marginally related to behavioral intentions to support the change initiative.

Discussion

Despite decades of research, fostering effective change within organizations remains an onerous task for organizational leaders and consultants. These challenges are omnipresent within Department of Defense organizations due to dynamic global economic conditions, budgetary variations, and evolving threats from nonstate actors, all of which represent the catalysts for increased emphasis on efficiency and reform. The current study used COR theory as a guiding framework to explore the influence of employee engagement and trust in one's supervisor as antecedents to change efficacy, representing the first study to examine the interactive effects of employee engagement and trust on change efficacy.

In support of Hypothesis 1, engagement and trust interacted to predict change efficacy; change efficacy was the highest for employees who were both highly engaged and who reported higher trust of their supervisors. Work-related energy may serve as a resource that activates protective behaviors/cognitions during a work-related stressor such as a change. Engaged employees likely want to see their organization succeed and they have a desire to contribute to that success (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008), and this desire may transfer to change scenarios. However, the current data suggest that the benefits of engagement during a change initiative depend on the level of trust held of one's supervisor.

Few studies have examined trust as a moderator within a change context, yet trust appears to be a critical enabling resource that buttresses the benefits of engagement. These results extend prior research that has focused on impact of participation on change acceptance (Amiot et al., 2006). While some researchers have suggested that engagement is similar to job involvement (Macey & Schneider, 2008), the concept of engagement moves beyond the mere participation in a change program and considers the psychological relationship individuals have with their work.

Efficacy perceptions could also be considered resources that motivate action within a change context. Consistent with prior research, it was predicted that change efficacy would be related to higher intentions to support the change, but Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported. Change readiness is multidimensional (Holt et al., 2007), and it is probable that change efficacy is one of several factors (e.g., leadership support, policies and procedures related to the change, individual differences, and the organizational culture of the organization) that influence one's intention to support or resist a change initiative. While the link between change efficacy and intentions was only marginally supported in the current study, there is strong support for a positive relationship between the broader construct of change readiness and support of

Table 2

Multiple Regression With Engagement and Trust as Predictors and Change Efficacy as the Criterion

Criterion	Predictors	β	$11R^2$
Change efficacy	Step 1		.02
	Organizational tenure	.16	
	Step 2		.07
	Organizational tenure	.21	
	Engagement	.23	
	Trust	.07	
Step 3			.07*
	Organizational tenure	.23	
	Engagement	.32*	
	Trust	.12	
	Engagement X Trust	.29*	

Note. β = Standardized regression coefficient in final step of model. $11R^2$ = Unique variance explained after each step of the model.

* $p < .05$.

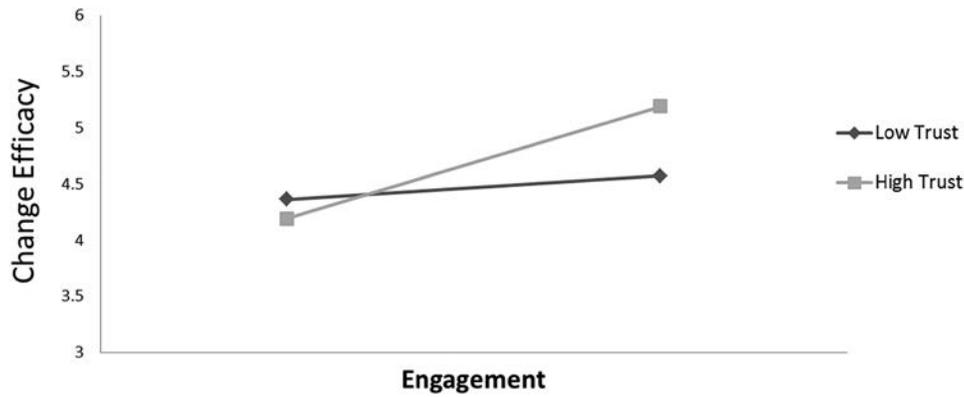


Figure 1. Engagement by trust interaction with change efficacy as the criterion.

change initiatives in prior research (e.g., [Cunningham et al., 2002](#); [Lyons et al., 2009](#)), of which efficacy is but one facet.

Implications

The challenge for organizational leaders during an organizational change is that they must foster a sense of trust among employees while at the same time challenging them with compelling work. We suggest such actions as:

(a) educating employees as to how the organizational change relates to them, (b) positioning the employees to contribute to the organizational change, and (c) informing the employees of key events, milestones, and goals related to the change initiative in an honest fashion. These communication elements are consistent with theories of trust that emphasize supervisor ability, benevolence, and integrity ([Mayer et al., 1995](#)) and it is aligned with engagement theory where a sense of contribution is important to employees ([Alarcon et al., 2010](#)). Second, supervisors should actively engage employees in the change process, and, if possible, give them challenging activities related to the change initiative.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation was the small sample size. However, it is encouraging that an interaction effect was found given the small sample size, as this would be a conservative estimate of the true relationship among the variables. A second limitation was that the data were all self-report. Although some researchers have suggested that common method variance is problematic in organizational research, others have questioned whether this assumption is correct ([Spector, 2006](#)). Third, given the cross-sectional nature of the data, causal inferences around the nature of these variables and the processes through which they emerge are limited.

Nonetheless, the current results should be considered as a seminal—albeit informative—exploration and impetus to spur additional research on the topic (e.g., role of different leadership styles on trust and engagement within a change context, level of leadership, etc.; [Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008](#); [Lyons et al., 2009](#)).

Research should also explore the role of trust and engagement within different kinds of organizational changes. For example, trust in senior leadership and self-efficacy may play large roles in organizational changes that are very stressful, highly ambiguous, and directly impact employee's jobs ([Rafferty & Simons, 2006](#)). It is also possible that the role of engagement and trust within a change context will vary over time as the demands on the employees evolve.

Conclusion

The current study examined the role of engagement and trust as resources within a change context. Engagement and trust interacted to influence change efficacy, which was related to higher behavioral intentions to support organizational change. COR theory provides a useful predictive lens to better understand individuals' behavioral and cognitive reactions to change. Individuals with higher work-related resources such as engagement may be motivated to protect these resources during a change, yet these efforts are most beneficial under conditions of high trust. Clearly both engagement and trust are beneficial resources within a change context.

Participation in the change process by having influence over decisions increases trust in leadership by demonstrating that leadership is willing to take risks based on employees' inputs ([Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005](#)). Thus, engagement as a resource may promote the

acquisition of trust as a resource. However, if an organizational change is introduced without employee involvement, then employees' change readiness will be low and the fate of the organizational change is to stall or fail (Holt et al., 2007). The topics of engagement, trust, and change efficacy remain burgeoning areas of research providing informative outcomes for both research and practice. Within the framework provided by Oreg et al., (2011), and guided by COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), the current study demonstrates that internal context factors can interact and serve as resources when predicting change reactions.

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