

Feelings about change

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Chapter 5

Feelings about change: The role of emotions and emotion regulation for employee adaptation to organizational change

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Karen van Dam

1 Introduction

Adapting to dynamic and rapid changing environments has been a challenge for organizations and employees alike. Although organizational change is often crucial for the competitiveness of the organization, employees may perceive change as disrupting routines and a threat to achievements, expertise and relationships that have been acquired over time (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006). Organizational change can thus evoke strong emotional responses in employees, which may turn into negative attitudes toward the change. Already in the 1940s, Coch and French (1948) pointed at frustration and aggression as emotional change responses that might cause resistance to change and other undesirable behaviors. Negative emotions can also cause lowered well-being, decreased commitment and job dissatisfaction (Kiefer, 2005).

While we often view emotions as irresistible forces that have a sweeping impact on behavior, most people do not like to be carried away by their emotions or 'to be hijacked' (Goleman, 1995) by the emotional impact of the situation (Koole, 2009). Because pleasant emotions are generally preferred over unpleasant emotions (Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007), employees in change situations may try to change or prevent negative affective responses and engage in emotion regulation. Effective emotion regulation might increase employees' openness to the change and protect their well-being (Van Dam, 2016). Emotions and emotion regulation during change have received research attention only recently.

The goal of this chapter is to delineate the role of emotions and emotion regulation as a part of employees' change responses. First, we will ask why change can act as an affective event: what are the reasons for employees to respond emotionally to change. Next, we focus on the concept and function of emotions, and how emotions relate to organizational change. Following, Gross' (1998, 2015) process model of emotion regulation is discussed as an overarching, theoretical framework, that might explain which strategies employees use during organizational change. The chapter concludes with several suggestions for future research.

2 Organizational change as an affective event

It is generally acknowledged that organizational change can serve as a trigger of emotional responses (e.g., Elfenbein, 2007; Huy, 1999; Kiefer, 2005; Oreg, Bartunek, Lee, & Do, *in press*; Piderit, 2000; Smollan, & Sayers, 2009). Large scale transformations, such as mergers, layoffs, and reorganizations, as well as smaller scale change, such as the introduction of new work methods or self-managing work teams, can evoke strong, often negative emotions in employees.

In the literature, various reasons have been proposed that might explain these affective responses. One reason relates to the (actual or anticipated) interruption of behavior and status quo that is often implied in organizational change. Change implementation can interrupt the daily workflow and result in increased work demands and stress (Bathge & Rigotti, 2013). Organizational change might also interrupt the practices, expertise, positions, and relationships that have developed over time (Kiefer, 2005). Interruptions have generally been associated with emotional arousal (Carver & Scheier, 1990).

Employees' affective responses may also originate from sincere concerns about the outcomes of the change (Huy, 1999; Kiefer, 2005; Piderit, 2000). Employees might worry that the intended change will affect procedures, products, services or the future direction of the organization in such a way that it will negatively affect productivity, sales, customers or workers. In particular employees' expectation that their job is at stake can elicit strong affective responses (Wang, Patten, Currie, Sareen, & Schmitz, 2012). As such, the change may undermine employees' expectations that the organization will protect and promote their interests (Oreg et al., *in press*), implying psychological contract breach (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). Employees might also respond emotionally if the change prohibits them to act in line with their ethical principles (Piderit, 2000), or if the change involves a fundamental change in the organization's core identity of which employees are proud (Huy, 1999).

Affective responses can additionally result from perceptions of the change process. As many organizational changes are management-initiated and the process and outcome of the change are often unclear at the onset of the change, employees may experience loss of control and increased uncertainty (Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007). Employees' worries about the change can also result from perceptions of injustice regarding the change (Kiefer, 2005; Oreg & Van Dam, 2009). Perceptions of diminished control, uncertainty, and injustice have been related to higher levels of stress and anxiety, and a decrease in job satisfaction, commitment and intentions to remain with the organization (e.g., Allen et al., 2007).

Whereas there are many different reasons for employees to respond to organizational change with emotions such as worry, anxiety, and anger, it should be noted that not all instances of change will evoke negative feelings (Kiefer, 2005; Oreg et al., *in press*). Sometimes, the need for change is so clear, and the expected outcomes for the organization or the individual are so positive, that a proposed change elicits positive feelings (Huy, 1999). In any case, it can be concluded that organizational change often serves as an affective event that can elicit different emotions in employees.

3 Emotions

What are emotions? Emotions are complex constellations of responses for dealing with adaptive problems (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Mesquita & Frijda, 1989) that are characterized by four aspects (Frijda, 1988). First, emotions are short-lived responses to events that have meaning for the individual because they relate to a goal, need or expectation. Second, central to the emotional response is the subjective experience of an emotion that results from an awareness and appraisal of this situation's meaning. Third, the response usually includes physiological, bodily changes, such as increased heart rate or hormonal changes (e.g., adrenaline secretion). These bodily responses are meant to support the fourth component of emotions, that is action readiness; included in emotions are innate behavioral patterns that, on a basic evolutionary level, relate to approach (aggression) and avoidance (defense) tendencies. Together, the emotion process is characterized by a situation-attention-appraisal-response sequence (Frijda, 1988; Gross, 2015).

Although emotions are sometimes considered the cause of people acting foolish or destructive, and the expression of emotions may not be much appreciated in certain settings (Grandey, 2000), emotions do have important evolutionary qualities (Baumeister et al., 2007). As rapid information systems, emotions signal that something is happening that is relevant to us. At the same time, they prepare the body for action; the initial mobilization processes activate internal resources to direct attention and behavior for solving the problem at hand (Taylor, 1991). Whether people actually engage in action may depend on factors such as context, perceived consequences, and previous experiences (Frijda, 1988). Emotions are also important for future self-regulation. By signaling how far one has moved toward a cherished goal, emotions can instigate processes of goal adjustment and learning (Baumeister et al., 2007; Carver & Scheier, 1990). In addition to these intrapersonal functions, emotions can also have interpersonal, social functions. For instance, the expression of particular emotions can signal the nature of interpersonal relationships, facilitate specific

behaviors in the other person, and provide incentives for desired social behavior (Hwang & Matsumoto, 2013). Taken together, emotions ensure that a matching takes place between the internal and external world (Frijda, 1988).

Emotions in organizational change

How do emotions relate to organizational change? Conform the situation-attention-appraisal-response sequence (Frijda, 1988), the first announcement of change will initiate a process of appraisals (Lazarus, 1991; Liu & Perrewé, 2005) where the employee evaluates the anticipated change as compatible, or not, with important goals and needs (i.e., primary appraisal), and assesses what can be done (if so) in this situation and how this will affect both the situation and the employee (i.e., secondary appraisal). Note that the primary appraisal of the change can already elicit an emotional response, as a warning that something important is at stake (Frijda, 1988; Liu & Perrewé, 2005). In case of goal congruence, this first emotional response might be positive (e.g., excitement or enthusiasm). However, as the onset of change is generally characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, most employees will perceive or expect goal incongruence and thus experience negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and frustration (e.g., Bathge & Rigotti, 2013; Kiefer, 2005). Similarly, the secondary appraisal process can lead to, or extend, negative affective responses as these appraisals focus on the controllability and modifiability of the situation (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989), which might be rather limited in management initiated organizational change.

As emotions are inherently motivational (Lazarus, 1991) and include action tendencies (Frijda, 1988), they will affect employees' attitudinal and behavioral response to the change (Oreg et al., *in press*). Change research has shown that negative emotions can serve as antecedents of employees' change attitudes and withdrawal behavior (Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Kiefer, 2005; Smollan & Sayers, 2009) and are indicative of employees' resistance to the change (Piderit, 2000; Oreg, 2006).

Given the complex and dynamic nature of most organizational changes, employees may experience a range of different emotions (Elfenbein, 2007; Klarner, By, & Diefenbach, 2011; Vince, 2006). For example, Vince (2006) noticed that the emotions of senior managers of a firm undergoing an acquisition ranged from anger at themselves and others, to shame, powerlessness, depression, and fear, dependent on the aspect of the event they appraised. Moreover, emotions might alter over time, as the change proceeds and employees adapt to the change (Fugate et al., 2008; Klarner et al., 2011). Rafferty and Restubog (2010) noticed that employees' anxiety decreased as the number of formal change information sessions increased.

It will be clear that organizational change can elicit a number of different, often negative emotions. Yet, research suggests that people generally prefer positive feelings (Mauss et al., 2007). Reports of everyday emotion regulation show that people are inclined to down-regulate negative emotions (reducing their intensity or duration) and up-regulate positive emotions (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999). It is therefore likely that employees in organizational change will try to enhance a positive state and engage in emotion regulation.

4. Emotion regulation

What is emotion regulation? Emotion regulation refers to individuals' deliberate and automatic attempts to influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how these emotions are experienced and expressed (Gross, 1998; Mauss et al., 2007). Emotion regulation can focus on each stage (i.e., situation-attention-appraisal-response) of the emotion process (Frijda, 1988; Gross, 1998). Taking these stages as a starting point, Gross (1998, 2015) proposed a process model of emotion regulation that delineates five distinct types (or families) of emotion regulation strategies.

Two strategies relate to the emotion provoking situation. (i) *Situation selection* refers to approaching or avoiding certain people, events, and places in order to regulate emotions (Gross, 1998). (ii) *Situation modification* relates to active efforts to directly change an affective or stressful situation in order to alter its emotional impact (Gross, 1998), and has been referred to as problem-focused coping in the stress and coping literature. Another two strategies address the attentional and appraisal phase of the emotion process. (iii) *Attentional deployment* encompasses different ways of focusing on the situation, i.e., distraction, concentration and rumination. People can regulate their emotions by *distracting* themselves from the situation, either cognitively or behaviorally, for instance by thinking of pleasurable moments or engaging in alternative activities (Augustine & Hemenover, 2009; Gross, 1998). In contrast, people can *concentrate* on the problem or situation in an effort to understand the antecedents and consequences of this situation. Concentration may turn into *rumination* when people get stuck in continuous worrisome thoughts and circular thinking about the situation that is difficult to stop (Querstret & Cropley, 2012; Van Seggelen & Van Dam, 2016). (iv) *Reappraisal* is an emotion regulation strategy that involves generating positive interpretations of the situation in order to alter its emotional impact (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweitzer, 2010; Gross, 1998). The fifth type of emotion regulation, (v) *response modulation*, relates to individuals' efforts to change the emotional response at the physiological, experiential or behavioral level. Meta-analytic

evidence (Aldao et al., 2010; Augustine & Hemenover, 2009; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012) indicates that some emotion regulation strategies (i.e., situation modification, distraction, and reappraisal) generally result in more positive outcomes, such as affect repair and increased well-being, than other strategies (i.e., rumination and emotional suppression).

Emotion regulation in organizational change

How will employees regulate their change-related emotions? Unfortunately, little research has addressed this question. Still, there are some related studies that shed light on this issue (see also Elfenbein, 2007). (i) *Situation selection* as a strategy for emotion regulation is rather limited in case of large-scale organizational changes. As such changes are generally inevitable, employees have only few options. Employees can decide to withdraw from the organization; Fugate and colleagues (2008) found that negative change appraisals resulted in increased absenteeism, quit intentions, and actual turnover behavior (see also Rafferty & Restubog, 2010). Employees can also decide to stay in the organization but avoid situations that are likely to elicit negative feelings, such as colleagues that are complaining about the change (Oreg, 2006) or even company meetings about the change, and seek out situations where they feel better.

(ii) *Situation modification* refers to employee attempts to do something about the change, for instance, through voice and participation in change implementation. Although change participation may not be primarily aimed at regulating ones' emotions, it can have beneficial effects on emotions because it can lead to a sense of ownership and control over the change process (Van Dam, Oreg, & Schyns, 2008) and to a work situation that is more attractive. Studies have found positive effects of change participation on employees' openness to change (Coch & French, 1948; Van Dam et al., 2008; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Coping research however indicates that efforts to modify the situation will be effective mainly in situations that are malleable (Terry & Hynes, 1998). It is therefore possible that change situations where the input of participating employees is not used to modify the change might elicit negative emotions, such as frustration and cynicism.

(iii) Although employees' *attentional deployment* in change situations has not received much research attention, several studies have focused on distraction, concentration and rumination in other work settings (i.e., Querstret & Cropley, 2012; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Van Seggelen & Van Dam, 2016). The findings of these studies generally support the conclusions of clinical and emotion research (e.g., Augustine & Hemenover, 2009) that distraction is an effective strategy for affect repair, whereas

rumination can have detrimental effects on individuals' well-being and recovery processes. Querstret and Cropley (2012) for instance found that rumination increased work-related fatigue, partly by undermining employees' sleep quality. Similarly, research on recovery from work indicates that efforts to distract oneself from work (i.e., psychological detachment) contributes to employees' energetic state, work engagement, and health (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015). In a change situation, Van Dam (2016) found that rumination was positively associated with negative emotions and resistance to the change.

(iv) Employees who engage in *positive reappraisal* are actively trying to emphasize the positive aspects of the change and put the negative aspects into perspective. As such, positive reappraisal should be considered an act that affects employees' appraisal of the change as a challenge or a threat (cf Lazarus, 1991). Change appraisals can have important consequences for employees' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the change (Fugate et al., 2008). Van Dam (2016) found that employees' efforts to positively reappraise the change situation related positively to challenge appraisals and positive emotions, and negatively to threat appraisals and negative emotions, which in turn predicted employees' openness to the change. Fugate et al. (2008) observed how threat appraisals were related to coping and negative emotions, which predicted voluntary turnover during the following year.

(v) Employees' *response regulation* during change can take the form of either experience/arousal (down) regulation or emotional expression regulation. Employees in change situations may try to downplay their emotional arousal or feelings through, for instance, relaxation, mindfulness or other strategies. They might also engage in one the other emotion regulation strategies, such as distraction or reappraisal, to down-regulate their affective responses. Indeed, Van Dam (2016) noticed that employees who resisted the change more, and thus experienced more negative emotions, had put more effort in trying to distract their attention away from the change. It is important to note that change might serve as a chronic stressor, and that the physiological arousal resulting from the change may deplete individuals' resources and energy and, in the long run, may cause emotional exhaustion, poor performance and health problems (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015). Moreover, sustained activation and negative affect might influence how change situations are appraised (Elfenbein, 2007; Tugate et al., 2004); owing to increased arousal and negative emotions, employees are more likely to appraise a change as a hindrance stressor than as a challenge stressor (George & Jones, 2001). Given these consequences, arousal regulation deserves more attention in change research.

Response regulation also applies to the display of emotions. While employees may have a need to express their emotions in change situations, organizations often consider emotional stages during change as unproductive that should be kept short (Kiefer, 2005). Emotional expression can have a number of different outcomes, such as emotional contagion. Because change happens within a social context, emotional contagion can serve as an important trigger of shared emotional responses to change (Bartunek et al., 2006). As negative emotional displays are not much appreciated, most organizations apply certain display rules that specify which emotions are appropriate and how they should be expressed to others (Grandey, 2000). Rules that emphasize suppression of negative emotions have been associated with lowered well-being (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), whereas rules that emphasize expression of positive emotions have been related to increased work engagement (Ybema & Van Dam, 2014). Studying a change situation, Smollan and Sayers (2009) noticed that especially in male-dominated environments change-related emotional displays were not much appreciated.

5. Future research

Although the role of emotions in organizations has received increasing attention in recent years and emotion regulation has been studied extensively in the fields of emotion and clinical psychology, the role of emotions and emotion regulation during organizational change has received limited research attention. As a consequence, there are many questions to be answered. To provide directions for future research, Ashkanasy's (Ashkanasy & Doris, 2017) five-level model of emotions in organizations is used as a general framework for research suggestions.

Level 1 of this model refers to within-person processes and as such addresses many of the issues raised in this chapter. Future change research could investigate how the emotion-and-regulation process evolves over time, and also in which order emotion regulation strategies are used, and whether this order would affect employee outcomes such as their well-being or attitudes towards the change. While much organizational research on emotions distinguishes between positive and negative emotions only, researchers are invited to focus on discrete emotions, such as anxiety or anger, as they may have different causes and outcomes (Elfenbein, 2007; Kiefer, 2005; Oreg et al., *in press*), and investigate the relationships of these discrete emotions with emotion regulation strategies.

Regarding level 2, the between-persons level, attention could be paid to individual differences, such as self-efficacy or trait affect, in affective responses and

choice of regulation strategy. Research could also focus on the impact of employees' previous change experiences and their expectations on their affective responses.

Levels 3, 4 and 5 focus on the interpersonal, team/leadership, and organizational level respectively. These levels might be especially important during change situations, as change is largely a social and contextual phenomenon. Future research could investigate how social and contextual variables affect employees' emotions and regulation during change (see also Klärner et al., 2011). For instance, emotional display rules and organizational emotional climate may determine how employees express their emotions during change (Ashkanasy & Doris, 2017; Ybema & Van Dam, 2014). Moreover, in line with emotion contagion processes that lead to shared emotions, studies could investigate whether contagion also happens concerning emotion regulation, and, if so, how change agents or the change process may impact these contagion processes.

Besides suggestions on *what* to study, it is also important to consider *how* to study emotion and emotion regulation during change. Different methodologies might serve this purpose, each with their strengths and limitations. First, one could try to study these phenomena in real-life change settings. Given the dynamic nature of emotions and regulation, it is important to use longitudinal designs. Having (at least) three waves and using latent change scores is recommended to establish intrapersonal changes in emotions and regulation over time, and investigate both cross-lagged and reversed effects (McArdle, 2009; Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Online and paper/pencil measures can be used to collect a dataset of sufficient size in organizations undergoing change. Possible limitations of this approach include 1 participation (organizations and change recipients may not be willing to provide data on multiple occasions); 2 timing (what would be the best time for data collection during the change, and how should the measurements be spaced); 3 awareness (participants might not always be fully aware of their emotional processes).

The second approach, diary or ESM methods, may overcome some of these limitations. In this approach, change recipients report their affective experiences on a day-to-day base (or more often) which helps to detect fluctuations and control for base level values. Owing to the increased number of observations per participant, this approach requires less participants, which accommodates limitation 1 but may raise another limitation, 4 generalization (is this smaller sample representative such that the findings can be generalized). Moreover, limitation 2, timing, is an issue; organization change might take months or even years, so in which period should we collect our data? In order to avoid limitation 3, awareness, wearables can be used that register participants' physical conditions, such as heart beat and blood pressure.

Finally, instead of field studies, experimental designs can be used where relevant aspects of the change are manipulated, and responses can be measured in different ways, for instance through registering participants' response time, and physiological responses. Vignette studies can be used to investigate how person characteristics, such as habitual emotion regulation and trait affect, impact participants' responses to specific change situations. While an experimental approach is useful for studying specific cause–effect relationships, the research setting differs considerably from the complexity involved in organizational change, and therefore, limitation 4, generalization, might be an issue.

Given the strengths and limitations of these approaches, a plea could be made to use different methodologies to overcome method-specific limitations and assess whether effects are method-dependent.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has delineated some of the ways in which emotions and emotion regulation can play a part in organizational change processes. Although this review is not comprehensive, it may serve as a trigger for organizations and researchers to pay more attention to the emotional aspect of organizational change. While emotions are often seen as irrational and the cause of problems during change implementation (Kiefer, 2005), they can be the expression of something valuable, indicating employees' perceptions, concerns, sense making, and adaptation to the change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Smollan & Sayers, 2009). As emotion generation and emotion regulation are inextricably connected (Mesquita & Frijda, 1988), organizations and researchers need to pay more attention to how employees regulate their emotions. Emotion regulation, like emotions, can imply strong motivational forces that can impact employee behavior and well-being at work. Employees will adjust to the change more easily when they apply adaptive regulation strategies such as positive reappraisal and distraction (Aldao et al., 2010; Augustine & Hemenover, 2009; Van Dam, 2016; Webb et al., 2012). Research with different methodologies is needed to investigate the specific mechanisms involved in employees' emotion regulation and adjustment to change. The practical implications of such research will help organizations in developing a shared meaning system and improve the emotional quality of organizational change.

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