

Transforming employee resistance into organizational learning at a higher education institution in Palestine

Employee
resistance into
organizational
learning

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper reconceptualizes resistance as a stimulant of organizational learning from a change agent’s perspective. Adopting a social constructivism lens, the paper argues that employee resistance has the capacity to trigger individual, group and organizational learning. It explores the “how” question—how can employee resistance be transformed into organizational learning?

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilizes the qualitative research method of auto-ethnography. Sensemaking auto-ethnographic narrative accounts of two change agents, internal and external is used to synchronize resistance and learning as well as reflect on the positive impact of organizational change.

Findings – Rather than, suppressing resistance as a dysfunctional aspect of the change process, becoming aware and making sense of this “misconstrued barrier” to learning and change can transform it into an appropriate feedback mechanism to initiate organizational learning.

Practical implications – This paper emphasizes the role of change agents in the change process and how their understanding of the culture, change recipients, organizational climate and work environment could increase the success of transforming resistance into learning. Collaboration through social interaction, communication, participation and awareness creation are utilized as effective mechanisms to develop a learning environment.

Originality/value – This research was carried out within an academic setting in a challenging context where not much is known about change initiatives and resistance at a university level.

Keywords Employee resistance, Organizational learning, Change agents, Sensemaking, Social constructivism, Autoethnography

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The entire change process involves employees and management, or rather change recipients and change agents linked together in conflict (Bauer, 1995; Bradley *et al.*, 2000), with employees usually resisting change endeavors initiated by the top management (Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Jost and Bauer, 2003; Smollan, 2011). Resistance which occurs in overt and covert forms such as conflicts, absenteeism, intentional carelessness, false compliance, sabotage, foot dragging (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Mullings, 1999; Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Scott, 1985; Smollan, 2011) has been described in negative terminologies with emphasis on rejection and dissension. Resistance implies tensions, conflicts of interest with the current state or with decisions taken by management. With employee resistance being perceived as actions of opposition (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Maurer, 2006; Modigliani and Rochat, 1995; Piderit, 2000; Profitt, 1996); a dysfunctional process which hinders organizational learning and change projects (Jost and Bauer, 2003). The entire focus is on causes of resistance and strategies to prevent or minimize resistance (Dent and Goldberg, 1999), how to influence change recipients and how to overcome the opposition successfully (Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Lawrence, 1954; Jarrett, 2004).



Although this connotation is logical it is not completely true as resistance could also be a signal that something is wrong and needs rectification (deJager, 2001; Folger and Skarlicki, 1999; Lawrence, 1954; Mousa *et al.*, 2018; Nadim and Singh, 2018). Resistance should not be looked upon as employees are “acting out” or becoming political with the change agents “taking the form of defensive routine”, instead it is something which needs to be understood (Jarrett, 2004). There might be some utility in resistance “it is better than apathy, it avoids group-think, it provides alternative ideas for conversation” resulting in collaborative problem solving. There are also important lessons which can be learned from resistance if one manages it instead of trying to overcome it (Graetz *et al.*, 2006; Nadim and Singh, 2018; Waddell and Sohal, 1998, p. 545). It could be a trigger which calls attention to the existing issues, encourages reflection and thereby acts as a stimulant for organizational learning (Diamond, 1986; Jost, 2004; Piderit, 2000; Oreg, 2006). Employee resistance should not be treated as “an obstacle to be overcome” but a “valuable source of knowledge and critique of change program” (Strebel, 1996 as cited in Masunda, 2015, p. 24). Employee resistance could be a fundamental force of guidance and the starting point for organizational learning. “When resistance . . . appears, it should not be thought of as something to be overcome. Instead, it can best be thought of as a useful red flag—a signal that something is going wrong” (Lawrence, 1954, p. 56) with a prescriptive dimension (Jost and Bauer, 2003; Senge, 1997; Wall, 1979). Resistance functions as a feedback loop for management; signaling problems exist within the organization and need to be dealt with, investigated and acted upon to prevent further damage (Jost and Bauer, 2003; Khalil, 2013). Resistance interrupts organizational work, it elucidates current scenarios within the corporation, and allows reflection and understanding of the problems illuminating potential complications which might have been overlooked (Weick, 2003). Resistance thus can be conceptualized as a diagnostic tool which repairs malfunctions by stimulating reflection and learning at the organizational level (Graetz *et al.*, 2006). In other words, the solution does not lie in “trying to solve it”, but in trying to remove the entire problem altogether (Nadim and Singh, 2018, p. 517). There is a need to “rethink” or reconceptualize the role of employee resistance in the entire change project (Diamond, 1986; Khalil, 2013; Masunda, 2015; Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000; Strebel, 1996).

Existing studies do link employee resistance to organizational change and consider it as a stimulator for organizational learning (Erwin and Garman, 2010; Jost, 2004; Msweli-Mbanga and Potwana, 2006; Nadim and Singh, 2018). As Strebel (1996, p. 87) argues “. . . it is unrealistic for managers to expect employees to fully buy into changes that alter the status quo”. Therefore, managers need to learn how to see things differently and revise the implied relationship with their employees. One needs to understand how resistance can be converted into a positive force through listening, learning and leading at the correct time (Caldwell *et al.*, 2008; Caruth and Caruth, 2018; deJager, 2001; Herold *et al.*, 2008; Weiner, 2009). However, further research is needed to gain insights on how change agents can transform this negative resistance into positive employee learning and development.

There is a void within organizational learning literature especially at the university level in academia (Khalil, 2013), in terms of evidence-based case studies, practical examples which can explain how these theoretical arguments can be practically implemented within organizations. How or who can utilize employee resistance and its diagnostic benefits to generate learning within the organizations? It is true that organizational learning has been addressed in the banking sector (Dirani, 2009), educational sector (Bowen *et al.*, 2006) and health-care context (Andrews and Delahye, 2000) but there is still a need for comprehensive empirical studies which explore the scope and content of organizational learning (Hearty, 2004; Mousa *et al.*, 2019). Further majority of the empirical studies have been conducted in the western countries, there is unfortunately a scarcity of empirical studies which investigate

organizational learning and resistance to change in the higher educational sector in developing countries (Jain and Moreno, 2015; Jamali *et al.*, 2009; Mousa *et al.*, 2019; Örtenblad, 2013). Thus more “blue-prints” are needed which trace “scope of issues associated with resistance, understand them, and conquer them with appropriate support of leadership of their institutions” (Khalil, 2013, p. 161). Moreover, all reported research has been derived from surveys and questionnaires which are quantitatively analyzed. This has ended up providing a limited perspective on employee resistance and its role in organizational change processes. Therefore, to broaden the parameters of resistance research, and integrate the feelings, attitudes and emotions of employees and the challenges faced by change managers, an effort should be made to adopt qualitative and practice-based methods (i.e. case studies and action research) (Masunda, 2015).

This paper seeks to contribute toward the existing empirical and methodological lacunae within change management and employee resistance literature by focusing on the positive aspects of employee resistance. For instance, converting employee resistance into organizational learning within the higher educational sector in the conflicted region of Palestine. By exploring issues such as how employee resistance to initiate international business accreditation process within an academic setting can be transformed into employee learning? How can change agents exploit resistance and help employees learn new values and behaviors? What interventions can be adopted to convert resistance into a positive learning experience? using the qualitative methodology of autoethnography.

The entire paper is divided into four sections. Section one reconceptualizes employee resistance not as a negative ideology in the context of organizational change and learning. Section two discusses concepts of social constructionism and sensemaking and the social learning theory of constructivism to demonstrate theoretically how a change agent can convert employee resistance into learning. Section three discusses the methodology of autoethnography. Section four analyzes the empirical data. While the last section covers implications of this research study both theoretically and practically, with limitations and suggestions for further research.

Re-conceptualizing employee resistance as a positive change construct

It is undeniable that the theory of resistance to change despite being extensively researched still suffers from limitations (Piderit, 2000). Because somehow all resistance studies have tended to emphasize its negativity and ignore its positive implications (Mabin *et al.*, 2001, Masuda, 2015; Nadim and Singh, 2018; Piderit, 2000, Strebel, 1996). Resistance has repeatedly been defined as a restraining force which hinders the management from achieving its goals and objectives. Managers therefore perceive resistance as negative, and all employees as uncooperative, disobedient and as obstacles which need to be overcome (Graetz *et al.*, 2006; Nadim and Singh, 2018; Watson, 1982). “The most prevalent way of analyzing resistance is to see it as a reactive process where agents embedded in power relations actively oppose initiatives by other agents” (Jermier *et al.*, 1994, p. 9).

However, this constricts the role of resistance in the entire change process. All employee resistance cannot be attributed to employees’ selfishness (Graham, 1984, 1986). A few (Ashford *et al.*, 1998; Dutton *et al.*, 1997) argue that employees might resist just to try to focus the attention of the top management toward important issues which they believe need to get addressed to ensure the survival of the organization and sustain high levels of quality and performance. Resistance can also be motivated by the desire of the employees to behave ethically (Milgram, 1965; Modigliani and Rochat, 1995). As Goldratt (1997) aptly comments individuals are not stubborn and dumb, they only resist something because it has not been coherently and logically explained to them pinpointing its benefits. In other words, efforts should be made to explore the real reasons behind employee resistance (Piderit, 2000),

by viewing it under a multidimensional lens encompassing three attitudinal dimensions: a cognitive stance, an emotional stance and a behavioral stance.

Resistance to change can be described as a multi-dimensional process, of how an individual thinks (cognitive), reacts (behavioral) and feels (affective) about the change process (Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000; Smollan, 2011). Looking at employees' actions from these three angles deepens understanding of why and how employees respond to organizational changes. Resistance can be behavioral when employees protest aggressively against disruptive change events such as change in their jobs and work habits. In case of emotional stance, employees might experience different types of emotions—frustration, aggression and anxiety (Argyris and Schon, 1974, 1978; Coch and French, 1948)—“feelings, moods, emotions and sympathetic nervous-system activity that people [can] experience . . .” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998, p. 272). While cognitive stance explains the thinking and decision-making process of the employees, how individuals can be influenced by their past experiences and happenings (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998). All these three attitudes combine to influence employees' behaviors, actions and outlook toward the change process—determine how an individual can respond either positively or negatively to the change process. It is the responsibility of the change agent to convert or take appropriate measures to avoid these three interconnected attitudinal components from turning negative. The change agent minimizes this impact or finds ways to dissipate these attitudes from becoming interlaced with aggression and bitterness (Argyris, 1983). They consider the resisters' espoused theories and theories in use, and repair these attitudinal routines accordingly (Argyris, 1983). Within resistance, negativity is usually located in the reluctance of the employees, i.e. their “unreadiness levels” (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993) or being unprepared for the change process. The change agents by intervening, focusing on one view over the others can change the course of events. They can stress on the importance of meaningful stimuli such as opportunities, growth etc. Eclipsing failure, fear and tension through dialogue and open confrontational debates (Piderit, 2000). It is possible to adjust the original change proposal or actions of the change agents or managers through well-timed communication strategies and appropriate conversations and dialogue (Mabin *et al.*, 2001; Masunda, 2015; Nadim and Singh, 2018; Piderit, 2000).

Thus, to avoid “resistance” from getting retired from the change management literature because of its negativity and pessimism (Merrow, 1983; Dent and Goldberg, 1999). There is a need to widen its boundaries by reconceptualizing it as a positive change management construct, where employees' responses to change are interpreted using the multidimensional attitudes paradigm (Piderit, 2000), which would enable the management to increase the chances of success of various change projects (Dent and Goldbert, 1999; Krantz, 1999; Nadim and Singh, 2018). This paper contributes here, empirically by demonstrating how employee resistance can be converted into a powerful constructive force of change, resulting in employee learning and organizational development. The next section considers social constructionism and sensemaking theories and the social learning theory of constructivism to understand how change agents can reflect on the behavior and actions of the change recipients, to intervene and transform these revolts into productive learning episodes.

Sensemaking theory and the social learning theory of constructivism

Organizations can be conceptualized as “living things” consisting of a “concrete social environment” (Wolf, 1958, p. 14) where all its members actively conceive, invent, interpret the socially constructed truth to react to internal events occurring within their corporation (March, 1994; Weick, 1995). Language, conversations and discourses play an important role in these socially constructed organizations. Employees continuously construct their social world they interact with and build social patterns which result in establishment of institutional arrangements.

However, another set of interactions may result in these previously constructed patterns, routines and arrangements to be modified or even replaced (Benson, 1977). Organizational members according to the social constructionism perspective take an active role in designing, developing and building new organizations. Relationships between supervisors and employees are not fixed or rigid, but are multidimensional, which keep evolving and changing from formal to personal, over time. Policies, rules, regulations are modified as conversations keep occurring within an organization. Stories, myths, rituals and language are not just mundane conversations but “ongoing dynamics that constitute organizational life” (Putnam, 1983, p. 40). Communication becomes the medium whereby change occurs (Ford, 1999)—“one way of talking replaces another way of talking” (Barrett *et al.*, 1995, p. 370). Structure, culture, systems, leadership all become topics of conversations when communicating with the employees during the change process (Anderson, 2005, 2020).

This entire process, known as sensemaking is an ongoing process, with no fixed beginnings or endings (Weick, 1979, 1995). Sensemaking involves becoming critically aware (Mezirow, 1978, 1981), seeking information, deconstructing and assigning meaning to this information, understanding and then acting on these interpretations (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Mills *et al.*, 2010; Weick *et al.*, 2005) to develop new understandings and perspectives which allows reaching better decisions.

The change process “. . . includes contributions from [both] change agents and change recipients who are linked together in conflict. The function of this temporary structure, in form and content is to alter the change project” (Bauer, 1993, 1995, p. 113; Jeremier *et al.*, 1994). Change agents would consist of organization development (OD) consultants both internal (managers or specialists employed by the organization) and external (practitioners hired on a temporary basis). Change agents can identify painful areas via employee resistance, work on unlearning employees’ fears and denials toward undesirable aspects of the change processes, move them from past perceptions, experiences and uncomfortable attitudes toward new realities. “The job of the change agent . . . is to initiate, maintain and complete conversations so as to bring into existence a new conversational reality in which new opportunities of action are created and effective action takes place” (Ford, 1999, p. 492). By intervening and engaging in conversation at multiple dimensions: cognitive and mental schema, emotional (dialogue and information to dissipate negative feelings) and interpersonal levels (individual- and group-based conversations) and then converting these conversations into behavior-oriented actions at the organizational level (such as official documents or developing task force committees, etc.) (Anderson, 2020; Ford, 1999). Ford and Ford (2008) in fact recommend that the change agents adopt a practical tool known as the conversational profile for all change agents, a sort of journal where they can record all conversations which take place during the initial change process. Change agents are encouraged to write as they recollect all conflicts and revolts, in the form of conversations which took place, what was said, who participated in these conversations, how frequently these individuals engaged in verbal disputes to analyze, interpret and deconstruct to expose the “true intentions” or issues surrounding the change project (Ford and Ford, 2008). “After seeing analysis of their conversations and results, . . . [change agents] come to their own conclusions about what might be missing or not working, that is develop a hypothesis which they can then test by altering [the] conversations . . .” they will next use or plan to use (Ford and Ford, 2008, p. 455).

The change agents use the raw data (i.e. resistance activities), make sense of them and interpret them in the context of the organizational environment through connected sequences of behavior, enactment and leadership decisions (Weick, 1995). Existing instability and uncertainty are thus effectively transformed into positive forces (Heider, 1958). The change agents influence the multidimensional attitudes of the employees—cognitive, emotional and

behavior to transform resistance into cooperation and then learning. They then reconstruct the same resistant environments into collaborative learning environments.

The learning theory of social constructivist provides insights on how learning occurs when social events influence individuals' psychology and their learning processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Individuals comprehend their social environments by assimilating information on the social events, then questioning and evaluating these happenings. This reflexive process involves interpreting social events, learning from them and moving ahead with new perspectives and philosophies (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Language plays a significant role in this entire learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Social structures determine individuals working conditions and their relationships with others, which in turn shape their cognitions, emotions, perceptions of the reality (Vygotsky, 1978). Social structures are shaped via various cultural tools such as language, symbols, rituals and rites (Vygotsky, 1978). To resolve organizational problems, the change agents or the managers should modify or revise the social structures using these psychological and cultural tools to influence an individual's perception of the same reality.

Change pessimism can get transformed into readiness for change within organizations through proper usage of communication and information by the change agent, which clarifies situations and events for the employees (Imran *et al.*, 2016). Learning and knowledge creation are not isolated processes, they are a result of the social and collaborative processes (Dudley-Marling, 2012; Ernest, 1998; Gredler, 1997; Schunk, 2012). Employees learn new information, strategies, technologies and mechanisms by participating in collective and collaborative spaces which increase their acceptance of change within the organization (Senge, 1990). Individual and organizational learning is fostered through employee participation in the change process and by allowing employees to communicate problems and offer suggestions for new practices (Nadim and Singh, 2018; Valleala *et al.*, 2015).

This paper explores how change agents can take up the responsibility of identifying resistance, reflecting on it and transforming it into a learning force within their respective organizations through social interaction, participation and collaboration. The next section discusses the methodological procedure used by the authors.

Autoethnography: self-reflexive narratives

The earlier section mentioned the need for all change agents to maintain a practical organization development (OD) tool such as a conversational profile to enable them to conduct a post-mortem analysis of the initial events of the change process. This directed the authors toward the qualitative research method of autoethnography. Autoethnography is an unconventional method which belongs to the autobiographical genre of research writing, where individuals record detailed and systematic accounts of their experiences (Doloriet and Sambrook, 2012; Ellis, 1999; Hayano, 1979; Haynes, 2011; Ostentoski, 2015; Prasad, 2014a, b, 2019; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). It is a valuable research method to explore, present and represent one-self (Haynes, 2011). This enables reflection of one's recorded narratives (Parry and Boyle, 2009) giving voice to events, situations and conversations which otherwise might have remained silent (Doloriet and Sambrook, 2012). As rightly remarked by Prasad (2014a, p. 525), "embracing the telling of our own stories might particularly allow emergence of previously unheard voices from the field . . .". The "unedited" autoethnographic data is able to "provide glimpses into one's own lives" to allow transformation of one's psyche and perceptions to propel change in the proper direction (Prasad, 2014b, pp. 249–251). Furthermore, the emphasis is laid on the researcher writing in a rigorous and analytical manner with a dose of reflexivity involved (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2008). Reflexivity effectively absolves artificial parameters pertaining to self and society, by subjecting the individual, his/her body and personality, and the social situation to a set of contingencies that

might happen to play upon an individual and how he/she responds to them (Conquergood, 1991). Autoethnography thus possesses the capability to allow the change agents to record all their observations and conversations in a narrative form, sense make and reflect on these narratives in an introspective manner to transform the change process in a positive manner.

Both the authors had collaboratively worked on a change project, as change agents within an academic institution undergoing a change process. The authors compiled the sequence of change events in their roles of internal and external change agents. These lived-body experiences in the form of narratives captured and recorded all conversations which took place between the agents and the employees. The analysis of these self-recorded narratives facilitated sensemaking of the change phenomena, interactions between change agents and change recipients, understanding the emotions, mental schemas and actions of the change recipient, to rephrase all conversations, to design collaborative learning spaces to generate learning among the employees. The data analysis started by reviewing the narratives recorded by each change agent separately. Several codes were extracted and summarized from change agents' scripts. Examples of repetitive terms included "not cooperating", "complaining", "fear", "stress", "negative attitude", "anxiety", "blaming", "participation", "communication", "awareness", "new concepts", "collaboration", "interpretation", "knowledge", "standards", "experience", "understanding". Commonalities and differences were identified, and initial themes were revised and categorized into four major themes and subthemes as shown in Table 1. The next section discusses the empirical analysis.

Empirical analysis and discussion

The entire change process took place at a Business School (BSL) of a well-known Palestinian public university located in the West Bank. BSL is one of the largest schools in the university, with six undergraduate majors and three master programs. Palestine classified as an extreme context, is a high conflict country comprising of two areas that are enforcedly separated, Gaza and the West Bank. The continuing political discord occurring due to Palestinian/Israeli conflicts has resulted in two intifadas or Palestinian uprisings, resulting in the death and imprisonment of numerous Palestinians, and severely impacting the political, economic and social development of the region. Frequent "strikes, curfews and roadblocks", have converted the entire region into a "virtual war zone" (Honig, 2001, p. 578; Muna and Khoury, 2012). Palestinian territories are separated due to military checkpoints, walls, settlements, security zones and other enforced occupation security measures (Khoury and Prasad, 2016; Prasad, 2014a, b, 2019). With all residents placed under close surveillance and monitoring which is enforced via paper and digital permits, ID cards, visas, evacuation orders, legal notices and other types of classifications (Abdelnour, 2013; Khoury and Prasad, 2016). Palestine is

	Themes	Subthemes
1	Sensemaking resistance	Cognitive Behavioral Affective
2	Change agents' reflections	Interpreting and understanding causes of resistance
3	Interventions used	Social interaction Participation Communication Collaboration
4	Learning outcomes	Individual level Group level Organizational level

Table 1.
Data analysis themes
and sub-themes

constantly faced with fierce military strikes and border closures which not only disrupt the lives of the residents but also negatively impact the educational institutions located within that territory (Khoury and Prasad, 2016). The education system is in a state of disrepair, with insufficient school infrastructure, lack of trained and qualified teachers and lack of proper Internet facilities (Save the Children Alliance, 2001). Moreover, students and teachers are repeatedly targeted by the Israeli undercover units, in the form of frequent arrests and imprisonments (El-Tohamy, 2021). Continuous and persistent tensions within the region have made it unsafe to conduct regular classes within universities and schools (El-Tohamy, 2021).

Higher education institutions in Palestine have been established under these trying social, political and economic circumstances (Abu Lughod, 2000; Alvi *et al.*, 2019; Khoury and Prasad, 2016). In addition, the Palestinian government has been facing diminishing financial resources in the last few years and is not capable of allocating the much-needed funds to higher education institutions in Palestine. This has placed all Palestinian higher education institutions especially those governmental and public institutions that are dependent on external funding and limited governmental support (Khoury and McNally, 2014) in dire circumstances. Student–teacher ratios have increased, so has the percentage of part-time teachers, with full-time faculty teaching massive overloads, and very few holding doctorate degrees. Research activity has substantially diminished, sufficiently reducing the quality of higher education and negatively impacting student learning (Hashweh *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, international faculty and student and faculty exchange programs are limited due to the entry permit issues and lack of Palestinian border control. Therefore, Palestinian universities endure lack of diversity and opportunities to internationalize their curriculum and expose their students to multi-cultures. However, some of the recently established private universities are trying to partner with foreign universities to establish joint academic programs and compete with earlier established public universities (Abu Lughod, 2000).

The change initiative which involved two change agents who converted employee resistance into employee learning, occurred within these extreme contexts. The entire change process was reconstructed under five stages utilizing the empirical analysis of the autoethnographic narratives of the change agents.

Phase one: the change initiative

The change project consisted of an initiative by the dean of the Business School (BSL) who wanted to apply for international accreditation of its business academic programs but lacked the support of university council members who cited insufficient finances and questioned the need for international accreditation with existing local accreditation. Despite her disappointment, the dean felt that international accreditation would enhance BSL's academic reputation. Therefore, she attended an international accreditation workshop and formed an academic program quality committee to assess the needs of BSL's academic programs.

The dean also applied for a country specific consulate scholarship and received a consultant to assess BSL's readiness for international accreditation before formally applying for accreditation. The consultant had to review the curriculum, faculty and staff qualifications, research output and recommend a course of action to overcome barriers to obtaining international accreditation. This was to reduce expenses and mitigate risks of accreditation failure in the future. The dean hoped that a positive assessment by the consultant would convince the top management to approve applying for international accreditation. She was not aware that BSL's faculty would also resist the accreditation initiative.

There were two change agents involved in this project. The internal change agent was the new dean of BSL. She was the first female dean of BSL ever, a well-published female who had been working for the same institution for twenty-six years. She had occupied various administrative positions prior to becoming a dean. The external change agent, a consultant was a faculty member herself at a business college in the United States. This was her first visit to the Middle East region. Her task was to assess BSL according to the quality standards of the business accreditation agency [see [Table 2](#)].

Phase two: employee resistance

The literature highlights possible causes of resistance such as fear of unknown and a desire to maintain status quo ([Anderson, 2020](#)). Change recipients demonstrate behaviors like “push-back, not buying in, criticism, foot dragging, work around . . . not responding to requests in a timely manner, making critical or negative comments” ([Anderson, 2020](#); [Ford and Ford, 2010](#), p. 24). Employee resistance can arise due to cognitive, behavioral and emotional attitudes, which indicate how people think, feel and react to the change process ([Piderit, 2000](#); [Smollan, 2011](#)). Emotional resistance deals with negative feelings experienced by the employees such as anxiety, tension and fear. For instance, faculty members at BSL showed concern and uneasiness about the quality requirements and standards of the accreditation process especially those related to research output and publications. They feared their job security and opposed the accreditation initiative.

During my meetings with small groups of faculty members, I was told how BSL was not ready for accreditation, the faculty didn’t have enough publications, processes were not in place, there was no need for international accreditation—“we already have Palestinian accreditation, and we are not receiving international students” (External Change Agent).

The fears and anxieties of the employees translated into behaviors of non-cooperation and non-compliance such as the delay in responding to the external change agent’s requests or complaining about the extra work allocated to them, i.e. behavioral resistance attitude. For example, as recorded in the change agents’ narratives:

In certain instances, the information requested by the specialist was not readily available. The department heads had to ask for it from other units such as the registrar’s office, computer center, and institutional research unit. Although the information was requested, there were numerous

The Change Project: Dean of Business School (BSL) at a well-known Palestinian public university in West Bank wants to apply for international business accreditation. She lacks the support of the top administration, the university council members who express financial concerns and the need for international accreditation with existing local accreditation

Events before the change process initiative: Dean of BSL attends an international accreditation workshop, forms academic program quality committee to assess BSL’s academic programs. She also applies for a country specific consulate scholarship before formally applying for accreditation. The consultant needs to review the curriculum, faculty and staff, research and professional experience and recommend a course of action to mitigate risks of accreditation failure

The change agents:

Internal change agent: The new dean of BSL, first female dean ever, a well published author with twenty-six years of experience, skilled in strategic planning, quality assurance and curriculum development and other administrative responsibilities

External change agent: a Faculty member from a business college in USA. First visit to the middle East region

The problem: BSL’s faculty uneasy about the consequences of international accreditation in terms of job security. They resist and are uncooperative during the external change Agent’s visit making the entire self-assessment process difficult. Both change agents are worried

Table 2.
Background of the
change project
initiative & change
agents profiles

delays in obtaining the required information in the form needed ... Some faculty members deliberately did not cooperate with department heads and did not submit the information they had requested like research output ... (Internal Change Agent).

There were always delays. Some information was submitted to me even after I submitted my report to the dean. Some departments submitted others did not. The collected data was not consistent in all departments. The data point person did not provide all the required information. He in fact jocularly stated, "I might give it to you in the last week" (External Change Agent).

Some resistant behaviors were overt and open, others more insidious, devious and indirect in nature.

... the easy response to all my inquiries "it is on the online portal." At the end of my visit, I recognized that some of the requested information was not available at all. I heard remarks during my last meeting like "it should have been there", "it is usually there", "really how weird it is not there!" (External Change Agent).

The change recipients were in complete denial of the accreditation effort. They had a negative perception about the entire change initiative. This explained their current mental schema, they did not understand the need for international accreditation, which placed additional burden on them in terms of quality standards, etc. They were stressed out and under a lot of mental pressure.

One department head complained "we are requested to work on too many requirements for the university's quality assurance unit and for the BSL accreditation specialist during the same time period" another remarked "we do not have time to translate information from Arabic to English." A faculty member mentioned "it would be costly to maintain accreditation even after we receive it." A newly appointed department head was asking "how can I obtain information about the department students' accomplishments?" (Internal Change Agent).

Phase three: change agents' reflections

The change agents reflected on the events happening at BSL, to reflect on the reasons behind employee resistance and to turn it into a positive force. For instance, the internal change agent had to confront her colleagues and their fears. She tried to understand their feelings to overcome the negativity surrounding the change initiative. As evident in her narrative:

Some of my colleagues were intentionally not cooperating because they did not want me to achieve results during my tenure. Being the first woman dean is difficult to comprehend by some. I am also more published than the majority. They know that I have worked hard to get to this point. Some are jealous (Internal Change Agent).

The internal change agent utilized her prior experience, knowledge and intuitions to deconstruct the reasons behind employee resistance and then reconstructed the entire change initiative. Her interpretations of the current situations were also influenced by her interactions with her colleagues and superiors (Weick, 1995, 1999). For instance, the dean was aware of the academic culture of BSL having been a faculty member herself before becoming the dean. She was therefore able to identify with her colleagues, was sympathetic and empathetic to their concerns.

The external change agent however, had a different view about the change process. She was not aware of the culture of BSL, for her all the change recipients were outsiders who either supported or opposed the entire accreditation process.

I became accustomed to the organizational culture and climate. BSL could be categorized into the dean and her supporters; senior and older faculty members; junior faculty consisting of teaching assistants and administrative staff (External Change Agent).

However, she was also interested in completing her project assignment within the allocated time. She had numerous conversations with the dean to comprehend why employees were adverse, to the accreditation initiative.

I had many conversations with the dean; we closely collaborated during the self-assessment process ... (External Change Agent).

Both the change agents wanted to remove the misconceptions of the faculty members regarding the accreditation assessment exercise. They tried to reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity within BSL and dissipate the anxiety and stress levels of the employees. By reflecting on the past events, they were able to comprehend the causes behind employees' actions and behavior. They now changed their communication strategies, instead of fighting the employees and antagonizing them further. They tried to initiate an open and honest dialogue with them.

Phase four: dialogic interventions

The change agents reconstructed the working environment to influence the change recipients' cognitive schemas, emotions and actions. They worked in close collaboration with others, listened attentively during social interactions with change recipients, in meetings, impromptu dialogues and feedback sessions. They felt the change recipients appeared to be confused, not clear about the purpose and standards of the international accreditation agency. The change agents therefore relentlessly communicated, discussed and explained the need for specific documentation and faculty support for the self-assessment process. They patiently explained that the whole process intended to improve the academic quality of BLS's programs by introducing new pedagogical standards. They reframed resistance, adopted an exploratory attitude (Clarkson and Kellner, 1995) to design psychodynamically informed interventions (Jarrett, 2004). The change agents became aware of their own countertransference and utilized interventions which stimulated dialogue, encouraged feedback and highlighted defensive routines to promote learning and to succeed in introducing change (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1989; Mabin *et al.*, 2001; Nadim and Singh, 2018). This took the form of creative and collaborative spaces to increase acceptance of change and allow employees to learn new information and mechanisms (Senge, 1997). Their interventions encompassed open confrontation of the opposition through the enhancement of dialogue, building awareness and strengthening networks (Battilana and Casciaro, 2013; Mabin *et al.*, 2001; Robbins and Judge, 2011; Nadim and Singh, 2018) at all levels in the university and getting faculty actively involved in the process. The following excerpts from the change agents' narratives explain the interventions which created collaborative learning spaces at BSL.

The dean invited me to attend BSL's council meeting where she asked for reasons behind faculty's non-cooperation. She directly asked a department chair "... Why did you inform the accreditation consultant that our students do not have any accomplishments when you know a number of them have published in a case book and participated in conferences ..." Again "why did you say we don't have feedback from program graduates although we have done a survey?" (Eternal Change Agent).

I was invited to other meetings with BSL's advisory board and various committees. I had the opportunity to explain the impact of international accreditation. I received many questions and faculty understood how lengthy the accreditation process is which allows them the opportunity to publish and remedy deficiencies before receiving the actual accreditation (External Change Agent).

After receiving faculty's feedback, I appointed two committees representing all academic programs one for assurance of learning and another for accreditation. I asked the accreditation consultant to discuss with committee members where BSL stood in terms of all accreditation standards and identify areas of improvement so these committees would follow up with their respective

departments. We thought these committees would help in changing BSL's values and culture. Involving faculty in the change process and introducing them to new quality standards would reinforce their support for the strategic direction. (Internal Change Agent)

Phase five: types of learning

The change agents provided opportunities for the change recipients to openly criticize, comment and complain. They listened to the critical feedback, implemented appropriate dialogic interventions resulting in evolution of new understandings and perceptions. At the individual level, all faculty members became familiar with the specific standards of international accreditation. The standards pertaining to assurance of learning were integrated by the faculty when they redesigned their course syllabi and learning outcomes for the courses they taught. Also, asking each faculty member to provide their publication list encouraged them to approach the change agents about the possibility of working on joint publications.

I knew that the dean was working with the junior faculty to help them publish. One department head shared with me her research interest and we worked together on a publication. (External Change Agent).

At a group level, formation of accreditation and quality assurance committees consisting of cross-functional departmental members allowed the faculty members a chance to work together and discuss common issues and problematic concerns.

Committee members started explaining and helping their departments' colleagues to understand quality standards and the assurance process. I noticed the collaboration of members from different departments to submit joint research proposals to be funded by the university's research committee. (Internal Change Agent)

At the organizational level, BSL's faculty, faculty across the university and the top management of the university started realizing the importance of applying for international accreditation in the future after attending two general workshops facilitated by the external change agent. The self-assessment exercise considered the limited financial resources of the university and was a less expensive approach, but it generated learning processes which built a culture that was willing to consider international educational standards. The learning that was achieved through collaborative spaces resulted in a change in the knowledge, beliefs and behaviors of change recipients (Nadim and Singh, 2018; Watkins and Marsick, 1993).

The quality assurance unit of the university invited me to conduct two workshops at a university level to emphasize quality and learning assurance for faculty. I understood they were in the process of assessing academic programs at a university level. This helped in building awareness at other departments as well. (External Change Agent)

During a farewell gathering at the end of my assignment I gave a comprehensive presentation of the report for BSL faculty. I clarified everything required to be able to achieve accreditation. (External Change Agent)

The collective problem-solving approach through dialogue, active communication, awareness building and participation (Graetz *et al.*, 2006; Nadim and Singh, 2018; Robbins and Judge, 2011; Valleala *et al.*, 2015) resulted in transforming BSL's culture, norms, values and beliefs. The change agents in this case study treated resistance as a feedback loop to diagnose problems within BSL and explored them through the process of sensemaking and reflection. They then acted upon these interpretations to stimulate learning among the faculty members (Jost and Bauer, 2003). The change interventions adopted by the change agents encouraged the employees to *unlearn* their past perceptions and fears and to *learn* new information about educational processes, quality standards and mechanisms (Senge, 1997).

Conclusion

This paper contributes toward the literature on organizational learning and employee resistance by emphasizing the “*how*” and “*who*” is involved in a change process and highlighting the active role of the change agents. The change agents, this paper argues possess the ability to transform resistance into learning at more than one level within the organizations by adopting sensemaking strategies and the social learning theory of constructivist to design learning communities where employees *unlearn* their prior mental schemas to *learn* alternative perspectives of the same reality. The change initiative in this paper involved a self-assessment exercise to determine BSL’s readiness for international accreditation. The change agents, instead of fighting employee resistance created new realities and designed collaborative learning communities, which encouraged social interaction, communication and participation and build awareness about the positive aspects of the accreditation effort thereby developing a learning environment and culture. This research study also provides the needed empirical evidence about effective change interventions from an academic setting at the university level (Khalil, 2013; Mousa *et al.*, 2019; Torraco *et al.*, 2005). It also contributes toward and illuminates the higher education issues and problems persisting within extreme contexts such as Palestine.

This study focuses on the practical role of change agents and how by sensemaking, deconstructing and reflecting on the organizational culture and on the behavior of the change recipients, they can transform resistance into learning thereby increasing the chances of success of various change initiatives. Albeit the practical example of the change agents used in this study provides valuable insights for action researchers and organization development consultants.

This research study however does not integrate the views of top administration, or the perspectives of the change recipients in the form of qualitative interviews on the accreditation initiative and the interventions implemented at BSL. Future research should overcome these limitations. Additionally, the cross-cultural issues involving the change agents and the change recipients, and the political context of the case study are not explored. This paves the way for further cross-cultural case studies in higher education, about the influence of national cultural values of change agents and recipients on the success of the different types of change initiatives.

This study focused on the change agents, contrasting their roles and responsibilities in the entire change process. However, the internal change agent also happened to be the dean of the college, a leader who initiated the change process and collaborated with the employees to transform resistance into learning. This study did not fully explore issues pertaining to how a leader can mediate when the change project shows signs of resistance and failure? What leadership style and leadership traits are needed to transform employee resistance into an organizational culture of cooperation and learning? Studies in future can take this change project forward by investigating these unexplored issues in more depth.

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