# Change agent's contribution to recipients' resistance to change: A two-sided story

Janita F.J. Vos [a, *], Joyce Rupert [b]

[a] University of Groningen, Faculty of Economics and Business, Nettelbosje 2, 9747 AE Groningen, The Netherlands
[b] Nyenrode Business University, Straatweg 25, 3621 BG Breukelen, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

In the change management literature, most studies on recipients' resistance to change include only the views of agents or of recipients, thereby ignoring that these parties may have different perceptions. In this quantitative study, we include the perceptions of both parties in studying the recipients' resistance and the impact of the agent's leadership behavior. In a sample of 117 agent-recipients groupings, covering 110 different change projects in 90 organizations, we found that agents perceive higher levels of recipients' resistance than do the recipients themselves. Additionally, we found that agents who create space to enable recipients to think and act differently (by employing creating behavior) report higher levels of recipients' resistance, whereas recipients perceive their resistance to be lowered when agents facilitate an emotional connection to the change (framing behavior). The depth of the change appeared to moderate the relationship between agent's leadership behavior and recipients' resistance, indicating that agents and recipients differ in which change leadership behaviors they perceive as increasing or decreasing resistance at different levels of change depth. These findings imply to reconsider the relationship between agent and recipients and we propose some promising avenues for future studies in resistance research.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the growing need for organizations to implement changes in order to adapt to a changing environment, it is assumed that up to 70% of change initiatives fail with one of the root causes to be leadership behavior (e.g., Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Kotter, 1990). Indeed, one of the key challenges that change agents face, which has shown to significantly influence the progress of change, is recipients' resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). In the dominant view of the change management literature, the agent suffers from this resisting behavior of the recipient (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008). Recipients are assumed to resist change because of their personal characteristics (Oreg, 2006) or due to reasons such as lack of motivation, uncertainties, and the increased anxiety that change brings (Dym, 1999, pp. 6–19; Maurer, 1998; Reger, Mullane, Gustafson, & DeMarie, 1994). Other studies address what agents can, or should do to lower recipients' resistance, assuming that recipients will automatically resist change and that this resistance will disrupt a change process (Del Val & Fuentes, 2003; Georgalis, Samaratunge, Kimberley, & Lu, 2015).

In their conceptual study, Ford et al. (2008) criticize this agent-centric view where recipients create unreasonable obstacles or barriers intended to disrupt the change, and agents struggle to overcome these barriers. These authors argue that resistance studies tend to overlook the contribution that the change agents themselves could make to the resistance. In practice, change agents can contribute to the creation of recipient resistance directly, for example, by violating existing agreements, breaking trust, and overselling the change (Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004).

The fact that most studies on resistance adopt a one-sided approach in their conceptualization and include the perceptions of one of the actors, thus neglecting the role of the other one in their empirical examination (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Bouckenooghe, Devos, & Van den Broeck, 2009), further nourishes this dominant perspective. This is remarkable because other research suggests that, essentially, there is no reason to assume that agents and recipients share the same understandings (Bartunek,

\* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: j.f.j.vos@rug.nl (J.F.J. Vos).

Rousseau, Rudolph, & De Palma, 2006, p. 183). For instance, past conflict research has shown that asymmetrical perceptions of a relationship can damage the quality and outcomes of relationships (Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010; Jehn, Rupert, & Nauta, 2006).

Building on this past work, we extend the change management literature by including both agent's and recipients' perceptions of their relationship. Through the investigation of 117 agent-recipients groupings, we offer a two-sided perspective on the relationship between leadership behavior and recipients resistance. We thus reconsider the dominant view on recipients' resistance and include the agent's possible role in creating recipients' resistance. Given the explorative nature of this study, we propose research questions to theoretically develop this area. In doing so, we contribute to the change leadership and resistance literature in three ways.

Guided by the first research question, we provide an empirical investigation of whether agents and recipients have different views of the recipients' level of resistance to change. Second, we explore the possibility that has been theoretically suggested, but not yet empirically tested, that agents may contribute with their behavior to the emergence of recipients' resistance (Ford et al., 2008). In our examination of this research question, we also extend the qualitative work on change leadership behavior by Higgs and Rowland (2005; 2011) by introducing quantitative measures of these behaviors. Finally, we examine how change depth (Woodman & Dewett, 2004), as a contextual variable, influences the relationship between the agent's leadership behavior and the recipients' resistance. Given the wide variety of organizational changes (Michel, By, & Burnes, 2013), we provide a needed and more nuanced comparison of the two actors' perceptions of how agent's leadership behavior impacts recipients' resistance across changes.

In this paper, the review of the literature on change leadership and resistance leads to our three research questions. We then describe how we investigated the agent-recipient combinations and present the results. Finally, after a brief summary of our results, we discuss implications for theory and practice, and provide directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Change leadership behavior

Leadership is seen as the ability to influence a group toward fulfilling a vision or a set of goals. In change situations, agents develop a change vision, which they communicate in order to align people, to inspire them to overcome hurdles in order to establish a positive direction (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Kotter, 1990). There is growing evidence that an agent's leadership behavior in the change process has a significant effect on the success of the change initiative ( Colville & Murphy, 2006; Higgs, 2003; Higgs & Rowland, 2011). For instance, results have shown that transformational leadership, where the "leader is moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration" (Bass, 1999, p. 11), is effective in situations of change (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Van der Voet, 2014). However, little research exists on what specific behaviors change agents display and how such behaviors influence recipients' behavior in change situations.

In this study, we build on the work of Higgs and Rowland (2005; 2011), who have identified leadership behaviors of change agents associated with certain activities that agents undertake in the implementation of specific changes (differing in complexity and linearity of the process). In their qualitative studies, they found change agents to exert three different kinds of leadership behaviors

to influence their recipients, some of which they are likely to combine and exert simultaneously (Higgs & Rowland, 2011). First, *shaping behavior* can be described as "the communication and actions of leaders related directly to the change" (2011; p. 312), with associated behaviors such as controlling what gets done, expressing their own views (as an agent) on the change, and holding others accountable for the delivery of allocated tasks. This leadership behavior can be characterized as agent-centric, which entails "the leader driving the change through personal involvement, persuasion, and influence" (2005; p. 133). Second, *framing behavior* is directed toward establishing starting points for change, an emotional connection to the change, and by challenging others to deliver the change, for example, by stretching the goals and limits of what is possible. Framing behavior refers to leadership behavior that is aimed at designing and managing the journey for the change and can be characterized as change-centric. Typically, the third type, *creating behavior*, is seen in the provision of "emotional, temporal and physical space to enable people to think and act differently" (Higgs & Rowland, 2011, p. 316). Here, the agent focuses on creating individual and organizational capabilities to induce the change, and the agent's focus is the recipient of the change. In contrast to the agent-centric-shaping style, the framing and creating style are more group- and systemic-focused behaviors, which tend to be associated with each other (Higgs & Rowland, 2011).

In this study, we adopt these three broad sets of change leader behaviors and quantitatively assess their relationship with recipients' resistance. Higgs and Rowland (2011) found that framing and creating behavior positively influenced implementation success in more complex and emergent change situations, whereas shaping behavior had a negative influence on implementation success in all change situations, unless this behavior was exerted together with framing or creating. Where they studied these behaviors from the agent's perspective, we extend their work by including also the recipients' perspective in how they experience the change agent in different change contexts. By doing this, we contribute to the recent research that has considered resistance as a two-sided story, in which leadership traits and behaviors are associated with resistance (Oreg & Berson, 2011).

### 2.2. A two-sided view of recipients' resistance

To achieve organizational change, the cooperation of recipients is needed (Jones & Van de Ven, 2016; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). However, recipients do not respond to change in similar ways and not all of them embrace the change. Resistance to change can be seen as recipients' responses not in line with the change attempts of the agent (Bartunek, 1993). Recipients can have various reasons to resist a change, such as a dislike of the change, discomfort with uncertainty, or a lack of conviction that the change is needed (Oreg, 2006; Palmer, Dunford, & Akin, 2009). At the individual level, resistance can be expressed in frustration and motivational problems, and may even lead to existential fear (Blomme & Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). Within the traditional perspective on resistance, change agents are characterized as victims of the change-resistant behaviors of recipients (Ford et al., 2008). This agent-centric view assumes that the change agent is an unbiased observer of an objective reality, namely resistance by recipients (Ford et al., 2008). Resistance is portrayed as arising spontaneously and seen as the recipients' reactions to change, and independent of the relationship and the interactions between the change agent and the recipient (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002; King & Anderson, 1995).

However, displayed resistance to change does not only come from the feelings and behaviors of recipients toward the "change"