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Listen to me:

The relationship between an organisation’s listening environment and employees’ openness to change.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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The Relationship Between Openness to Change and the Listening Environment

Abstract

Change is a reality of organisational life. New technologies, globalisation, the vagaries of the economic climate, and internal organisational pressures drive change today faster than ever before. Yet failure rates for change can be up to 70%. Understanding the different drivers of change, and what promotes change success, is therefore critical. Researchers are recognising that change is essentially a human event, and that individuals have a major role in determining whether organisational change will be successful. Employees’ attitudes towards change determine whether they will support or resist it. The focus of this study is on employee’s openness to change, and the extent to which this variable is affected by the listening environment created in the organisation by the supervisor and also that created between team members.

An online survey was carried out of 485 employees in one public sector organisation in New Zealand. Measures were taken of employee openness to change, team listening environment, supervisor listening environment and potential demographic contributors. Findings were that the supervisor listening environment had a moderate effect on employees' openness to change. It also had a similar effect on the team listening environment. However, the team listening environment was found to have only a small little impact on openness to change. Four employee variables—position, tenure, age and gender—were considered, and all were found to influence the relationship between the supervisor listening environment and openness to change. This was especially so for managers, employees between 35 and 54 years of age, and female employees. The impact of employee characteristics on the openness to change variable was also looked at. The only demographic variable that had an impact on openness to change was the position an employee holds in the organisation.

The implications of these findings for management is that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between an employee, and their supervisor, as demonstrated by how the supervisor listens to them, creates an environment where employees feel listened to, cared for and connected. This influences an employee’s willingness to support new and different things, that is, their openness to change. This contributes in turn to whether the employee will embrace change or resist it, and ultimately influences whether the organisational change will be successful.
Acknowledgements

This thesis was borne from the knowledge that organisational change impacts the lives of almost everyone today. The more scholars can find out about how it works, the better for all who are affected. Listening has long been known to be an essential component of communication and finding out the value of listening in the context of organisational change has been for me an interesting journey.

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I would also like to thank the people at Organisation X who allowed me to come into their organisation and survey their staff. Letting a Master’s student have access to a large and busy organisation is a big ask, and so to all of you, and to the 583 members of your staff that took my survey, you know who you are, and I would like to express how appreciative I am that you let me in.

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