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The Emotional Rollercoaster of Organisational Change:  
Affective Responses to Organisational Change, their Cognitive Antecedents and  
Behavioural Consequences

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## ABSTRACT

Change is a potentially emotional event as people anticipate or experience its outcomes and processes. Managers and researchers often ignore the emotional aspects of organisational change, yet it is precisely these aspects that can promote acceptance of change or resistance to it.

The focus of the research is on the many factors that contribute to cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to organisational change. A model of individual responses evolved from the literature review and helped guide the research questions. It indicates that responses to change depend on factors in four categories: those in the change itself (outcomes, scale, temporal issues and justice); those in the employee (their emotional intelligence, disposition, previous experience of change, and change and stress outside the workplace); those in the employee's perceptions of the leaders/managers/agents (their leadership ability, emotional intelligence and trustworthiness); and those in the employee's perception of the organisation (its culture and change context).

Two main research approaches underpinned the thesis. Firstly, cognitive appraisal theory takes the position that emotion derives from cognition as people contemplate the importance of events (such as organisational change) to their wellbeing and consider how they will cope. Secondly, social constructionism was used as a theoretical platform because it combines the individual experience of emotions during change with the social forces that help shape them.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted in Auckland, New Zealand. The participants were from a variety of industries, organisations, hierarchical levels, change roles, functional departments and ethnic, gender and age groups. They reported on many different types of change, small and large, with many focussing on some element of organisational restructuring. The study showed that people played different roles in change events - as leaders, managers, agents and recipients - and at times took on a combination of these roles, which did not always depend on hierarchy. The roles they played to some extent influenced their responses.

Findings show that all 13 factors in the model produced some responses, but not in all participants. The most prevalent of these, and those that often provoke emotions of the greatest intensity, were personal outcomes and the fairness of change. Two additional factors surfaced, control over the change and support from colleagues and people outside the organisation, and the model was revised to include them. The study

confirmed that organisational change is indeed an emotional event, and that these emotions arise from a host of factors that have individual, social and wider contextual origins.

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