

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Leading a successful change intervention in a modern organisation: Key elements to consider

Rein Coetzee<sup>1</sup>, Jan Visagie<sup>1</sup> and Wilfred Ukpere<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Human Resources Science, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, Faculty of Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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**The reality today is that organizations and leaders are faced with unrelenting demands for change. Globalisation, competitiveness and ever changing business environments have forced organisations to constantly consider innovative changes. The challenge today is for leaders to be able to reduce the resistance to change, thus allowing for successful change navigation. It is therefore necessary to be mindful of the various approaches to change to ensure that successful change can be successfully implemented. This article will outline some of these approaches. In-depth interviews were conducted with five senior executives in the case company, and questionnaires were distributed to 301 employees at different levels within a single division in the same organisation. By following the mixed method approach in two separate phases namely the qualitative and quantitative it was possible to gather the requisite data.**

**Key words:** Change, organisational change, navigating change, leading change, approaches to change, resistance to change, perceiving change and change management.

## INTRODUCTION

Change is beyond all doubt, the most debated phenomenon today. The pervasiveness of change is visible in every sphere of human activity. At organisational level the turbulence and rate of change and innovation due to competitive pressures are evident.

The reality of change is that it comes in many different forms and levels of complexity. It also varies in its extent and significance ranging from nominal to transformational. The fact remains that, change has become more regular and pervasive over the past few years.

The pressures for change today in organisations are formidable. The competitive landscape is ever changing. Economic conditions, labour markets, demographics, consumer preferences and especially technological changes affect how business is conducted, managed and driven in order implement change initiatives. The pace of change in modern organisations have accelerated and it

is evident that globalization may not be the real problem, but how to adapt to the changes that has been triggered by the current economic phenomenon (Herold and Fedor, 2008). According to Thurlow and Mills (2009, p.459) change in modern literature is explained in three fundamental approaches namely, *“There is an unquestioning acceptance of change as essential to organisational survival; change is characterised as a threat to organisations; and change is represented as an issue of leadership”*. Organisations seem to struggle with change when responding to mergers, acquisitions, restructuring, realignment and strategic planning. There are further indications that the pace of organisational change is also accelerated by environmental change.

Although change and the characteristics thereof have been defined in many ways the outline provided by Blake and Bush (2009: 4) significantly reflect the focus and scope of this article. *“Change in nature or evolution, can be seemingly unstructured and chaotic to those being affected. It is only when viewed retrospectively that purpose and direction are revealed. Staying competitive*

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\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [wilfredukpere.ajbm@gmail.com](mailto:wilfredukpere.ajbm@gmail.com).

*in business does not allow for the luxury of evolution – it takes too long. Only by approaching change in a structured way can you shape and achieve a pre-defined future and realize benefits to the business*". In most cases, change is ineffectively managed and there seems to be some agreement that the chances of success are greatly enhanced when the "people side" is fully attended to (Taylor, 2001, p. 114). An important point stated by Bohlander and Snell (2010) is that many people at first resist change because they have to modify the way they do things even though they have been doing them in a certain way for some time. They continue by stating that: "Organizations that have been successful in engineering change: link the change to the business strategy, show how the change creates quantifiable benefits, engage key employees, customers, and their suppliers early when making a change and finally make an investment in implementing and sustaining change" (Bohlander and Snell, 2010, p. 8).

### **Problem statement**

The most important aspect of change is to ensure that the envisaged change is not seen as negative or for that matter ignored. It remains of paramount importance that change should be navigated effectively. It is widely accepted that coping with change and the resistance thereof causes a lot of anxiety and may result in people switching to survival mode. Van Toder (2004:192) argues that, "change, without exception, is experienced as stressful and will result in a variety of undesirable outcomes which to a large extent will be a function of the manner in which it is implemented. Managers could either facilitate relief from or exacerbate employees' discomfort during change."

### **Research objectives**

This article will explore the change process in organisations, by reflecting on different approaches and illustrate the importance of navigating or leading change. This research will attempt to reflect on how senior executives and employees perceive the change that they implemented and experienced in the workplace, and how the employees perceive the navigation of the implemented change. There are various approaches and techniques used in the world today to deal with change. In this article a summary of a few approaches to dealing with change will be explicated.

### **Literature review**

In dealing with change, different researchers have focused on different concepts, perspectives and forms.

For instance, Ackerman (1986) reflects on developmental change, transitional change and transformational change. On the other hand, Kanter et al. (1992) see change as a process that focuses on modifying patterned behaviour. However, Felkins et al. (1993) see change as a process that alters organisational relationship, structures, systems and processes to ensure organisational survival.

Veldsman (2008) regards organisational change as the transformation from the current state of the organisation to the desired state. Van Tonder (2004:6) attempts to provide generic definitions namely, "change is a process that is dynamic and bound to time and clearly not discrete; change is evident in the state and/or condition within a state of an entity; and change as difference does not occur in void but is bounded by its context." King and Anderson (2002) regard change as a phenomenon that significantly influences organisational performance while Jones and George (2003) believe that the success of organisational change resides more in the individual rather than organisational dynamics and refers to critical tasks of managers. The definitions above and other definitions from literature clearly indicate that change is inevitable; it is a process; it is an initiative that alters the state of something; it involves people (person based); it is dynamic and non-discrete; it is time and context bound; it is developmental, transitional or transformational.

With Regards to the principles of change, Hall and Hord (2011:5) maintained that change is a learning process, which is not an event and the institution/organisation is the primary unit of analysis. Organisations therefore adopt change, while individuals implement change interventions as a key to the success of the change process. Therefore, an appropriate intervention reduces resistance to change. In other words, an administrator leadership is essential for long term change success. Facilitating change is a team effort, which requires mandates and influences the process of learning and change.

### **Approaches to change**

It is evident that there are contrasting ways to view change and furthermore change efforts in practice do not neatly fall into one approach or the other. The most logical way would be to fully identify the range of approaches that organizations and/or individuals take when implementing change. Roland and Higgs (2008:31) has mentioned the four approaches of implementing change as directive; self-assembly; master and emergent. It should be mentioned that no single change process ever falls into just one approach and different approaches might be needed in different parts of the organisation. Directive change is top down and driven from a single source, usually senior leadership. Both the outcome and goals and the process of change are determined and developed by the initiating source. Self-

assembly change implies that the goals or outcomes of the change is pre-determined, however how to go about the change is mainly left to local operating units and teams.

Master change approaches are characterised by having a very clear central framework for the change effort, whilst the emergent approach assumes that the organisation is complex and cannot be directly controlled. It is characterised by leaders establishing hard rules to govern what needs to happen. Green (2007:19) on the other hand distinguishes between the following five approaches where change is brought about through emergence, learning, design, addressing interests and people. Change through emergence means to create the conditions for change to occur without specifying the exact nature of the change. Change through learning is concerned with change happening as direct result of learning. Change through design most often occurs in organisations and implies the project management approach to change, which involves careful planning and detailed analyses. Change through addressing interest addresses the political aspects of organisations directly addressing the different needs of the various stakeholders. Change through people recognizes that change in an organisation is predominantly done through people.

Cameron and Green (2009 p. 19) emphasize the behavioural approach focusing on how one individual can change the behaviour of another by using reward and punishment to achieve the intended results. Secondly the cognitive approach whereby individuals need to look at the way they limit themselves through adhering to old ways of thinking and replace that with new ways of being. Thirdly the psycho dynamic approach is useful for managers who want to understand the reactions of their staff during a change process and deal with them. It allows them to gain an understanding of why people react the way they do and use such in the change management process. Fourthly the humanistic psychology approach combines some of the insights from the previous three approaches while at the same time developing its own insight.

Graetz and Smith (2010) provide an extremely detailed and significant framework regarding different approaches to change by briefly reflecting on certain philosophies. For example, the biological philosophy is an incremental change within industries, rather than individual organizations. The philosophy is developmental in nature, comparing the on-going stages of progress and change in organizations to organic processes of growth and reproduction. The rational philosophy, which is also referred to as strategic, is concerned with the alignment between an organization's composition, competencies and state over time, with its environmental context". The institutional philosophy "makes some fundamentally evolutionary assumptions, but does so in the context of a strong belief in the sensitivity of organizations to the

external environments in which they operate". The resource philosophy of organizational change begins by identifying needed resources, which can be traced back to sources of availability and evaluated in terms of criticality and scarcity. By understanding that a dependence on resources increases uncertainty for organizations is particularly useful to change attempts because it encourages an awareness of critical threats and obstacles to performance.

The contingency perspective is based on the proposition that organizational performance is a consequence of the fit between two or more factors, such as an organization's environment, use of technology, strategy, structure, systems, style or culture. The psychological philosophy is based on the assumption that the most important dimension of change is found in personal and individual experience, which is referred to as organizational development and change transitions. The political philosophy assumes that it is the clashing of opposing political forces that produce change and explains change as the result of clashing ideology or belief systems. The cultural philosophy maintained that change is normal in that it is a response to changes in the human environment, where this process is natural, leading to the construction of firm ways of thinking about how things should be done. The Systems Philosophy posited that any imposed change has numerous and sometimes multiplied effects across an organization, and consequently, in order for change management to be successful, it must be introduced across the range of organizational units and sub-systems. The postmodern philosophy is best described as one which is comfortable with ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and chaos, but also seeks to take action rationally toward ongoing improvement. These aforementioned 10 philosophies illustrate the distinctive differentiation in a particular situation or set of events. These philosophies focus on the complementary and competing forces that organizations face in managing the tension between continuity and change. In view of different approaches to change as outlined above it is evident that attention should be paid to the different views of implementing a change intervention.

### **The transition to leading change**

Lately there has been worldwide intensive debate about relevant issues such as managing change, leading change and navigating change. Many regard the aforementioned as pure semantics but in this article about change, the principle of leading a change will be adopted. There is little doubt that managing change will focus more on the planning, organizing, coordination and controlling aspects of change, whereas successful change depends on the leadership aspects. This view is supported by Graetz and Smith (2010) when they state

that: “Traditional approaches to organizational change generally follow a linear, rational model in which the focus is on controllability under the stewardship of a strong leader or ‘guiding coalition’. The underlying assumption of this classical approach, ever popular among change consultants, is that organizational change involves a series of predictable, reducible steps that can be planned and managed. Evidence from case studies of failed change implementations indicates, however, that this uni-dimensional, rational focus is limited because it treats change as a single, momentary disturbance that must be stabilized and controlled. Such a view fails not only to appreciate that change is a natural phenomenon which is intimately entwined with continuity but also, that the change-continuity continuum is what defines organizations and their ability both to exploit and explore. Change and continuity represent competing but complementary narratives, bringing in ambiguity and novelty to destabilize as well as validate existing organizational routines”.

Geldenhuis and Veldsman (2011) have remarked that traditional and existing approaches to change are less effective... and change navigation in an organisation tends to be more of an emotional process. In that line of thought change navigation consists of the following basic steps of mobilising dissatisfaction with the status quo; shaping a guiding coalition; diagnosing organisational problems; building organisational capacity; developing a shared vision; formalising change strategies and generating short-term wins; dismantling temporary transition structures and processes and ensuring organisational learning.

In order to enhance the chances of affecting lasting, successful change, organisational change navigation needs to be guided by at least the principles of believing in the possible actualisation of a clear vision; linking change to the organisation’s strategic intent (that is a central or overall change theme) and the concerns of organisational members; steering the overall change in a manner that mirrors the desired future state; maintaining congruence between all aspects of the change and the organisation itself (Geldenhuis and Veldsman, 2011); providing organisational members with adequate or high-impact training and emotional support; investing substantial resources in support of the change; dealing with the resistance to change in an open and fearless manner; conducting frequent assessments of the change impact; the on-going, wide sharing of information; dealing with the historical baggage of previous change journeys; celebrating milestones and successes; providing visible and active transformational leadership; encouraging responsible and active participation (or engagement) by organisational members; developing a conceptual model as an intellectual map to aid in conceptualising and systematising the change that the organisation has to undergo” (Geldenhuis and Veldsman, 2011).

Finally, Mokgolo et al. (2012) have remarked: “line managers or leaders are key sources of influence on

leadership acceptance, performance and job satisfaction. Employees who work in changing situations may have a more positive, open-minded approach to the change of leaders and develop a more accepting attitude”. They further stated that leaders who are able to reduce the effects of uncertainty during change interventions will ultimately assist employees in achieving the desired change outcomes.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This article adopted a mixed method approach. While there are numerous definitions for mixed method approach, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:286) has defined mixed method research as “...research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws conclusions using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or programme of inquiry.” Hence, a mixed method design is suitable to for this research owing to the fact it allows the researcher to gain complementary insights in the conceptualisation, experiential and inferential phases about the relative contributions of leadership in navigating change; it provides a more complete and meaningful picture of the nature and dynamics of leading change (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009:287). An initial qualitative research approach allows the researcher to refine the initial research propositions in the research hypothesis that can be tested quantitatively. It also allows the researcher to expand on the initial understanding of the type of leadership and provide a more comprehensive explanation at a later phase in the research process, and provides the opportunity to assess the credibility of the inferences that are made about leadership during one phase and thereby strengthen the credibility of inferences that are made at later phases in the research.

In terms of the qualitative component, a convenient sample of 5 Senior Leaders was selected. While data was obtained from individuals, organisational-level measures were used to compare the differences in change navigation and leadership. Semi structured interviews were conducted and digitally recorded and transcribed. Content analysis of verbal response was undertaken to identify and verify different dimensions.

In terms of the quantitative component, one of the divisions in the company was purposefully selected and 301 questionnaires were distributed to all the employees in that division. A survey questionnaire was developed and piloted at the company amongst a number of non-randomly selected employees who were not part of the initial focus group; where after 301 employees were requested to complete the questionnaire. A factor analysis to identify and confirm the questionnaire structure was used. Comparative statistics to identify differences and similarities was applied during this process.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In discussing the major findings of this research, focus will be paid to the results relating to organisational change. Research objective was to analyse perceptions of organisational change. This will be done in two separate phases:

### Phase 1: Qualitative analysis

Table 1 shows the relevant questions and the responses

**Table 1.** Relevant questions and the responses by participants.

Question	Participant	Response
Did you provide a clear vision on where you intend to go with the Company with reference to the Traditional Retail and Financial Services decoupling?	1	The response came quick and decisive with an absolute yes. According to the participant, the change did not emanate from the stance that it is time to change things and what we would change. We constantly focus on the long term vision of the organisation and more so the long term wellbeing of the organisation. As a leader, one has to constantly ask who we are as an organisation and then decide if our long term vision will stand the test of time. With regards to change one can become a 'healthy dinosaur' if you do not provide a clear vision for the future that is all you will ever be.
	2	Regarding the response, it was exactly the same as participant one, namely absolutely yes. According to the interviewee, the strategic initiative as we like to call it is curtail to the success of the business and the communication of such, which is vital for our future success. During the communication of the vision we found that when it comes to change you have to look at things completely through a different set of eyes. This vision was not only provided to the employees, be we also ensured that the vision was 'tested' within the international business environment.
	3	The response was consistent with the first two. It was furthermore mentioned that it was not only provided or shared, but it was as well clearly defined. According to the participant, the business strategy was also formulated, articulated and aligned to support the vision that we have for the organisation.
	4	Regarding the question the response was also positive in that the participant indicated yes. According to the participant, the vision and said change were briefly discussed and an interesting observation was done, in addition to numerous discussions that took place at an executive level long before the change was actually implemented. Another important point was that there were different cultures and interpretations in the organisation, which was taken into account in the sharing of the vision.
	5	This participant had a slightly different view on this. Regarding the vision, he felt that it was communicated and shared using a very theoretical view as opposed to a model that will enable the change rather than communicating it only. The participant continued and stated that empowering people to ensure that we follow one vision is more important than merely communicating it.
What was the initial reaction to the envisaged change?	1	The response focussed on the fact that different level of staff reacted differently. According to the participant, there was a definite level of anxiety especially amongst more senior members of the business. There were definitely people who said: "we do not need this in our lives". The key lies in your leadership ability to get people to believe not only in you as the leader but also in them by instilling in them that their best effort will be good enough.
	2	Very similar to participant 1, the participant discussed the different reactions at different levels, comparing the board of directors to the employees in the business units. He mentioned that people were shell shocked at lower levels and felt that the initiative is turning their world upside down. Clearly the initial reaction was uncomfortable which triggered certain unpleasant discussions. In his view, getting the correct message out at the various levels was crucial.
	3	The response included amongst others the comment that "there was a significant feeling of uncertainty" and also referred to a fundamental re-orientation towards accountability and responsibility. According to the respondent, involving all the stakeholders including the union and sharing the honest truth about the long term strategy/vision contributed to the success. Furthermore it was very important to keep people's self-esteem intact.
	4	A definite and clear indication of "panic" and then an explanation of such from the participant to put it into perspective: all levels of staff were not necessarily involved in the initial planning and discussion phase, so this change came quickly and turned their world upside down. Another explanation consisted of the fact that people have gone through similar experiences in the past and immediately relate to such experiences. The important issues for us as leaders was to ensure we take them through this and trust was very critical, something that is earned.

Table 1. Contd.

Was this change contemplated and if so provide reasons for this?	<p>5 The participant felt that the employees did not understand initially why the change is necessary and secondly did not clearly understand the benefits of the initiative to them in changing the business strategy. The reason for this is linked to the initial communication which was very academic driven by a communication model that did not talk about one company, one vision, one future and one customer. The participant did mention that once the communication “model” was changed did a change in the people take place.</p>
	<p>1 The participant felt extremely strong that it would be a blatant lie if anybody claimed that the change was contemplated. In November 2005 following an investor’s road show, a decision was taken that the business model should change. The economy was still doing well but we realised change is immanent and that we had to “split” traditional retail from financial services. We have already started then to search for a business partner in this change process.</p>
	<p>2 According to the participant, the journey from 2006 was very interesting as we knew that we had to change the business strategy and that there was a clear vision of where we wanted to go. The decision was made and the one thing that had to be done was to stretch test that decision. There were so many opportunities and we engaged with banks, with the intention of finding a partner of course. The participant also made it clear that the change was never contemplated.</p>
	<p>3 The participant had a lengthy discussion on the theory behind contemplation and the role of leaders in such. It is further mentioned that leaders have continuously contemplate whether the current business direction and strategy is still applicable in the long term future. The participant also spoke about the timing of certain visionary and long term fundamental changes in a business. The question was asked again and the participant responded by saying only time will tell us, however the participant was confident that it was done at the right time.</p>
	<p>4 According to the participant, there were several discussions relating to change and the timing of such. He also mentioned of one change bringing about other changes and how they as leaders should be able to harmonise them. The participant during the discussion indicated that the said change came at the right time and that it was necessary to change</p>
	<p>5 The participant joined the top leadership team after the decision to decouple traditional retail from financial services, and although the participant discussed the contemplation question in theory, it was never established/confirmed whether the change was contemplated or not.</p>

by participants.

**Phase 2: Quantitative analysis**

Figure 1 reflects the responses of employees regarding change, how the envisaged change was perceived, how the change was communicated as well as the initial reaction of employees towards the change initiatives. Relevant questions relating to the change process in the organisation are:

- Q9: You understood the need for change?
- Q11: You did not feel comfortable with the change initially?

- Q12: The new vision was clearly stated?
- Q13: There was clarity on the desired end results?
- Q16: The intended change was experienced as a threat?
- Q18: All stakeholders supported the intended change?
- Q22: You resisted the intended change?

All the factors were above the Chronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient of .732 and a result of .93 was indicated, thereby indicating adequate internal consistency.

**DISCUSSION**

Regarding question 9 that relates to the understanding of the need to change, the majority of the respondents (65.8%) indicated that they agree. The mere fact that only 14.9% of the employees stated this to be untrue is a strong indication that the reasons for the envisaged change were well communicated. The majority of senior management (4) stated that the vision of the company, which included the envisaged change, was well communicated. They also stated that the envisaged change did not merely pertain to short term business results, but rather the long term

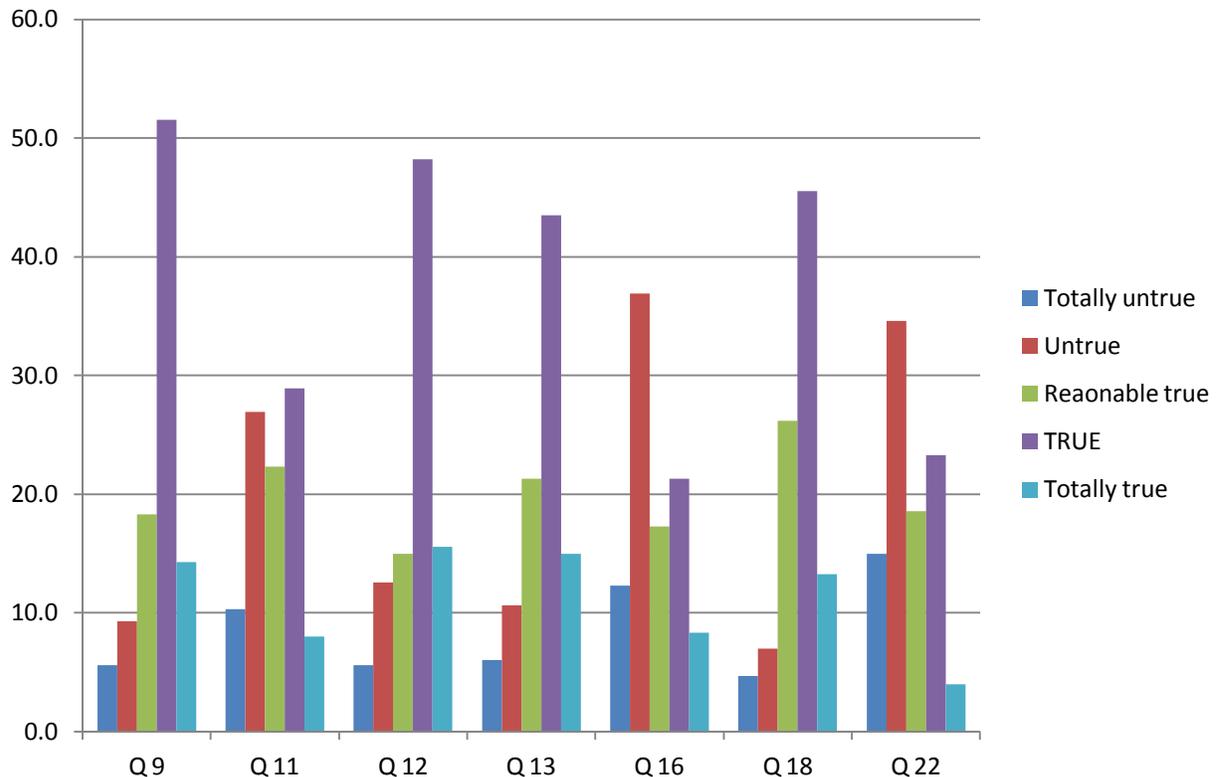


Figure 1. Summary of employee responses.

survival of the company. A control question in the questionnaire confirmed that 65.8% of the respondents were extremely positive about the communication in the change process, which supports the assertion in the interview phase.

Question 11, which pertains to how comfortable the employees were with the change, had an interesting result. From Figure 1, it is evident that there exists a balance in the number of respondents that answered true and untrue. There was 37.2% that felt they were uncomfortable initially and 36.9% that were comfortable. The reasonably true category represented 22.3% of the respondents. It is clear that the initial reaction was therefore not as positive as one would have preferred, which correlates with other literatures reviewed in this study. Furthermore the initial reaction of employees is confirmed by senior management in that the participants during the interviews mentioned about uncertainty, shell shock, panic and anxiety.

There is a direct correlation between question 9 and question 12 that deals with the vision, namely whether or not the employees felt that the vision, which included the change, was well communicated. In this regard the respondents stated that they knew about the Vision and that it was clearly communicated. The fact that 63.8% of the respondents replied positively to this, is a testament to that. As indicated in the interview senior management

felt that the vision, with specific reference to the change intervention was continuously and clearly communicated.

On the question whether there was clarity on the desired results (Question 13), the majority of the respondents (58.5%) replied positively. There was furthermore 21.3% that said relatively true, which confirms that the employees knew and understood why the need for the envisaged change. In this context one of the participants from the senior management referred to "healthy dinosaur" as appose to creating a vision for the company that would ensure the long term profitability and sustainability of the company.

It was mentioned in the literature review that resistance to change is one of the primary reasons why change is not navigated and implemented successfully. One of the reasons for these phenomena is that people often feel threatened by change because they are afraid of the unknown. Question 16 deals with the challenge of whether employees felt threatened or not. 42.9% of the respondents did not feel threatened by the envisaged change, whilst 29.6% felt threatened by the changes. As mentioned in the interview, senior managers confirmed that there were definite indications of initial resistance. It was furthermore confirmed that lower level employees did react with emotions and were "uncomfortable" as perceived by one of the interviewee.

From the literature reviewed, it was evident that the

ability to reduce resistance to change is the key to successfully lead or navigate change. Question 18 specifically focussed on the support or the absence thereof for the envisaged change. The majority of the respondents (58.8%) felt that they supported the envisaged change. Only 11.7% indicated that they did not support the envisaged change. On the question whether or not the change was contemplated, the majority of senior management indicated that it was well researched and planned for some time. They further indicated that all involved understood the necessity for change and supported the vision of the company to implement the envisaged change.

The final question pertaining to change posed the question directly namely “you resisted the intended change”. This was used as a control question for Q16 (the intended change was experienced as a threat) and when compared with Figure 1, the similarities are obvious, confirmed by the Chronbach’s Alpha of .93. A total of 46.9% of the respondents indicated that they did not resist the change compared to the 27.3% that indicated they did resist the intended change.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, change will continue to challenge leaders and organisations. Change occurs in different forms and will never remain the same. It will evolve, it will bring about new challenges and most of all, will continue to push our boundaries. One thing that is clear is that change remains the most challenging part of any leadership position. The better the leader can reduce resistance to change and continuously communicate the envisaged change and ensure employee acceptance and engagement, the more likely implementation will be successful.

Thus, in order to implement any significant change interventions it is of the utmost importance to continuously share and communicate the vision as well the reasons for the envisaged change. In addition to this, the ability of the leader to reduce the initial resistance to change, anxiety and fears of the employees will enhance the acceptability of change in the organisation. Finally, it should be mentioned that any improperly planned and poorly executed organisational change initiative will result in failure. Should this happen, the financial, human, information and physical resources utilized become a waste.

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