Change Readiness in Public Recreation: A Longitudinal Multiple-Case Study

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Management - Organizational Change (Community Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2017-047  
Thursday, June 1, 2017  
1:45 PM  
Room: Torrey's Peak

Public recreation officials face an increasingly uncertain business environment. Caught between political pressures, fiduciary duties, and competition by private sport and leisure providers, neighborhood recreation centers in particular can no longer follow traditional ideals of altruistic community stewardship. Instead, they are asked to implement operating and management principles modeled after for-profit organizations, many of which clash with long-held logics and expectations (Stanton, Markham-Starr, & Hodgkinson, 2013). Accordingly, public recreation leaders and change agents face difficulties in priming their employees for change and in generating the necessary support to initiate and sustain major transformation efforts. This research provides insight into how to get public recreation employees ready for change and how these efforts can and should be tailored to differences in organizational hierarchy and change content.

This study examined the implementation of a complex change initiative in a major parks and recreation department over the course of 12 months. Focusing in particular on participants’ change readiness, the present research argues that the lack of progress in addressing current and future organizational challenges arises from mismatches between change complexity, contextual factors, and change execution leadership strategies.

Armenakis et al. (1993) defined change readiness as an individual’s “beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding the extent to which changes are needed and the organization’s capacity to successfully undertake those changes” (p. 681). To elicit these favorable cognitive responses, the authors suggested that leadership in charge of the proposed changes craft change messages that address change recipient sentiments of discrepancy, efficacy, appropriateness, principal support, and personal valence.

The universal applicability of the five change readiness sentiments has been adopted somewhat unquestioningly, with few efforts to empirically assess their adequacy in different contexts or understand their relative importance for different change recipients in different change situations (Caldwell, 2013; Neves, 2009). As such, contemporary change readiness research appears to be very similar to the best practice change management approaches popularized in the late 1990s (e.g., Kanter, 1997; Kotter, 2012). Moreover, change readiness research has been predominantly quantitative in nature, thus further exacerbating the limited attention paid to more nuanced change readiness perceptions.

The application of change readiness in the public recreation context is suggested to be particularly fruitful to elaborate on these questions. For instance, in the public service sector, adaptations of organizational processes often are accompanied by profound challenges to long-held modes of provision of essential public goods and services. Especially where organizations have long relied on stability, bureaucratic organization, and centralized decision-making, change to any of these or other features will be judged against a firmly entrenched blueprint of how the organization is supposed to look and function. At the same time, with their traditional focus on functional responsibilities and adherence to narrowly defined roles, public recreation organizations have not tended to hire for or award flexibility in their employees. As such, one can expect changes to these roles and expectations to trigger emotional responses based on change recipients’ feelings of uncertainty, inefficacy, and self-doubt. Furthermore, as public recreation organizations depend on public fund and budgets – which usually tend to be relatively stringent – change and novel expectations will be met with worry regarding their financial feasibility.

Interviews with management, middle managers, and employees, 147 in total, typically lasted 20-45 minutes. Furthermore, the researcher attended meetings and strategy briefings and analyzed internal as well as external correspondence in order to triangulate data. Interview transcripts and other qualitative data were analyzed using
MAXQDA. Specifically, the researcher followed the “two types of coding in a classic grounded theory study: substantive coding, which includes both open and selective coding procedures, and theoretical coding” (Holton, 2010, p. 21). Throughout both stages, the researcher constantly compared data and categories (Boeje, 2002; Fram, 2013) in order to eventually elaborate theoretical relationships, saturate and delimit categories, and densify concepts (Holton, 2010). Some initial codes were eventually rejected, while others were expanded or grouped into larger overarching concepts.

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The results revealed that members of the executive team predominantly assessed change in terms of its discrepancy and appropriateness. Supervisors offered the most nuanced array of change sentiments. On the one hand, they shared many of management’s strategic concerns. On the other hand, they were decidedly more concerned with how they would be able to implement and explain change to their subordinates and customers (efficacy). They were also more concerned about their own role and position within the organization as a result of change (valence). Vis-à-vis members of the executive team they felt a comparatively stronger urge to comply with managerial directives in order to maintain their standing in the organization. Finally, non-supervisors hardly reflected on efficacy-related change concerns. At the same time, non-supervisors showed less concern for change discrepancy than their superiors. Moreover, they exhibited an almost non-existent occupation with leadership support. Most notably, non-supervisors predominantly framed change as a matter of personal valence or inescapable force.

The findings point toward the value of more nuanced explorations of group differences in change readiness in particular and organizational change processes in general. Specifically in the public recreation sector, where contextual and change-specific factors result in ambiguous change interpretations, attending to these differences in change experience are of great importance, for “the future of the profession of sport and physical activity management will depend on the way such programs of a public, semi-public, semiprivate, and private nature are administered in the years ahead” (Zeigler, 2007, p. 42). As different members of the changing organization interpret changes in various ways, the need for customized change messages under consideration of objective and subjective change realities becomes apparent. Future research is necessary to understand how and why those affected by change attend to different aspects of a major change initiative.