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Linking Theory & Practice

Be careful what you ask for: how inquiry strategy influences readiness mode

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Abstract

Much has been written about affecting change in the workplace, including how to help employees prepare for the process. However, little is known about how participation influences employees' emotions and attitudes at the start of an intervention. By qualitatively analyzing conversations that were triggered by an organizational change effort, we explored how different inquiry strategies influence readiness for change. We examined four inquiry strategies by combining strength or deficit frames with individual or organizational focus. Distinctive conversational patterns emerged within each strategy, which we believe influence peoples' change readiness. In this article we present four readiness modes to describe these patterns and conclude with implications for managers who seek to shape their change efforts more effectively. *Organization Management Journal* (2009) 6, 106–122. doi:10.1057/omj.2009.15

Keywords: organizational development and change; change management; positive organizational scholarship; readiness for change

Introduction

Change is a constant in organizational life. In times of global economic turbulence the sustainability of many organizations depends upon employees' readiness for change and their ability to take swift action. Being ready for change implies that beliefs, attitudes, and intentions can be altered (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). To instill attitudinal and behavioral shifts, managers should be mindful that preparing employees for change is an essential component of organizational change effectiveness (cf. Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003). Mobilizing employees to action requires supporting them to let go of the past as they concurrently transition to something new (Clarke *et al.*, 2007). Successful change can occur when employees are better prepared (cf. Armenakis *et al.*, 1999; Chawla and Kelloway, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2005). While emotions play a key role in the change process (Mossholder *et al.*, 2000), change agents do not know enough about how these emotions are generated at the start of an intervention and how they influence attitudes that affect change (cf. Madsen, 2003).

Change agents typically use deficit- or strength-based methods when they launch an organizational change effort, targeting weaknesses or strengths of the organization or its members. To improve their ability to mobilize employees quickly to action, managers need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how questions, posed at the beginning of an intervention, influence



employees' readiness for the change process. To increase understanding we ask the following research question: *How do the initial inquiry strategies used in a change intervention impact employees' emotions (affective) and attitudes (cognitive) to influence readiness for change in organizational settings?* To answer this question, we empirically examine the concern using qualitative methods to study employees' conversations held at the start of a change effort. Rather than measuring readiness using preexisting instruments, we explore the influence of four different inquiry strategies on the content and emotions present in employees' conversations.

Our study contributes to the change management literature in two ways. First, we broaden present knowledge of organizational change techniques by exploring the interaction of *frame* and *focus*. Second, by studying both the affective and cognitive aspects of readiness for change, we add breadth to this construct. Current views typically present a rather narrow interpretation with a rational, cognitive orientation. In this article we review the literature on readiness for change, emotion, and organizational change theory to explain the concept of *inquiry strategy*. We then present our methods and results, including a description of four distinctive readiness modes associated with each inquiry strategy. In closing, we suggest practical implications for managerial application.

Theory

Many factors influence employees' readiness for change such as the credibility of those managing the organization and leading the change, the social dynamics within the organization, the practitioner's competencies (e.g., persuasive communication), and method of external information management (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). The change message itself may affect employees' readiness as well. Some scholars use components of the change message (e.g., discrepancy, appropriateness, self-efficacy, principal support, and personal valence) to measure readiness for change (Bernerth, 2004).

Although definitions vary, few managers remember to account for change readiness when they plan interventions (Bernerth, 2004). Readiness for change is typically assessed through questionnaires, interviews, and observation methods (Armenakis et al., 1976; Pond et al., 1984; Fox et al., 1988). Change readiness scales (Jones et al., 2005; Holt et al., 2007) examine process, content, context, and

individual attribute components. While attitudes are valued, current research considers readiness for change as a largely cognitive process. For example, it is described as "the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort" (Armenakis et al., 1993: 681).

Readiness for change and emotions

In addition to cognitive factors that impact employees' readiness for change, there are also affective factors (George and Jones, 2001; Roberto and Levesque, 2005). These factors are emotions, reactions that declare a person's mental state of readiness. Often arising from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts, emotions are accompanied by physiological processes that often manifest themselves physically (e.g., in gestures, posture, facial features). Emotions result in individuals affirming or coping with their experience, depending on its nature and the meaning they ascribe to it (Bagozzi et al., 1999: 184–185). Rooted in Lazarus's (1991) research, this description reflects how cognitive appraisals are the basis for eliciting emotional response, with one's initial evaluation typically processed in terms of personal relevance (i.e., individual or organizational identity) and well-being, and framed in positive or negative terms (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). In sum, when asked to recall an experience or event, this cognitive process can trigger relevant emotions (Strack et al., 1985).

The self-regulation of goal attainment is a core function of emotions (Bagozzi et al., 1999). When a substantial change in the probability of achieving an important goal occurs, psychophysiological monitoring mechanisms broadcast a signal to the cognitive system. This cue sets into motion a readiness stance and potential reaction to the proposed new information. Individuals experience these cues and the states of readiness that they induce as emotions (Oatley, 1992). Once cues are received, individuals form judgments about the information. Inquiry influences the mental representations that emerge, which may thwart or promote one's perceived ability to achieve his or her desired goal. The point is that attitudes and emotions emerge instantly, based upon what information is brought forward and accessed (Higgins, 1996).

Different organizational change methods trigger different emotional responses. One study showed that the highest positive affect occurred in groups using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and the highest

negative affect in those groups using the Diagnostic approach (Sekerka *et al.*, 2006). This is partially attributable to the former approach making a positive view of self salient (e.g., self as efficacious and capable), while at the same time reducing the focus on negative aspects of the self. Because more positive views of self are aligned with favorable changes in positive emotion, AI can reduce the incidence of negative affect. Other studies show how organizational change is mediated by stimulus-response, whereby negative appraisal is associated with reduced control and positively related to negative emotions (Fugate *et al.*, 2008).

The persistence of negative emotion is problematic (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2006) since people engaging in large-scale change find the experience difficult and even threatening. Interestingly, those not claiming negative emotions still describe it in negative terms, sharing sentiments that large-scale change evokes a sense of loss and a lack of decision-making power. As experienced managers know, even without a change process underway, employees typically report a greater variety of negative emotions than positive ones (Dasborough, 2006).

Given the recent attention to Positive Psychology, Positive Organizational Scholarship, and Positive Organizational Behavior, many scholars have turned away from the study of resistance and now look toward understanding how positivity impacts organizational change (cf. Avey *et al.*, 2008). For example, psychological capital (a core factor consisting of hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience) relates to employees' positive emotions, which in turn relates to their attitudes (engagement or cynicism) and behaviors (organizational citizenship or deviance) relevant to the process of change. Employee's interpretations of the change initiative create an affective undertone stimulating emotional contagion that can shape the meaning of the change within the organization (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006).

We want to add depth to the change management literature by exploring how emotions impact the change process – from the start of the intervention. We believe greater understanding in this area will broaden managers' awareness of how organizational practices, processes, and strategies create *emotion work* for employees (Mayer and Smith, 2007) and how they can better prepare them for this effort. As noted by Elfenbein (2008), "organizational change evokes emotions, so too do emotions evoke organizational change" (334).

Inquiry strategy: frame

Practitioners employ various interpretive schemas (Markus and Kunda, 1986), mental models (Senge, 1990), and suppositions from theories in use (Argyris and Schon, 1978) as they formulate their strategies to affect change. We use the term "frame" to identify these operating assumptions, which are employed (sometimes unconsciously) as managers and practitioners plan interventions. Two dominant frames exist: deficit-based and strength-based approaches. We realize that change agents are likely to combine them, since inquiry into the positive and the negative provides a more complete process for transformation (Golembiewski, 1998). However, in our study we dichotomize these frames to facilitate the identification of the unique influences of each.

Existing research explicates the differences between the deficit- and strength-based approaches (Bushe and Kassam, 2005). However, rarely are the questions scrutinized to fully understand how they guide and impact the direction and path of change (Sekerka *et al.*, 2006). Those who lead change inquiry hold a position of power in that they help to create the truth, rather than reveal it (Hardy and Clegg, 1997). Questions literally shape the construction of a certain version of the world experienced by those engaged. The nature of the inquiry and the language that stems from it are tools for change. Inquiry frame prompts the reflexive practices needed to help "destabilize" or deconstruct the organization, as people move to consider multiple perspectives in dialogue (Harley *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, if managers want to improve their ability to mobilize employees for change responsibly, they must understand how the questions they ask impact employees' preparation for change.

Strength-based frame: Instead of determining what is wrong with the organization or its employees, practitioners may inquire about what gives life to the organization and to then use these strengths as a platform to instigate change. Techniques such as AI (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2003) are distinctively different from the pathology model implicit within the deficit approach (Porras and Silvers, 1991). Appreciative Inquiry is based on the assumption that change does not need to fixate upon problems, faults, and deficits. Strength-based approaches work because they spur "generativity" by targeting that which deeply touches, engages, and energizes employees within an environment of safety, affirmation, relational trust, and collaborative



discovery – not simply because of excessive positivity (Bushe, in press). Assuming that all inquiry is a form of intervention (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), AI is grounded in the idea of social constructionism (Gergen, 1997). Those employing AI assume that employees construct a reality based upon where they focus their attention, what they reflect upon, and what they collectively discuss (Mohr et al., 2000).

Deficit-based frame: Traditionally, organizational change methods rely upon diagnostic techniques (Lippitt, 1961), with the intent to identify organizational problems. By analyzing symptoms to formulate solutions and make changes, practitioners employ this frame with the goal of restoring order and function to the organization. Traditional methods progress linearly and are generally deficit-based because managers usually try to locate symptoms and determine the causality of what is perceived broken, at risk, or in need of improvement (Barrett and Peterson, 2000). Using organizational flaws as levers for enhancement, repair, or transformation, this process is a fault-finding and solution-producing venture.

Inquiry strategy: focus

When applying the frame (strength- or deficit-based), change agents steer employees toward a focus on themselves or their organization. In other words, guided reflection directs peoples' thoughts and feelings to center on salient features of their identity. As employees engage in the intervention, they are asked to reflect, illuminate, review, and potentially question their internal and external realities (Winnicott, 1965). These processes combine to impact individuals' thoughts, feelings, and overall states of mind regarding readiness change, among other aspects.

Focus on the self: When employees focus inward they initiate cognitive and affective processes pertaining to the self, which in turn directs their behavioral actions (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Self-introspection guides individuals to confirm or change how they see themselves (Markus, 1977). Stored representations of self-knowledge (self-schemas) influence future personal outcomes (Cross and Markus, 1994) by facilitating continual encoding, evaluation, and retrieval of new relevant information (Bargh, 1982; Markus et al., 1982; Nasby, 1985). Consequently, focusing on the self (e.g., think of a time when *you* experienced ...) directs individuals to access, reflect upon, and

examine self-schemas that relate to their personal identities.

Focus on the organization: When employees focus on the external organization they activate different cognitive and affective processes. If the employee's concept of self is consistent with his or her perceptions of the organization's identity, organizational identification occurs (Dutton et al., 1994). This sense of social (Tajfel and Turner, 1985) or organizational connection can generate feelings of belongingness (Lee, 2004). Thus, starting an intervention by stimulating employees to focus upon the organization (vs the self) can activate their organizational identities, which "intertwine" employees with the common fate of the organization (Lee, 2004: 626).

Missing from the literature is an empirical examination of how inquiry strategy (a combination of frame and focus) impacts readiness for change. Crossing the two core techniques (frame) and two identification targets (focus) allows us to explore how four inquiry strategies influence employees' emotions and attitudes as they prepare for change.

Methods

The study occurred during the first stage of a larger research project conducted at a US government medical facility. Four conditions were formed by crossing the two inquiry frames (strength- or deficit-based) with the two foci (self or organization) resulting in the following conditions: strength/self (SS), strength/organization (SO), deficit/self (DS), and deficit/organization (DO) (see Figure 1).

Employees who volunteered to participate were randomly assigned to face-to-face dyads, each randomly associated with one of the four conditions (see Appendix A for interview protocol). After reflecting on the assigned questions, participants shared their responses with their designated partner. The conversations were recorded and lasted 40 min. A script was used to achieve consistency and to ensure that each participant had equal time to share. Two hundred and twenty-four employees (of 1700 employees) engaged in the study. The transcripts were inductively analyzed using thematic analysis to determine how the inquiry strategy influenced participants' emotions, reflecting their readiness for change. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to better understand which themes were significant within and between

		Frame	
		Strength	Deficit
Focus	Self	Strength/Self (SS) Valuing and Engagement Excitement Joy Appreciation/gratitude Values helping Feels valued Inclusion of voice* Freedom to make decisions* Conscientiousness* Empathy for others	Deficit/Self (DS) Frustration and Solidarity Frustration* Anger Resentment Controlled by others Criticizes organizational communications Criticizes management Considers leaving job Solidarity
	Organization	Strength/Organization (SO) Broaden and Build Organizational learning* Compliments organization* Effective organizational communication Coworkers cohesive Coworkers as a team Coworkers are competent Coworkers work hard Effective teamwork	Deficit/Organization (DO) Criticize and Resolve Generates ideas Feels undervalued No inclusion of voice Criticizes organization* Low morale Coworkers are lazy Lack of teamwork Worry

Figure 1 Inquiry strategy and associated readiness modes with major themes.
 Note: *Denotes theme is significantly higher in this condition as compared to all other conditions (based on Scheffe analyses; see Table 3).

the four conditions. A broader description of the methods is presented in Appendix B.

Results

In this section we report our findings and the descriptive and inferential statistics that support them. After reporting details associated with each theme, we review how they relate to the four conditions. Table 1 shows themes and representative quotes. For example, *excitement* was noted when a person said something related (e.g., “It was an exciting feeling”). Table 2 shows the mean frequency of themes (by condition), with an ANOVA used to identify significant differences between the conditions. For example, excitement was mentioned on average 0.48 times in the SS condition, but only 0.12 in SO, 0.08 in DS, and not at all in DO. These means were significantly different across the four conditions ($F=5.42, P<0.01$). A Scheffe analysis (see Table 3) highlights pairwise differences used to determine which themes were significantly higher in each condition (as compared to all others). For example, excitement was significantly higher in the SS condition than in DS ($SS-DS: -0.40, P<0.05$) or DO ($SS-DO: -0.40, P<0.01$) conditions. By examining Tables 2 and 3, we see that the emotions and attitudes elicited by each condition are very different. A summary of these differences appears in Figure 1, in which themes that are significantly higher within a given condition are noted (marked with an asterisk).

SS condition: Participants in the SS condition expressed more positive emotions to describe their experiences than in any of the other conditions, as illustrated by these comments: “I felt happy. I felt a sense of self-satisfaction ... and that’s a good feeling.”, “I think that was also one of the reasons I was able to get the job done so well. It was an exciting feeling.”, and “I feel like I’ve certainly been blessed.”

In this condition, employees were more likely to mention having the ability to speak and be heard. This sense of having their voice included and self-efficacy was observed by their freedom to make decisions and direct their actions with assuredness. One participant started out with a variety of observations about his liberty to direct his own efforts, and then described how this was associated with helping others:

I think I communicate well with others. I do my work without little or no supervision. I do that well. I think I’m a team player. I think I share with others. And, of course, I try to do my work to the best of my ability in coding medical records and analyzing them for whatever. I mean to follow up for any reports or anything that need to be done. I think I do that well. I really enjoy working with the computer because I’ve been getting a little bit more experience with it. I think I can do that better, well. I’m courteous ... try to be friendly ... with my team players. Help others ... you know.

Additionally, while focusing on areas of personal satisfaction, participants discussed pertaining to others. They reflected on their relationships, valued

Table 1 Themes and examples^a

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Example quote</i>
1. Excitement	It was an exciting feeling.
2. Joy	I felt happy. I felt a sense of self-satisfaction, and that's a good feeling. I think that was also one of the reasons I was able to get the job done so well.
3. Appreciation and gratitude	I feel like I've certainly been blessed.
4. Values helping	And in a setting like this, you know, you need to have a love for people and a desire to help people.
5. Feels valued	I felt like I worked hard, you know, over the years, but I also felt that I was recognized for it.
6. Inclusion of voice	They actually listened to me ... I couldn't believe it. I mean here I am and they're going to listen to me.
7. Freedom to make decisions	I think I communicate well with others. I do my work without little or no supervision. I do that well. I think I'm a team player. I think I share with others. And, of course, I try to do my work to the best of my ability in coding medical records and analyzing them for whatever. I mean to follow up for any reports or anything that need to be done. I think I do that well.
8. Conscientiousness	Another thing that helped me to work that I tried to become more effective. I tried to be part of that group. I tried to go all the way up to my standards, and then I start getting more involved within the organization like trying to get on the TQ Aims and all that stuff.
9. Empathy for others	And the patients, you know, you get used to them, and they more like my family 'cause my husband passed, and so I don't have no small kids. It's just coming to work, and you know, to be around. If you like working with peoples, you know, you can do this.
10. Organizational learning	(The organization) offers opportunities, you know, for us to take continuing ED courses so that we can, you know, keep up with the most current information and techniques, and they offer to, you know, reimburse up to a certain amount so that we can go ahead and learn new things and all that. I like the interest, I mean, that they have in trying to get us to get our education. I like that part, too, yeah. It's like making the system work for you.
11. Compliments organization	You can identify with each other as opposed to another organization. You know you got all walks of life at other organizations so they don't have a common thread. So I think that the organization, I mean that's veterans' organization, they have that one thing in common, and it makes it different from other organizations.
12. Effective organizational communications	Just general support and people willing to, you know, openly communicate with each other the issues going on regarding patients or otherwise; We all got along well and helped each other and communicated very well with each other.
13. Coworkers are cohesive	It's a lot of caring and love over there, you know, as far as the nurses taking care of them, the guys, you know, having camaraderie with even the housekeepers, you know. It's like a family over there.
14. Coworkers part of team	We worked together because it was a common cause.
15. Coworkers are competent	This organization has some very good people ... very talented and mostly they know their job well.
16. Coworkers work hard	They work hard (coworkers). They work real hard.
17. Effective teamwork	(The team) ... we all worked together well.
18. Frustration	I couldn't get in this organization, and it was kind of frustrating.
19. Anger	I got so angry, first he was undermining me ... so I got rebellious, you know. And I kind of took it out on everybody else.



Table 1 Continued

Theme	Example quote
20. Resentment	They were saying that I was a troublemaker. All kinds of lies were being told.
21. Controlled by others	This supervisor ... he used to contradict everything I do. I mean he used to every time I make a decision to do something, it wasn't right for him. And it was like not giving me no leeway, you know.
22. Criticizes organizational communications	It's ... lack of communication within our service.
23. Criticizes management	I see them (management) stab me jump in the back, you know, all the time.
24. Considers leaving job	I was thinking about quitting or going to another job.
25. Solidarity	Employee A: Rumors go through. Employee B: Right, its rumors for the whole thing. But you know that's what this organization revolves around is conversation so when the rumors get out ... Employee A: ... it's like on Peyton Place. Employee B: Right. And everybody hearing it; ain't no telling, you know what I'm saying? He might be trying to get a job with somebody else and that rumor done jumped out on it. Employee A: And plus it can, like, get back to somebody who you don't might not want to hear that, and it's a lie. Employee B: It's a lie. Employee A: And then like that person might, she might believe it, man. Employee B: You see what I'm saying? It makes my job hard.
26. Generates ideas	I kind of got my own ideas. I got the authority to make up my own ideas and questions and forms and database. And once I got that authority that helped out a lot.
27. Feels undervalued	They would get all these big bucks, so I felt, you know, like I was being abused a little bit ... I took that for about 6 months. They just looked at you like you ain't shit and all that, right.
28. No inclusion of voice	<i>There was a clique of employees that very much left me with kind of a left-out, isolated feeling.</i>
29. Criticizes organization	What causes problems is ... they don't supply us with enough equipment as far as which is to do with the job to help patients get around.
30. Low morale	A lot of low points about this place, man. It's going to the pits, to the dogs.
31. Coworkers are lazy	The young ones don't want to do nothing ... lazy as hell.
32. Lack of teamwork	They seem like they sit back and let you ... fall in it yourself ... And don't care to look out for nobody, you know, keep everything you know, keep us as a team.
33. Worry	(I had) concern for the veterans or the employees that I was assisting.

^aOnly themes with significant differences across conditions are described, as reported in Table 2.

helping others, and expressed empathy. For example, the following quote from the SS condition exemplifies how an employee recalled a negative situation that was turned around to become a positive one:

When I first came to the medical center and started walking around and talking to people see how they felt about the

EEO program or how they felt about working here ... people said that the only thing missing that would make this a plantation is a white man on a horse in the halls. But two years later the medical center won Undersecretary of Health's EEO Award for Diversity.

On average, the SS condition had the highest number of observations of positive emotions including joy, excitement, and appreciation. Other

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and ANOVA F (N=98)

Theme	Strength/self mean	Strength/ organization mean	Deficit/self mean	Deficit/organization mean	ANOVA F
Excitement	0.48	0.12	0.08	0.00	5.42**
Joy	3.22	1.85	1.04	0.21	11.56***
Appreciation/gratitude	0.52	0.23	0.12	0.08	2.82*
Values helping	1.61	0.73	0.32	0.12	7.44***
Feels valued	1.35	0.50	0.04	0.00	13.00***
Inclusion of voice	0.30	0.04	0.00	0.00	6.07***
Freedom to make decisions	0.57	0.19	0.04	0.00	7.84***
Conscientiousness	3.96	0.65	0.76	0.42	25.54***
Empathy for others	1.52	1.15	0.24	0.92	4.07**
Organizational learning	0.78	2.12	0.12	0.00	17.70***
Compliments organization	0.17	6.38	0.00	0.58	48.29***
Effective organizational communication	0.00	0.15	0.00	0.00	4.19**
Coworkers cohesive	0.30	0.65	0.12	0.08	5.97***
Coworkers as team	0.22	0.31	0.04	0.00	3.45*
Coworkers are competent	0.04	0.27	0.00	0.00	6.58***
Coworkers work hard	0.04	0.35	0.04	0.04	3.76*
Effective teamwork	0.30	0.69	0.04	0.00	9.55***
Frustration	0.04	0.12	2.32	0.38	24.60***
Anger	0.04	0.00	1.12	0.50	10.30***
Resentment	0.00	0.04	0.28	0.17	3.31*
Controlled by others	0.17	0.19	1.40	0.79	9.26***
Criticizes organizational communication	0.00	0.12	0.56	0.42	3.04*
Criticizes management	0.70	0.50	2.72	2.08	11.74***
Considers leaving job	0.17	0.00	0.69	0.29	5.77***
Solidarity	0.43	0.54	2.28	0.42	8.99***
Generates ideas	0.00	0.00	0.16	0.33	2.16+
Feels undervalued	0.04	0.19	1.04	1.21	11.26***
No inclusion of voice	0.00	0.00	0.16	0.25	2.96*
Criticizes organization	0.57	1.73	4.72	7.25	30.93***
Low morale	0.04	0.04	0.16	0.50	6.19***
Coworkers are lazy	0.35	0.27	1.96	2.42	8.85***
Lack of teamwork	0.00	0.08	0.24	0.42	2.39+
Worry	0.00	0.00	0.12	0.16	2.70+

Note: Bold indicates highest mean observations; only themes with significant differences across conditions are reported; *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$, + $P < 0.10$.

themes that were higher in this condition than in any other were inclusion of voice, freedom to make decisions, conscientiousness, and empathy toward patients.

SO condition: Significant themes within the SO condition included organizational learning and compliments to the organization. This condition had the highest average number of mentions of employees expressing regard for others. Here, we saw the emergence of people describing their coworkers as cohesive and engaged team players. Compliments toward the organization showed how

employees identify with each other as opposed to another organization. They discussed having a “common thread” within their organization that made it special or unique from other organizations. A feeling of appreciation was expressed, especially when employees’ efforts were valued, as described in this quote:

They (management) say “thank you” and “good job” and “way to go.” And I’ve gotten financial awards; ... so they really do, I feel like, if you put forth the effort and do your job, then people do appreciate that. And that means a lot.

Table 3 ANOVA with Scheffe analysis (N=98)

Theme	SS-SO	SS-DS	SS-DO	SO-DS	SO-DO	DS-DO
Excitement	-0.368	-0.40*	-0.40**	-0.04	-0.12	-0.08
Joy	-1.37+	-2.18***	-3.01***	-0.81	-1.64*	-0.83
Appreciation/Gratitude	-0.29	-0.40	-0.44	-0.11	-0.15	-0.04
Values helping	-0.88+	-1.29**	-1.48***	-0.41	-0.61	-0.20
Feels valued	-0.85**	-1.31***	-1.35***	-0.46	-0.50	-0.04
Inclusion of voice	-0.27*	-0.30**	-0.30**	-0.04	-0.04	0.00
Freedom to make decisions	-0.37*	-0.53***	-0.57***	-0.15	-0.19	-0.04
Conscientiousness	-3.30***	-3.20***	-3.54***	0.11	-0.24	-0.34
Empathy for others	-0.37	-1.28***	-0.61	-0.91	-0.24	0.68
Organizational learning	1.33**	-0.66	-0.78	-2.00***	-2.12***	-0.12
Compliments organization	6.21***	-0.17	0.41	-6.38***	-5.80***	0.58
Effective organizational communication	0.15+	0.00	0.00	-0.15*	-0.15*	0.00
Coworkers are cohesive	0.35	-0.18	-0.22	-0.53***	-0.57***	-0.04
Coworkers are a team	0.09	-0.18	-0.22	-0.27	-0.31+	0.04
Coworkers are competent	0.23*	-0.04	-0.04	-0.27**	-0.27**	0.00
Coworkers work hard	0.30+	0.00	0.00	-0.31+	-0.30+	0.00
Effective teamwork	0.39+	-0.26	-0.30	-0.65***	-0.69***	-0.04
Frustration	0.07	2.28***	0.33	2.20***	0.26	-1.94***
Anger	-0.04	1.08***	0.46	1.12***	0.50	-0.62+
Resentment	0.04	0.28+	0.17	0.24	0.13	-0.11
Controlled by others	0.02	1.23***	0.62	1.21***	0.60	-0.61
Criticizes organizational communication	0.12	0.56+	0.42	0.44	0.30	-0.14
Criticizes management	-0.20	2.02***	1.39*	2.22***	1.58**	-0.64
Considers leaving job	-0.17	0.43+	0.12	0.60**	0.29	-0.31
Solidarity	0.00	0.16	0.33	0.16	0.33	0.17
Generates ideas	0.00	0.16	0.33	0.16	0.33	0.17
Feels undervalued	0.15	1.00**	1.16***	0.85**	1.20**	0.17
No inclusion of voice	0.00	0.16	0.25	0.16	0.25	0.09
Criticizes organization	1.17	4.15***	6.68***	2.99**	5.52***	2.53*
Low morale	-0.01	0.12	0.46**	0.12	0.46**	0.34+
Coworkers are lazy	-0.08	1.61*	2.07**	1.69*	2.15***	0.46
Lack of teamwork	0.08	0.24	0.42	0.16	0.34	0.18
Worry	0.00	0.16	0.12	0.16	0.12	-0.04

Note: Bold indicates significantly higher number of mentions between the conditions; negative indicates second condition is lower than the first; ****P*<0.001, ***P*<0.01, **P*<0.05, +*P*<0.10.

Favorable comments about coworkers included viewing them as competent and hardworking. The focus on organizational strengths also resulted in employees considering when their organization was effective, as this participant explained:

At least (management) try to help a little bit, you know, instead of just picking their nose and walking on by like, oh well ... sometimes they really do. I mean sometimes basically in the engineering department if all the shops work together, hell would probably freeze over, but sometimes they really do. Like I had to rebuild the whole pharmacy upstairs and I was in charge, and all the shops came in, and they actually listened to me. And I couldn't believe it. I mean here I am, and they're going to listen to me.

In the SO condition, employees expressed a sense of cooperative unification with others, which often accompanied feeling valued. People shared scenarios with language to describe their coworkers as collaborative, supportive, professional, hard-working, fun, enjoyable, and helpful in creating a nurturing and congenial atmosphere. This quote exemplifies the point:

It's a lot of, it's a lot of caring and love over there, you know, as far as the nurses taking care of them, the guys. You know, having camaraderie with even the housekeepers ... it's like a family over there.
We laugh, and we smile at each other. We joke around. This organization has some very good people here.



Employees also viewed coworkers as effective team players: "The team ... we all worked together well."

Overall, there was a sense of family and cohesiveness that emerged for those who engaged in this condition, as expressed by this employee: "We worked together as a family ... we worked together because it was a common cause."

DS condition: The key themes in the DS condition included a pronounced abundance of negative emotions. Frustration, anger, and resentment were expressed in statements such as "I got so angry, first he was undermining me ... so I got rebellious, you know. And I kind of took it out on everybody else" and "I began to feel frustrated and fearful."

Frustration was a sentiment found to be significantly higher in the DS condition and it dominated many of these conversations. Employees also expressed a sense that they were being controlled by others. They criticized their organization, its communications, and management. Participants shared thoughts about leaving their job and worked to create solidarity toward negative concerns with their partner. They described themselves as being controlled, trapped, or watched, which reflected vulnerability and a sense of insecurity. People in this condition discussed feeling dominated, and placed the locus of control outside themselves (even though the target focus was on the self). Here, an employee felt excluded from decision-making processes and expressed concern over not having his or her voice heard. These statements underscored a sense of isolation, such as "There was a clique of employees that very much left me with kind of a left-out, isolated feeling. They would get all these big bucks, so I felt, you know, like I was being abused."

In general, participants in this condition felt that they were treated unfairly, left out, undervalued, or not valued at all. Some sought support for their articulated plight and blamed an external other, who were then deemed to be the cause of the problems they identified.

DO condition: Participants in the DO condition frequently described their organizational contributions as being undervalued. They expressed a sense of being disrespected by management and articulated the need to have others show them more respect and to communicate more effectively, as exemplified by these quotes: "The supervisor is making big bucks and doing nothing but walking around with clipboards, harassing people, degrading people, yelling and screaming at people." and

"I think the morale in the overall hospital would be a lot better if, like you talked about, the respect, if folks would respect one another."

As might be expected, employees engaged in the DO condition were much more critical of the organization's structure and complained of low morale. Some focused more on generalities, not targeting specific issues but describing how the entire system was in decline, as illustrated in this quote: "A lot of low points about this place, man. It's going to the pits, to the dogs."

Combined, this frame and focus also drew out employees' negative regard for others. Many shared criticisms of their coworkers, with laziness being the core issue, as portrayed in multiple conversations: "They sit back ... and don't care to look out for nobody, you know. The young ones don't want to do nothing ... they lazy as hell. Some of them do as little as possible."

A key theme in the DO condition, mentioned more frequently than in any other, was criticism of the organization. For those who identified problems more concretely, this was also coupled with idea generation. After describing several scenarios depicting problems leading to low morale, one participant described ways to boost it, including improvements:

And I think, you know, if you want to make employees happy, then you have to give them something when they're not on the clock but still physically in the building. And so, you know, sprucing up the types of things that they offer and making sure everything is really fresh and offering, I guess, freshness and something that's fairly healthy and wholesome because a lot, you know we're supposed to be, you know, more health conscious.

Unlike those in the DS condition, when employees identified specific issues, they ultimately began to try and resolve them.

Discussion

To broaden the scope of our results for managerial application we show how each inquiry strategy elicits a unique clustering of themes. This reveals four distinct states – emotions and attitudes – that we call readiness modes.

Readiness modes

Each strategy combination corresponds to one of four distinct readiness modes (see Tables 2 and 3). The modes represent the predominant pattern of emotions and attitudes that employees experience at the beginning of the organizational change intervention. The study shows that inquiry strategies

elicit a different blend of emotions and attitudes influenced by a combination of frame and focus. We name these modes Valuing and Engagement (associated with SS), Broaden and Build (associated with SO), Frustration and Solidarity (associated with DS), and Criticize and Resolve (associated with DO). Figure 1 depicts these relationships in a two-by-two pictorial showing that certain themes are prevalent in each mode.

Valuing and Engagement mode: This readiness mode is associated with the strength-based/self-focused (SS) inquiry strategy and positive emotions such as joy, excitement, and appreciation are typically present. In this mode, employees articulate having a positive sense of self and favorable sentiments toward others. Although the focus is on self, employees explain their positive accounts as a result of hard work and caring for others. Employees mention helping behaviors, display workplace conscientiousness, and express empathy toward patients and coworkers. They demonstrate confidence and self-efficacy, as expressed by their perceptions of being free to make decisions and to be heard by management. Strategies that facilitate empowerment provide known benefits, yet the conditions for empowerment are seldom achieved (Yukl and Becker, 2006). This inquiry strategy can produce a positive reflection of self, one that expands to positive thoughts and actions toward others. The readiness mode could be a valuable contribution to managers who are working to achieve an empowered workforce.

Broaden and Build mode: Associated with the strength-based/organization-focused (SO) inquiry strategy, this readiness mode promotes organizational effectiveness. Here, employees are stimulated to seek out opportunities for learning. This mode appears to encourage employees to perceive and express beneficial aspects of working with others, coupled with positive emotions. As described by Fredrickson's broaden and build theory, positive emotions contribute to broader and more flexible thinking that help build enduring resources for resilience (Fredrickson, 1998), which can be particularly useful during times of change. In our study, employees discuss collective efforts such as organizational learning while conversing with their coworkers. Additionally, they frequently recall their organization and coworkers in a positive light, describe actions associated with collaboration and relationship-building, and emphasize team efforts. While they do not generate discrete ideas (e.g., to solve problems), employees show a

willingness to be open-minded. The strength frame's emphasis on assets combined with an external organizational focus primes positive emotions, helping people benefit from the broadening and building capacities that stem from positive emotions (1998).

Frustration and Solidarity mode: This readiness mode is associated with deficit-based/self-focused (DS) inquiry strategy. In this mode, employees express negative emotions such as frustration, anger, and resentment. Focusing on personal reactions to problematic situations, employees work to extricate themselves of the responsibility for these problems through various means, including blaming others and their proposed departure from the organization. Employees work to generate solidarity, perhaps, because the negative tension fosters a need to bond with others. Feeling exploited, employees try to establish security in what was frequently described as "a threatening environment." This mode ushers in the harsh reality of negativity, immediacy, and urgency to establish support.

Criticize and Resolve mode: This readiness mode exemplifies the deficit-based/organization-focused (DO) inquiry strategy, which primes negative thoughts about the organization. This mode favorably influences participants' efforts to restore balance to their organization through immediate problem-solving. Here, employees express negative emotions and articulate a sense of being undervalued and excluded. But unlike the SO strategy, where participants focus on their organizational identity through favorable perceptions of the collective (e.g., effective teamwork), this mode seems to move employees to distance themselves from the cause of the problems – their organization or other employees. In this study, the cause of problems was often perceived as a generalized external other, known as "management."

In this readiness mode, employees express negative sentiments about the workplace and their coworkers, but they also generate ideas. Moreover, their reflection and dialogue regarding the organization's problems spark concern and worry. Possibly wanting to alleviate this distress or imbalance, but not feeling directly threatened (as those in the Frustration and Solidarity mode), employees quickly engage in problem-solving. Targeting issues within the system apparently heightens urgency to repair the identified dysfunction. As employees direct their thoughts toward specific problems, they naturally seek out a timely resolution to address



the concern. In other words, this mode encourages an awareness of what is wrong and evokes the need to restore proper functioning to the organization. *Selecting a strategy:* Collectively, these results convey a rich picture of how inquiry strategy prompts different emotions and attitudes, as well as elements of employees' identities. As a result, we see how inquiry strategy helps to create and foster distinct readiness modes at the start of an intervention process. Managers can use this information to select a strategy at the start of their effort; one that best suits the organizational context and type of change desired. The inquiry strategies and their associated modes can be used in conjunction with Lewin's model to help move through the stages of unfreeze, movement, and refreeze (1947). Given our work, we expect that the Valuing and Engagement, Frustration and Solidarity, or Criticize and Resolve modes would be helpful in unfreezing the organization. Criticize and Resolve or Broaden and Build modes would likely facilitate movement. And finally, we expect that the Broaden and Build mode would be effective toward refreezing the organization.

Implications for practice

In today's society with the fast-paced need for change, managers may reach for what appears to be a quick-fix. Upon discovering a problem, developmental need, or even an opportunity, most tend to react. Such haste may be exercised by deploying known resources to orchestrate quick fact-finding, and then swift attention to address the most immediate issues. Depending upon the organization, the issue, and one's repertoire of intervention techniques, most of us tend to charge into action. Before taking action, however, this study demonstrates that managers and practitioners should consider what mode of readiness they want to prime in employees before they pose the first question. Based upon the desired readiness mode they can choose or blend inquiry strategies to acquire more tailored results.

The examples set forth below illustrate each readiness mode based upon events that have actually occurred in organizational settings. The scenarios presented are based on the experiences encountered by one of the authors while performing work as an organization consultant.

The Valuing and Engagement readiness mode is generated by having employees focus individually on their own strengths. Practitioners may find that this mode supports their attempts to empower

employees, encouraging more entrepreneurial, innovative, and developmental thoughts and behaviors. When a technical corporation had to lay off a number of employees, cultivating this mode was particularly useful. While the layoffs were imminent, organizational leaders hired a consulting firm to prepare employees for their next careers. During the workshops employees were asked to reflect upon their strengths, abilities, and peak moments of performance and organizational fit. The SS inquiry strategy was used to create the Valuing and Engagement readiness mode. This helped employees identify the times when they were most effective, bringing forward their awareness of how to effectively cultivate and connect with opportunities best suited for them.

In the Broaden and Build mode employees are mindful of team unity, effective organizational and interpersonal communication, and appreciative of their hard-working and competent fellow organizational members. Such a mindset can be extremely useful in preparing employees to embark upon a new and innovative path that will require them to engage in increased learning and teamwork. The SO inquiry strategy and its associated mode are particularly useful in organizations where core strengths have been all but forgotten. In the organization described above, after use of the SS inquiry strategy, the consultant shifted the strategy to induce the Broaden and Build mode, by redirecting the questions toward identification of organizational strengths. Based upon the study, employees would likely become more open to trying new approaches to old problems or to tackle new problems with a spirit of teamwork. In this case, while people were clearly still disturbed about the downsizing, this focused on collective strengths generated tempered excitement, as each person identified new career possibilities. Perhaps more importantly, those involved in the process realized that they were all in the same boat, which encouraged empathy and collaborative support. By focusing on organizational strengths, even though they were destined to leave the firm, people began to open up and share, providing useful feedback and demonstrative helping gestures to others (e.g., resume support and sharing job lead information).

In another example, during a diversity, visioning retreat at a US university, members of senior administration were asked to brainstorm what the school was currently doing well, with regards to



diversity in the workplace. In this session, administrators were eager to learn what other groups had listed. There was also noticeably more anticipation, energy, and conversation in the conference room than when they were discussing problems. Once participants reported out from all of their discussion groups, two administrators remarked that, while the university had a way to go in terms of diversity, they were pleased and surprised at what they had accomplished. Hence, the Broaden and Build mode did not ignore problems but provided a positive starting point for change and development.

While care must be used with the DS inquiry strategy, the Frustration and Solidarity mode has been constructive when management needs to find out where individual or team problems, weaknesses, or deficits reside. This readiness mode, though useful in special circumstances, can backfire and become destructive. Therefore, we highly recommend careful and mindfully derived application for short-term purposes or in conjunction with other inquiry strategies. The readiness mode produced by the DS inquiry strategy appears to be most productive when there is a high level of frustration and anger in the organization, regarding management or the organization at large. In such situations, this readiness mode can be used to allow the team to “blow off steam” so that the practitioner can then move beyond that negativity to get to the business at hand, *i.e.*, making a team more effective. The negativity energy produced in this mode, while volatile, can actually be used to encourage a nascent sense of team unity.

For example, this inquiry strategy was used at a highly technical department of a university to elicit a bound expression of negative emotions to bring about team cohesion (*i.e.*, a functional consequence of conflict). From the onset of the intervention, the one thing that the team had in common was their disdain for the Dean, who had labeled them “dysfunctional.” Using the DS inquiry strategy the consultant elicited the Frustration and Solidarity mode. She allowed the employees a finite amount of time to address their individual-level problems. During this period they were able to openly criticize management (the Dean), voice their frustration, anger and resentment at the sense of being controlled, and to ultimately rally with a shared sentiment: “We’re not dysfunctional!” Once the employees individually and collectively reached an agreement that they were not dysfunctional, the consultant

switched to a strength-based strategy, prompting the Broaden and Build mode, followed by the Criticize and Resolve mode. This helped the group create changes that would help to “prove” that their consensual assertion was in fact true (*i.e.*, that they were not dysfunctional, but indeed fully functional). As they considered what it would take to prove their effectiveness, they became hopeful that they could shed their embarrassment at being labeled dysfunctional.

Finally, the Criticize and Resolve readiness mode surfaces a sense of being undervalued, feelings of insecurity and worry, and that one’s voice is not being heard. In this readiness mode, we have seen that this exclusion prompts employees’ awareness that there is a critical need for change. We do not think it accidental that within this mode employees generate the most ideas. Because they experience such intense dissatisfaction and then focus on worry about the current state of the organization, they are motivated to generate ideas on how to improve the situation. While this is not a long-term desired state, practitioners may choose to elicit this readiness mode in organizations where apathy or lack of motivation to change exists. In order to instill motivation to change, we advise using the DO inquiry strategy, which requires employees to take a critical and immediate look at their organization. If this option is selected, the practitioner should be prepared to deal with the resulting emotions of the Criticize and Resolve readiness mode.

This inquiry strategy was used in a financial institution that had an overall low turnover rate, but a very high turnover rate for males of a particular ethnicity. The managers and executives had good intentions and were highly competent; however, they did not grasp the severity of the turnover problem for this population. They did not realize that this was a major problem because they saw plenty of males from the given ethnic group. These employees were, however, in the non-professional ranks of the organization. Thinking it best that the executives discover the problem themselves, the practitioner and the organization’s Human Resources Department collaboratively gathered turnover statistics, disaggregated by gender and race. The information was then presented for discussion. The majority of managers were surprised. A minority of managers, who belonged to the ethnic group with the turnover problem, confirmed that they felt undervalued, frustrated, and forlorn. During this conversation,



one of them disclosed the fear that their recruiting methods created for potential candidates. By having managers address this problem directly, the consultant engendered a genuine collective concern about the situation and motivated the group to generate ideas on how to do a better job of identifying, recruiting, and retaining these employees. This mode is particularly effective at helping people to realize that there really is an issue of concern, a problem that requires focused attention and likely a change to current processes. In this situation, once the managers became aware and willing to face the issue, people were ready to engage in the needed diversity education activities that can promote learning, change, and development within the entire organization.

A better understanding of how different inquiry strategies create distinct readiness modes prepares practitioners and managers to set the stage for the type of change they seek, with greater precision and effectiveness toward achieving their change goals. While managers intuitively plan interventions based upon the issues at hand, it is important to take a step back to plan the engagement, rather than to simply react. It is essential that managers, as agents of change, determine which readiness modes may prove to be the most useful, with an eye toward application of inquiry strategies, their combinations, and greater attention to their sequential use. Reflecting upon the planned intervention through a lens of readiness mode will enable practitioners to be more deliberate in their preparation for change and, as a result, more effective in their efforts. Finally, by becoming more familiar with the associations between inquiry strategies and readiness modes, those helping to create change can be more adept at adopting inquiry strategies en route, as emotions and attitudes emerge during the intervention process.

Limitations

Although supported by the examples provided, because this study was conducted in one organization, additional research is needed to investigate how different inquiry strategies work in a variety of contexts. Future research must also examine how the planned use of strategies and their associated

modes work in relation to different types of organizational change. While our effort to combine qualitative and quantitative measures provides in-depth understanding, replication and cross-sectional comparative studies will add value to this research. This is particularly important because we imposed an individualistic notion of the self concept, which may not be an appropriate assumption in all organizations and cultures.

Perhaps most importantly, we must learn how different inquiry strategies work during various stages of change. This study provided insight about the start of the effort, but it is not yet clear how strategies work together or independently to achieve organizational change, given a particular context over time. As with our examples, we expect practitioners to weave different strategies together; however, additional research is needed to empirically demonstrate the impact of frame and focus throughout the intervention process.

Conclusion

The choice of inquiry strategy at the start of an intervention creates different emotional states that can influence attitude formation, which, in turn, shapes how people view others and their organization. We learned that different inquiry strategies elicit identity salience in varying ways, which manifests itself in alternate emotional states as employees prepare for change. Our findings showed how frame and focus interact to promote distinct change readiness modes, which can be used to help managers understand how to effectively start an intervention. When employees think about deficits or strengths, with a focus on themselves or their organizations, they are biased toward valuing or frustration, and prepare to criticize or build from the onset.

We learned that inquiry strategy contributes to four distinct readiness modes: Valuing and Engagement, Broaden and Build, Frustration and Solidarity, and Criticize and Resolve. This study advances change management theory by providing evidence that inquiry strategies elicit different emotions and attitudes, resulting in readiness modes that can be used to facilitate employee readiness in varying ways.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol

Strength/self: We are interested in discovering when you have been at your best. Reflect back, from the moment you first joined this organization until right now. Obviously, you have experienced ups and downs, twists and turns, high points, and low

points. For now, think about a moment that stands out as a high point for you. This was a time when you felt the most engaged, you were the most successful, you felt alive or energized and you were the most effective – you were at your best. While you may have experienced a couple of high points, please share a story of just one. What happened? What was it about this situation that made it a high point for you?

Strength/organization: We are interested in discovering when this organization has been at its best. Reflect back, from the moment of first joining the organization, until right now. Obviously, the organization has experienced ups and downs, twists and turns, high points, and some low points. For now, think about a moment that stands out as a high point for the organization. This was a time when the organization was the most engaged, the most successful, alive, or energized, and the organization was the most effective – the organization was at its best. While the organization may have experienced a couple of high points, please share the story of just one. What happened? What was it about this situation that made it a high point for this organization?

Deficit/self: We are interested in understanding the major problems you have encountered at your job and to identify some of the causes of those problems. Reflect back, from the moment you first joined this organization until right now. Obviously, you have experienced ups and downs, twists and turns, high points, and low points. For now, think about a situation that stands out as one where you have felt the most blocked and you were the most frustrated – you were the least effective. This was a time when you faced problems on your job, things got in your way that kept you from being at your best. While you may have experienced a couple of problematic situations, please share an example of just one. What happened? What was it about this situation that raised the most concern for you?

Deficit/organization: We are interested in understanding the major problems within this organization, and to identify some of the causes of those problems. Reflect back, from the moment of first joining the organization, until right now. Obviously, the organization has experienced ups and downs, twists and turns, high points, and some low points. For now, think about a situation that stands out as one where the organization was the most blocked, the most obstructed – the organization was the least effective. This was a time when the organization faced problems, things got in the

way that kept the organization from being at its best. While the organization may have experienced a couple of problematic situations, please share an example of just one. What happened? What was it about this situation that raised the most concern for this organization?

Appendix B

Study methodology

Sample: Of the 224 participants, 182 were African American, 24 were Caucasian, and 18 were from other racial groups. The sample was 55.4% female and 44.6% male, with ages ranging from 25 to 70 years (mean=46.6 years). Participants' positions ranged from janitorial to highly skilled medical personnel and organization tenure ranged from 1 to 44 years (mean=11.5 years), with years in their current positions ranging from 1 to 35 (mean=7.0 years). Their educational levels ranged from eighth grade completion to advanced graduate degrees (M.D., Ph.D., etc.); many had some college or technical training after high school (45%). Each received a remuneration of \$35.00.

Method: A qualitative process was used to analyze the transcripts ($n=110$; two pairs were dropped because of poor recordings). A random subsample was drawn for theme development (three per condition). Informed grounded theory with procedures for constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) guided the process. A preliminary codebook was created with themes and descriptors (cf. McCall and Bobko, 1990; Boyatzis, 1998). The codebook was tested on four randomly selected transcripts from the subsample (one per condition) by the first and third authors. After dropping, adding, and combining several themes, both independently tested the codebook on the entire subsample ($n=12$) using an intensity-frequency scoring method based percentage of agreement on presence. Inter-rater (IRR) agreement rate of 87.9% ($n=12$) validated the use of the codebook. The coders then independently coded all of the remaining transcripts ($n=98$), similar to conventional content analysis (Kassarjian, 1977). A manual process was deemed appropriate (rather than use of software tools), because of the frequency of jargon, slang, sarcasm, double negatives, and the use of acronyms in the conversations. The IRR on the entire sample was 94.99%. Consistent with other qualitative studies, inferential statistics were used to build theory, not to determine causality (cf.

Cowan and O'Brian, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Druskat and Wheeler, 2003).

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