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## EMERGING CONCEPTUAL SCHOLARSHIP

# Organizations Don't Resist Change, People Do: Modeling Individual Reactions to Organizational Change Through Loss and Terror Management

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**This article has three premises that stand in contrast to emphases found in contemporary organizational change research. First, examination of resistance must start with the individual. Organizations don't resist change, people do. Second, people react not to the change per se, but to the loss it represents. Third, loss engenders a deeply rooted peril response that is largely emotional in nature. To support these premises, we apply Terror Management Theory to locate resistance in existential buffers: emotional defense mechanisms that prevent awareness of loss and allow participation in a larger meaningful system. We argue that the buffers threatened during organizational change are consistency, standards/justice, and culture. These in turn negatively impact the individual capabilities of sensemaking, competency, and identity. A theoretical model is erected that integrates buffers and capabilities with different levels, or types, of organizational change. Modeling multilayered affective, cognitive, and behavioral forces is necessary to unravel successful change initiatives. *Organization Management Journal*, 12: 125–138, 2015. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2015.1039637**

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Change is a fundamental human experience, and as such it provokes fundamental human reactions. Change—be it good or bad, wished for or imposed—represents loss. Loss is an unconditioned response to the predictable becoming unpredictable and to the known becoming unknown. This terrifying threat triggers atavist emotions that activate complex and interwoven cognitive and behavioral dynamics that are the source of individual resistance to change and the key to productively managing it.

This stream of reasoning brings into sharp relief that the research and practice of organizational change adhere to the following axioms. First, any examination of resistance to change must start with the individual. Organizations don't resist

change, people do. Second, people react not to the change per se, but to the loss that change represents. Third, loss engenders a deeply rooted peril response that is largely emotional in nature. And fourth, mapping multilayered affective, cognitive, and behavioral forces is necessary to unravel successful change initiatives.

A brief review of influential, contemporary research into organizational change more formally enunciates the matters at hand.

Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) and Self, Armenakis, and Schraeder (2007) expand the organizing framework of Van de Ven and Poole (1995), arranging the change literature into three categories: content, context, and process. Content theories, including those by Ginsburg and Buchholtz (1990) and Kabanoff, Waldersee, and Cohen (1995), address which aspects are to be changed. Context theories address the environmental factors surrounding or triggering change, exemplified by Johnson-Cramer, Cross, and Yan (2003) and Greenwood and Hinings (1996). Process theories, seen in the work of George and Jones (2001) and Isabella (1990), address how change unfolds or should be executed. Huy (2001) further divides content into tangible (structure and work processes) and intangible (beliefs and social relationships) factors, and process into episodic (punctuated and radical) and continuous (gradual and ongoing) time frames.

Despite the magnitude of scholarly contributions, three concerns about contemporary organizational change research persist. First, examinations have favored macro explanatory structures that diminish the role of the individual (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000; George & Jones, 2001). Second, change research has been dominated by rationalistic modeling at the expense of emotional processes (Caldwell, 2005).

Third, although distinctions such as content, context, and process are useful, change tends to span categorical frameworks, as opposed to fitting neatly into a single category (Rousseau, 1985).

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This article addresses these issues by advancing an integrated model of individual reactions to organizational change spanning macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis, similar to that studied by Shin, Taylor, and Seo (2012) and described by Vakola (2013). But it goes beyond them by examining mixed effects to refract the inherent complexity of how change reverberates between employees and organizations (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994), and because it is rooted in the proposition that individuals react not so much to the change but to the loss it represents, and the adjustment it necessitates (Chreim, 2002). Herein, loss is conceptualized as encompassing both the cognitive uncertainty and the emotional anxiety brought about by organizational change.

But what is lost? Borrowing from Terror Management Theory (TM), we argue that the existential buffers that allow individuals to emotionally and cognitively adapt to their surroundings are compromised by change. A tripartite theoretical model is derived, depicting change's content as operational, performance measurement, or beliefs/values. Content determines the firm–employee context by entailing the potential loss of the existential buffers of consistency, standards/justice, and culture. Context triggers the adjustment process by which employees insulate their sensemaking, competency, and identity capabilities from threats. This model provides theoretical value by proposing a multilevel framework that places the individual at the core, acknowledging the powerful cognitive and emotional role of loss, and advancing the work of Grant and Wade-Benzoni (2009) by relating Terror Management Theory to change. Practically, this model facilitates managers' comprehension and anticipation of individual resistance to organizational change.

The genesis of this article lies in the simple realization that change can be scary. Our approach to researching this started there. Terror Management Theory was the obvious candidate to start with. Once deciphered, the concept of loss emerged, which bridged the literature between TM and individual resistance to change. The examination of the threats that change poses required plotting those threats against different types of change, which naturally led to the existing scholarship on levels of change. From there, we drew on traditional behavioral and structuralism literature, as well as alternative schools of thought such as post-modernism and psychoanalysis, to craft an overarching integrative model.

## LOSS AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

There are numerous variations to the word *loss*, but the common theme among them, and the definition used herein, is that loss is the cognitive and affective experience brought about when something once possessed is removed. Cognitively, loss arises from circumstantial uncertainty. Uncertainty is unavoidable during change because new circumstances cannot be perfectly known, engendering ambiguity (Chreim, 2002). Uncertainty is accompanied by an emotional reaction, typically

defined as anxiety (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999), the symptoms of which can include tension, restlessness, apprehension, and irritability (Zell, 2003). Loss is an especially useful concept by which to map employee reactions to organizational change, as it encompasses two central individual variables present during change: uncertainty (Piderit, 2000)—a cognitive state of unpredictability or indefiniteness—and anxiety (Isabella, 1990)—an affective reaction to uncertainty. Change, by definition, entails loss. We additionally equate how actual and potential losses are processed, as the latter is sufficient to generate the cognitive and affective reactions that constitute the former (Wolfram Cox, 1997).

Directly or not, change research often evokes the concept of loss. Grady and Grady (2013) linked organizational loss of effectiveness (LOE) with Bowlby's Attachment Theory. George and Jones (2001) rely on "discrepancies" between internal processes and external environments when introducing change. Discrepancies can be understood as cognitive and affective manifestations of loss in the way work is executed or evaluated: differences between what was and what is or is to be. Similarly, Ginsburg and Buchholz (1990) argue that inertia is caused by routines, organizational structures, and relations. Loss is central to their model, given the assumption that individuals strive to avoid abandoning that which they believe provides personal and organizational certainty and thus advantages. Numerous studies imply loss as a source of resistance to change, including loss of the following: control (Eby et al., 2000), effectiveness (Ford & Ford, 1994), job security (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002), potential opportunities (Johnson-Cramer et al., 2003), power (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997), resources (King & Anderson, 1995), routines (Ford et al., 2002), and status (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Rather than build a model around variables lost in change, we build a model around loss itself.

Not surprisingly, research often portrays loss as a negative phenomenon. Concepts as serious as grief, bereavement, and mourning have been employed to describe individual reactions to change (Wolfram Cox, 1997). Driver (2009) tracks loss themes during organizational change scenarios, even citing the notions of trauma and tragedy experienced by employees. Yet change does not necessarily need to be negative to bring about loss. Our definition of loss is not evaluative; it rather acknowledges that any change, regardless of its severity or nature, can be accompanied by loss. Change as dramatic and negative as a lay-off (i.e., removal of livelihood and/or identity) or as expected and welcome as a promotion (i.e., removal of routines and/or social interactions) creates loss, and thus can generate cognitive uncertainty and emotional anxiety. Wolfram Cox (1997) support this notion by presenting "loss as relief" and "loss as release," in which loss liberates employees from past obligations that burden them (p. 634). Also corresponding to positive loss, Driver (2009) presents loss as an "epic" in which employees, over time, can benefit and become more satisfied (p. 362).

That loss accompanies positive change is supported by concepts such as positive organizational change and readiness for

change, where facilitation involves optimistically positioning loss to cultivate supportive attitudes. These processes reframe loss, as opposed to denying it (Piderit, 2000). Similarly, an attraction-based view of change known as trialectics (Ford & Ford, 1994) holds that people are drawn to changes where loss is perceived as positive. In these situations, Kovoov-Misra (2009) argues individuals might focus on “who I could be,” creating readiness (Vakola, 2013). The result is change through replacement or synthesis and acknowledges that loss has the potential to lead to something better.

Piderit (2000) builds on the notion that loss can simultaneously be perceived as positive and negative, resulting in a state of ambivalence, which arises from internal uncertainty, to trigger anxiety. For example, when employees cognitively know that a change is positive, they can still emotionally feel that they are losing something (Piderit, 2000). Driver (2009) argues that ambivalence exists because even positive change sacrifices the familiar, an event typically seen as negative. Cutcher (2009) asserts that challenges to individuals’ “traditions” can evoke negative feelings. The long-anticipated promotion, thus, can contain elements of positive loss (e.g., no longer being a subordinate) and negative loss (e.g., no longer working with valued colleagues), generating acceptance or resistance, depending on overall perception (Cutcher, 2009). People interpret change based on past experiences or perceptions, and either come to terms with ambivalence or resist it (Randall & Procter, 2008).

Loss is the actual or potential removal of something once possessed, whether positive or negative. That real or anticipated loss is fundamental to change appears valid, but what, exactly, does one stand to lose? What is removed?

The following addresses this question through the theoretically developed and empirically validated literature on Terror Management Theory (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009), which portrays the existential human conflict between life and the inevitability of death. Terror Management Theory argues that people are motivated to resolve this terrifying circumstance through participation in reassuring patterns and societally endorsed conventions. It proposes that compromising these can result in the loss of conscious and unconscious defense mechanisms that allow one to fully engage in a meaningful and enduring world.

We contend that Terror Management Theory enhances the organizational change literature by going beyond acknowledging why loss is so debilitating. We erect a grounded theoretical structure that pinpoints individual work capabilities that are threatened by different types of organizational change.

## THE TERROR MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Terror Management Theory (TM) holds that managing terror is a uniquely human problem, as we are sophisticated enough to be cognizant of our own frailty, but not so much so as to escape it. This awareness clashes with humanity’s inborn desire to survive (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus,

1994). According to TM, when humans recognize their own lack of control in an uncertain world (a cognitive process), the loss that becomes salient is of life itself, which is terrifying (an emotional reaction; Landau et al., 2004).

Like all theories, TM is derivative of former work, particularly that of Becker’s famous 1973 book *The Denial of Death*. A cultural anthropologist, Becker identifies the anxiety that mortality engenders, and describes instances of it, but does not provide an empirically verifiable structure to confirm it. TM does. Another intellectual influence is found in Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (1969). Although Bowlby’s work includes the loss and anxiety constructs, it is developed specifically around children’s experience of separation and their need to develop trust with their caregivers.

A recent meta-analysis used over 275 studies that examined Terror Management Theory (Burke, Martens, & Fautcher, 2010). Even a decade ago, a literature review identified more than 200 papers (TM; Landau et al., 2004). Thus, its lack of presence in management is surprising, as TM has demonstrated key organizationally related findings.

One stream of especially relevance focuses on self-esteem. People with high self-esteem—defined as having a durable worldview—are (a) less susceptible to cognitive dissonance (Landau et al., 2004); (b) more open to measured personal growth (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997); (c) more determined in their course of action (Greenberg et al., 1993); and (d) comfortable with tolerance (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). In these studies, participants were introduced to a mortality salience exercise. Those with high self-esteem are better equipped to manage terror. These findings echo recent research into personal resilience, or “grit.” Duckworth and colleagues (2007) have shown that grit contributes to people’s passion for activities and their ability to persevere to achieve long-term goals.

Another research stream is on the preference for, and choice of, leaders when a mortality salience exercise was administered (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Consistent with TM hypotheses, participants preferred charismatic over relationship-oriented leader profiles. Furthermore, mortality-salient individuals are more likely to choose male leaders and in-group leaders (Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009). The implication is that when faced with crisis, people want leaders who can deal with their emotions to confirm that their worldviews are legitimate.

TM is not without its critics. Oddly enough, the harshest have been its founders. Pyszczynski and other major figures have acknowledged that many of the same results they’ve achieved can be demonstrated without mortality-independent variables, such as difficult choices or encounters with antagonistic others (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Moreover, primary researchers have acknowledged that evolution conditions “adaptive” responses to environmental threats. Thus, reactions to terrify circumstances are not simple anxious states, but reasonable and necessary survival reactions (Landau et al., 2004).

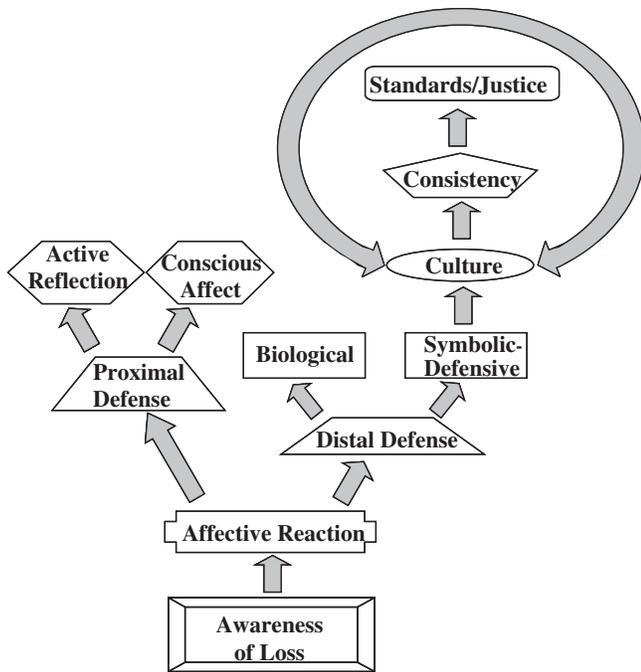


FIG. 1. The complete Terror Management Theory structure.

To suggest that employees are terrified about loss of life during organizational change seems hyperbolic but, as raised in the previous section, change evokes a form of loss, which TM is particularly well suited to explore.

Humans have evolved serial defense mechanisms to cope with and adjust to loss's disabling prospect and enable participation in daily life. While such coping mechanisms have been addressed in the management literature by Argyris (1985), TM focuses on why they are critical: particularly, insulation from cognitive and emotional acknowledgment of loss (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). TM asserts that defense mechanisms take one of two paths: the proximal system that distracts and distances one from increased consciousness of loss, and the distal system that uses existential buffers to prevent this awareness from reaching consciousness.

Even subconscious awareness of loss causes uncertainty and anxiety, illustrating how organizations are experienced as fundamentally emotional places (Vince, 2006). In the proximal system, conscious reactions inform individuals that something is wrong and coalesce into an awareness of loss, whereas in the distal system, this reaction takes the form of a vague recognition of loss that is not consciously perceived (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). The full TM model is represented in Figure 1.

### The Proximal (Conscious) Defense System

The first proximal mechanism relies on cognition. Here, perception is adjusted to make loss derived from high levels of uncertainty appear less probable. Dubbed active reflection, this

process rationalizes threatening circumstances in order to make them seem less likely and less uncertain, allowing daily life to continue unfettered by anxiety (Goldenberg et al., 2001). Rationalization is largely accomplished through reliance on biased facts and distractions from reality (Pyszczynski et al., 1999) in a manner not fundamentally different from Festinger's cognitive dissonance (1954). In this way, the proximal mechanism operates at a perceptual level, where an event like the forced departure of a valued colleague is framed as an opportunity for that colleague to professionally develop in a new environment.

Conscious affect is the second proximal defense mechanism, and relies on emotion, typically anxiety (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). The more profound the awareness of loss, the more anxiety individuals experience (Greenberg et al., 1993), which shifts focus from cognitive acknowledgment of uncertainty to the experience of the emotion itself. In this way, the system refocuses attention away from the cause of the anxiety (Pyszczynski et al., 1999), thereby restoring a sense of balance. As emotional displays are strongly influenced by context, these negative emotions are rationalized through active reflection to sublimate them in a socially and politically acceptable direction (Vince, 2006). Thus, fear in the face of potential threat is expressed as excitement for new challenges. This helps explain how organizational change can provoke strong emotions among employees (George & Jones, 2001).

### The Distal (Unconscious) Defense System

Although the proximal defense system effectively handles conscious realizations of loss through reduced uncertainty and reorientation to anxiety, the central value of TM is that it explains how uncertainty and anxiety are not a constant presence. Through the distal defense system, loss is prevented from becoming salient in the first place (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). The distal system attends to the unconscious awareness of uncertainty that permeates organizational life (Vince, 2006) prior to its conscious acknowledgment. Mitigating the conscious recognition of loss is achieved through a complex reliance on primitive and progressive existential buffers.

The biological buffer argues that awareness of physical needs triggers realization of the corporeal, which then forces acknowledgment of the impermanence of existence (Goldenberg et al., 2001). To prevent this, biological needs are ritualized—by, for example, using utensils and going to restaurants—to attain more cultural and psychological value (Landau et al., 2004). This may appear unimportant, but skill at masking-rituals—colloquially referred to as manners—is highly prized in modern organizations, be it using the correct fork at an interview lunch or covering one's mouth when coughing during a board meeting.

Pyszczynski et al. (1997) argue that the primary existential buffers are symbolic-defensive, and imbue life with meaning and value, making it appear less uncertain and anxiety-provoking. This system strives to make constantly changing

environments appear stable: a fundamental human desire as argued by the fields of chaos and complexity theory (Burnes, 2004; Caldwell, 2005). In TM, individuals desire personal meaning and identity, which is primarily established through the culture buffer that formalizes behavioral patterns, reinforcing the consistency buffer. These two buffers facilitate established standards, which allow for an enforceable system of justice, together comprising the standards/justice buffer. The self-reinforcing nature of these buffers creates the appearance of objectivity that transcends relativism in favor of universality.

Elaborated examples of symbolic-defensive are offered in the next section. But to foreshadow, common organizational changes efforts focus on, among other things, standard operating procedures, which affect consistency; new performance systems, which affect standards/justice, and; culture initiatives, which affect identity.

It is logical that individuals strive to fully participate in their culture (Pyszczynski et al., 1997). Consistency creates an environment high in certainty, which individuals become increasingly willing to associate themselves with (Chreim, 2002). Such associations increase the desire to pursue standards that serve justice. This earns one enduring public plaudits. Therefore, cultural participation increases opportunities to gain recognition in a certain and lasting social structure (Greenberg et al., 1993).

Standards/justice create a framework or rubric for acceptable behavior. Guiding actions in accordance with these standards reduces uncertainty and anxiety (Eby et al., 2000) by adding credibility that culture will persist and be defensible against contradictory worldviews (Landau et al., 2004). Standards are essential because, as Pyszczynski et al. (1997) observe, “To effectively serve its TM function, one’s worldview must provide a sense that behavior and outcomes are related in a just way, that if one lives up to cultural values, one will . . . ultimately qualify for . . . transcendence” (1997, 9). If one fulfills cultural responsibilities—living up to inculcated standards—one expects to be treated justly and, additionally regarded with enduring respect.

Ultimately, TM would argue that the fundamental human need is to protect existential buffers. This article extends that logic by arguing that organizational change entails real or anticipated loss, which threatens these buffers, helping to explain individual reactions and resistance to change. Although TM can inform individual reactions to change, only peripheral attempts have been made to explore this relationship and exclusively involve political ideology (Echebarria-Echabe & Fernández-Guede, 2006).

As detailed in the previous section, organizational change can include the actual or potential loss of such variables as authority, reporting relationships, colleagues, position, status and autonomy. TM provides value by furnishing a coherent structure for such disparate losses. It is not the loss of specific things, per se, that generates uncertainty and anxiety; rather, it is the implication of such losses to existential buffers. Change threatens established defense mechanisms that connect

employees to a broad, enduring system and protect them from acknowledgment of everyday life’s inherent uncertainty. Thus, TM informs the understanding of both why and how employees react to organizational change. This supports work by Argyris (1985) and like-minded scholars who advocate the central placement of defensive routines within employees’ reactions to change. We present a model that takes essential elements from TM and applies them directly to individual reactions to organizational change.

## AN INTEGRATED, MULTILEVEL MODEL OF INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS TO CHANGE

The proposed model’s logic flows through a  $3 \times 3$  structure based on a typology progressing through depth of planned change, and describing macro-, meso-, and micro-level scope, coalescing individual loss reactions and adjustments. It is a mixed-effect model, with the vertical axis encompassing the impact of the change initiative on three levels of depth—in line with Bartunek and Moch’s (1987) levels of order-change—and with the horizontal axis representing the impact of potential loss on three levels of scope—in line with the Klein et al. (1994) levels of analysis. Within this model, TM concepts are integrated through the impact that actual or potential loss has on existential buffers and the defensive mechanisms that ensue. At the macro level, the content of planned change is arranged into three types: operational, performance measurement, or beliefs and values. At the meso level, the content of change creates a work context that entails potential loss, threatening the existential buffers of consistency, standards/justice, or culture. At the micro level, the defense mechanisms triggered by the context merge around mitigating threats to individual capabilities of sensemaking, competency, or identity.

Consistent with other mixed-effect models (Holt & Vardaman, 2013), it is important to emphasize that change may or may not affect all levels equally. Further, change does not have to descend from organizational policy to the individual; rather, it can ascend from individuals to the organization, or arise from the individual–organization interface. Such model flexibility is essential, as it is erroneous to assume that change’s impact can be fully controlled (i.e., change’s losses may cause unintended reverberations throughout the firm), and employees may react in an uncorrelated, independent manner or in a manner that is interrelated within their organizational units (Klein et al., 1994). Therefore, the model allows for subjective interpretations and individual differences (i.e. risk-preference, openness to change, and tolerance to ambiguity) that affect how change ruptures TM’s existential buffers. The full model is depicted in Figure 2.

### Type 1 Change

#### *Content: Operational*

Type 1 change alters prior knowledge and established mental models (Becker, 2010) such as processes, procedures, or

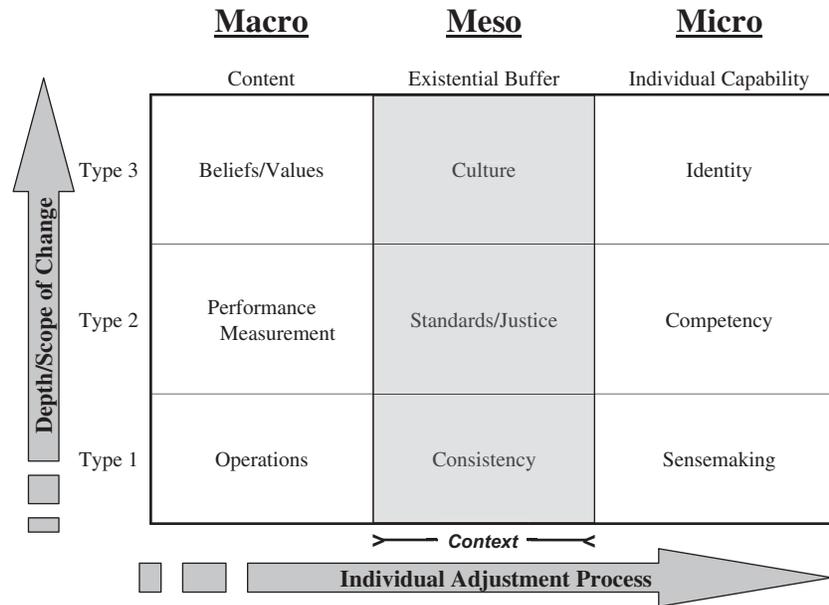


FIG. 2. An integrated model of individual reactions to organizational change.

logistics, entailing a shift in routines, patterns, and habits. Implementing novel acquisition systems and implementing software programs are small-scale examples, whereas new computer interfaces and total physical relocations are large-scale examples. This echoes first-order change as outlined by Bartunek and Moch (1987), implying adjustment in ways of thinking and doing tasks without necessitating complete dissemblance in constructed worldviews.

*Existential Buffer: Consistency*

From TM, the existential buffer of consistency allows individuals to see the world as certain, orderly, predictable, familiar, and safe. Operational change disrupts this buffer, causing concern by possibly rendering the world random, unpredictable, foreign, and dangerous. This propels organizations into a quasi-state of flux, causing people to lose their ability to negotiate the varying terrain of life and make sense of their surroundings. As Schein (2004) states, “Disorder and senselessness makes us anxious, so we will work hard to reduce that anxiety by developing a more consistent and predictable view” (p. 15). Macro-level operational change creates a meso-level context where the stability furnished by consistency is, at least temporarily, hampered.

The organizational analogue of consistency exists in routines and inertia (George & Jones, 2001). Lewin’s (1951) definition of change argues that unfreezing occurs only by undermining consistency. As Schein (2004) observes, “The fundamental assumptions underlying any change in a human system are derived originally from Kurt Lewin” (p. 319); therefore, virtually all models acknowledge the necessity of instability (Burnes, 2004). Thus, inconsistency and the loss it entails are tantamount

to change as they force firms out of equilibrium, introducing uncertainty that can lead to increased anxiety (Eby et al., 2000). Research has found that employees react poorly to circumstances engendering contradiction (Rouleau, 2005), uncertainty (Cataldo, Raelin, & Lambert, 2009), and unpredictability (King & Anderson, 1995).

Operational change intentionally alters routines and inertia to, eventually, adjust mental frames about work and the work environment. Destabilizing consistency is a natural result of this process (Burnes, 2004). Walker (1997) reinforces this logic, arguing that behavioral alterations must precede mental ones. Moreover, inconsistency has long been known to precede attitude change (Festinger, 1954). Finally, Becker’s (1992) stages of commitment parallel this progression: Employees first merely ape behavior to avoid repercussions (i.e., compliance commitment), then socially identify with the behavior (i.e., identification commitment), and eventually completely internalize the behavior (i.e., internalization commitment).

*Individual Capability: Sensemaking*

When operational change involves the real or potential loss of the existential consistency buffer, the micro-level individual capability with the highest potential to be compromised is sensemaking. Weick (1995) defines sensemaking as the process people use to structure the unknown and develop a frame of reference to interpret the world around them. Although somewhat social in nature, employees consciously and unconsciously erect mental maps based upon schemas and tacit knowledge to represent and predict their environment (Rouleau, 2005).

Sensemaking is a valued capability in organizational settings that accounts for contradictions between messages and

broader social circumstances (Rouleau, 2005), allows employees to comprehend problems in a way that makes them solvable (George & Jones, 2001), fosters individual learning (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000), keeps employees attuned to their surroundings (Weick, 1995), makes messages internally relevant and actionable (Isabella, 1990), and promotes accurate assessments of organizational capabilities (Eby et al., 2000). Thus, sensemaking creates a bulwark of meaning and understanding, which explains why employees react negatively to changes that threaten or diminish this ability (Eby et al., 2000). Not surprisingly, due to undermined sensemaking abilities, individual reactions are even more negative when change alters stable situations, leading to resistance (Johnson-Cramer et al., 2003).

Ford et al. (2002) argue that negative reactions can be mitigated if employees are allowed to make sense of the change. Similarly, George and Jones (2001) believe that the employee sensemaking processes must be supported on an emotional and cognitive level to encourage change acceptance. We agree, but contend that the underlying reason people react negatively to instability is precisely because TM's existential buffer of consistency has been threatened. Sensemaking, then, is a symptom, but not the cause, of individual reactions to organizational change. Indeed, sensemaking is so emotionally satisfying precisely because it helps create certainty by establishing an understandable world (Eby et al., 2000). Employees' reactions to Type 1 change can be represented through the following propositions:

- Proposition 1a: Operational change leads to the actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of consistency.
- Proposition 1b: The actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of consistency leads to vulnerability of the individual capability of sensemaking.
- Proposition 1c: Vulnerability of the individual capability of sensemaking leads to resistance to operational change.

## Type 2 Change

### *Content: Performance Measurement*

Type 2 change alters how employee performance is measured. A salesperson asked to increase the volume of sales, and a software engineer whose roll-out deadline is moved up, are examples wherein what is being measured remains constant, but the absolute scale shifts. Alternatively, when adding new elements to a performance portfolio, such as cross-selling or teamwork, the number of items, or scope, of measurement shifts. Another alteration could include changing the metrics used to evaluate a dimension, such as efficiency. In this case, the performance dimension of efficiency stays the same, but the manner in which it is calculated shifts. This resembles Bartunek and Moch (1987) second-order change, which entails a modification—but not dismissal—of worldviews in order to remain functional within an existing environment.

### *Existential Buffer: Standards/Justice*

Altering how performance is measured entails the actual or potential loss of TM's existential buffer of standards, and by extension, justice. Standards serve as organizationally established objectives that are used to evaluate one's self as well as other surrounding variables. They are the basis upon which individuals in a broader social system determine whether an object or action is good or bad, accepted or rejected, beautiful or ugly, and smart or stupid, thereby furnishing benchmarks for discrimination, discernment, and perspicacity. Macro-level changes in performance measurement, then, occasion the loss of the meso-level standards that serve as reflections of how well individuals are interacting with the organization.

Standards do not operate in isolation. As raised in TM, they serve as the foundation to administer justice. In this way, justice is a means for enforcing standards, the end product of which is fairness and equity (Koivisto, Lipponen, & Platow, 2013). When fairness and equity are compromised, the connection between actions and outcomes is unwrought, which generates uncertainty and anxiety by removing causality. If the world is not causal, the untalented and indolent could advance while the exemplary and diligent don't. Contemplating the loss of such established organizational standards causes employees to reconceptualize the stability of their environmental.

As with any change, employees may initially "go through the motions" to avoid punishment and obtain rewards (Piderit, 2000), but repeating the behaviors required of new standards slowly inculcates those standards as "objective" ratings of success and failure. When standards are changed, employees feel, at least immediately, that they cannot evaluate their individual capability for competence (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009), a terrifying revelation. This maps closely onto what Self, Armenakis, and Schraeder (2007) describe as "justified" organizational changes.

### *Individual Capability: Competency*

Changes in performance measurement threaten TM's existential buffer of standards/justice, which, in turn, threatens the individual capability of competency. Competency is a micro-level construct defined as the knowledge, traits, or skills that allow individuals to distinguish themselves from their peers (Arnold, 1985). Although teams or organizations can be described as more or less competent, collective competence is largely an amalgam of individuals (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Although externally measurable, competence is internally anchored (Koriat & Bjork, 2005).

Competency is linked to a number of desired organizational variables. The most widespread of these are efficiency and productivity, typically included in the term's definition (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Competency also functions as a boost to self-esteem and self-efficacy (Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1989), serving as a force for intrinsic motivation (Arnold, 1985) and as a motivator for learning and development (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). Many researchers attest to

negative reactions from employees when change harms the applicability of unique skills (Bovey & Hede, 2001), hinders their ability to achieve goals (Huy, 2001), increases the possibility of reduced employee psychological well-being (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009), or violates assumed organizational benchmarks (Bies et al., 1997). Bovey and Hede (2001) approach this variable by arguing that negative reactions can be limited by ensuring employees that their competencies will not be violated, an act potentially increasing certainty and reducing anxiety.

Although we locate the cause of negative reactions to performance management within individual competence, we reiterate that competence is a symptom of a chain reaction triggered by macro-level content change, and that the primary causal factor is the actual or anticipated loss of standards/justice. The standards/justice buffer provides comparison points for personal and professional worth and value. It is the potential loss of standards/justice that, in the TM system, provokes uncertainty and anxiety, as without them employees' ability to display their competencies is compromised (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). Moreover, change that necessitates the loss of standards/justice may lead employees to suspect that their organization is not concerned with their own positive self-evaluation (Landau et al., 2004).

We propose that performance measurement change succeeds or fails precisely because of how it mediates TM's standards/justice buffer and, by extension, the competency capability. By ignoring these, employees are left to question whether their skills and abilities will be compromised to such a degree that their future employability will be impacted (King & Anderson, 1995). In sum, employees' reactions to Type 2 change can be stated as:

- Proposition 2a: Performance measurement change leads to the actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of standards/justice.
- Proposition 2b: The actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of standards/justice leads to vulnerability of the individual capability of competency.
- Proposition 2c: Vulnerability of the individual capability of competency leads to resistance to performance measurement change.

### Type 3 Change

#### *Content: Beliefs and Values*

Although Type 1 change and Type 2 change alter something tangible—operational procedure or performance measurement—Type 3 change alters something intangible, organizational beliefs and values. This is the deepest level of change because it goes beyond behavior, to what is accepted as true, and to the priorities placed on ideas, actions, and outcomes. Variations on Type 3 change include attempts to instill competitor awareness, ethical decision making, innovation,

risk orientation, and unity of purpose. This depth parallels Bartunek and Moch's (1987) third-order change and echoes Lewin's (1951) critical levels of change, where organizations, groups, and individuals must wholly reconstruct their worldviews.

#### *Existential Buffer: Culture*

Attempts to alter beliefs and values commensurately implicate the existential culture buffer. Culture occupies the most prominent and overarching position in TM's distal system, under which both consistency and standards/justice are arranged. According to TM, culture imbues individuals with the sense that they are participating in a larger holistic system, affording predictability through consistency, as well as equity and fairness through standards/justice. More importantly, culture is likely to endure, bestowing a figurative permanence. Individuals feel highly uncertain and anxious when their deeply held beliefs and are threatened. This real or potential threat enfeebles the living record of their past success, and the social system they helped to erect.

The parallel between TM's definition of culture and the management literature is direct. Culture is comprised of artifacts, values, and assumptions that underlie an organization (Schein, 1999). Described as the essence of organizations, these largely unconscious, implicit, and unexplored variables powerfully govern daily conduct (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988). Culture is so powerful that even when recognized and rejected, employees will struggle to reinvent it (McCabe, 2010). The longer organizations exist, the more their cultures are viewed as effective, and the longer employee tenure extends, the more they associate their identity with that of the organization (Chreim, 2002).

Attachment to culture is particularly evident in employees who struggle as much to unlearn the old culture as they do to learn the new culture. A culture is promoted and perpetuated through memories, which are difficult to reinvent (McCabe, 2010). Losing all the hard-won learning that made an organization successful renders this process particularly anxiety-inducing (Schein, 1999). As the current culture represents the past, it serves as proof of employee participation (Cataldo et al., 2009). It is, then, not surprising that altering beliefs and values often undermines change initiatives (Schein, 1999). Changing beliefs and values implies that previously held ones were somehow illegitimate, causing uncertainty and anxiety as it undermines desired objectivity (Greenberg et al., 1994). This leads to skepticism that the new culture can be a source of certainty in the long run (Cataldo et al., 2009). In this vein, attempts to change culture have been found to drive potentially disparate employees together to preserve what they see as the essence of the organization and, possibly, themselves (Chreim, 2002). All of these reasons led Schein (1999) to observe that this process is so fraught with uncertainty, anxiety, and difficulty that it is often better to merely work around dysfunctional assumptions.

### *Individual Capability: Identity*

The actual or potential loss of beliefs and values compromises TM's culture buffer, which in turn threatens individual identity (Chreim, 2002; Pitsakis, Biniari, & Kuin, 2012). Rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, identity has been studied in psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior (Gioia, 1998). Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, and Gordon Allport conceptualized identity as those characteristics that distinguish one person from another. Building on this notion, managerial scholars such as Scott and Lane (2000) believe that employees use interpersonal exchanges to differentiate their identity. Identity does have a social component, inasmuch as individuals often base their identity on the teams and organizations they are involved with (Gioia, 1998). Yet according to Erikson (1964), identity can be understood as the stable core of who a person is, the meaning people assign to themselves, and what they stand for. Identity, then, is individually possessed and unique to each person (Erikson, 1964). Indeed, this is largely why scholars have struggled to define group and organizational identity (Gioia, 1998).

Identity has been connected to a number of beneficial organizational variables, such as allowing employees to transcend roles to bring their whole selves to work (Raelin, 2003), distinguishing between the individual and the organization (Scott & Lane, 2000), encouraging efficient learning (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000), facilitating effective organizational change (Cutcher, 2009), and motivating and sustaining task commitment (Kovoor-Misra, 2009). Identity is often cited as a source of negative reactions to change due to concerns over identity loss demanded (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009), dislike of the identity the organization wants assumed (Schein, 1999), feelings of exclusion and isolation (Chreim, 2002), and frustrations about an organizational demand for a contradictory identity (Ford & Ford, 1994).

Employees must be assured that change will bolster rather than endanger their identity (Kovoor-Misra, 2009; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). This again assumes that employees react negatively to change. Instead, we advocate returning to Erikson's (1964) premise that people react poorly to change if it leaves their identities exposed by necessitating the loss of their existential culture buffer. TM informs us that employees react negatively to loss rather than to change itself. As identity is cultivated and formalized by the immediate culture, threats to culture increase uncertainty and anxiety as they render establishing a stable identity problematic (Chreim, 2002). Change may also force employees to alter who they are; as Schein (1999) states, "If your current way of thinking is a strong source of identity for you, you may not wish to be the kind of person that the new culture requires you to be" (123).

Indeed, the identity loss that accompanies culture change is often considered so severe that Schein (2004) argues that one should attempt such changes only if the organization's survival depends upon it. Note that Schein evokes—intentionally or not—the concept of loss, particularly loss of life. He asserts

that such change is arduous and should be reserved until absolutely necessary. Although developing an identity during cultural change is possible, without a highly defined cultural anchor it is unclear what benefits can be achieved, and this must be carefully managed. We assert that negative reactions occur because change compromises TM's existential culture buffer, producing uncertainty and anxiety by threatening the individual capability of identity. When considered altogether, employees' reactions to Type 3 change can be articulated in the following propositions:

Proposition 3a: Beliefs/values change leads to the actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of culture.

Proposition 3b: The actual or potential loss of the existential buffer of culture leads to vulnerability of the individual capability of identity.

Proposition 3c: Vulnerability of the individual capability of identity leads to resistance to beliefs/values change.

### **THE ITERATIVELY INTERDEPENDENT AND INVERSELY ENCOMPASSING NATURE OF CHANGE**

As previously reported, academic models create categories as if change's effects are isolated. Although we agree with erecting evidence-based categories, we strenuously object to the idea that change efforts are statically contained. Organizations are complex organic systems wherein change emanates across levels of analysis in a nondiscrete fashion that cannot be localized.

In line with mixed-effect reasoning, the managerial implications of the model presented herein suggest that any macro-level change can reverberate through formal and informal systems, along the way influencing dynamics at other organizational levels. Although content change can be designed to have a specific, bounded impact, its effects cannot be so readily delimited—which is supported by chaos theory (Burnes, 2004). Change, then, has a level-spanning contagion quality that we dub *iterative interdependence*. We use the term *iterative* because change at any macro level can extend through the meso and micro levels multidirectionally, and the term *interdependence* to highlight the causal commingling that can occur.

Beginning with Type 1, introducing a new accounting system is a fitting example of a macro-content operational change. We have argued that such change entails the loss of TM's existential consistency buffer, which increases uncertainty and anxiety by threatening the individual capability of sensemaking. However, a new accounting system may reveal processes and enable metrics that were not previously discernable. Whether it is intended by the organization or not, employees realize that enhanced transparency is possible, which raises concerns about the existential buffer of standards/justice and, consequently, the individual capability of competency. Employees may believe

that the operational change reflects new standards that they then strive to discover and use as benchmarks to achieve competency. Furthermore, the enhanced transparency brought about by introducing a simple accounting system may lead employees to feel anxious that the firm is trying to shift beliefs and values. These assumed organizational priorities rouse TM's culture buffer and identity capability. In these ways, Type 1 change ascends through the levels of analysis.

A Type 2 macro-content change might introduce new performance appraisal dimensions capturing the extent to which activities are fully vetted by the firm's legal counsel. Our model holds that such a change creates a meso context in which TM's standards/justice buffer is compromised, generating uncertainty and anxiety as individual competency is threatened. Even in the absence of newly implemented formal processes, novel performance appraisal elements often necessitate a change in employees' daily practices as they move projects through legal examination, causing a loss of consistency and, by extension, threatening sensemaking. That is, the patterns of work and the ability to make sense of environmental contingencies are shifted to accommodate new performance measures. With legal approval now being explicitly evaluated, ethical beliefs and values are increasingly perceived as a high priority in the organization, raising the possible loss of TM's culture buffer and threatening the identity capability. The culture buffer is impacted as employees become anxious to reconcile their assumed surroundings to the ethical values they believe the firm now privileges. Finally, identities are reevaluated with ethical implications in mind. Type 2 change can thus descend and ascend through the meso and micro levels of analysis.

The content of Type 3 change is beliefs and values, which jeopardizes TM's culture buffer and individual identity capability. Various organizational communications such as speeches, mission statements, and workshops are methods of instilling, for instance, a heightened ethical climate. Espoused beliefs and values indirectly communicate a new or reoriented set of standards/justice upon which individual performance will be measured. Perceived alterations to standards/justice threaten the individual capability for competency, ostensibly causing employees to feel anxious about embracing ethical outcomes as an indicator of competence. With no specific operational support to achieve these standards, employees naturally seek to adjust their work patterns. This accordingly spurs uncertainty and anxiety about consistency and sensemaking. Thus, even though no performance measurement or operational content is altered, the effect of Type 3 change redounds in descending fashion to the existential buffers and individual capabilities directly associated with Type 1 and Type 2 change.

The primary effects of the three types of change can directionally be traced horizontally across the model. However, to assume that the effects of content change are localized is naive. The strands of individual life within organizations are so interwoven that change in one domain indirectly but almost inevitably impacts other domains (Caldwell, 2005). This fact

underscores long-standing admonitions about the unintended consequences of change (Merton, 1936).

The logic supporting change as iteratively interdependent leads to a final assertion: Individual reactions to organizational change are inversely encompassing. As the depth of change increases, supportive changes at lower levels become more important. By this we are not prescribing a sequence wherein organizations are advised to move through all three types in lock-step. An organization might introduce a single, episodic, Type 1 operational change with no intention of enacting other types, it may progress deductively by beginning with Type 3 change and then delving into operational and measurement elements, or it may proceed inductively, from Type 1 to Type 3, or from tangible to intangible. We assert that to support the thrust of change and mitigate uncertainty and anxiety, organizations enacting Type 2 change should modify operations accordingly, and firms enacting Type 3 change should modify operations and performance measurements accordingly. In this fashion, the importance of change is stressed throughout the system (Eby et al., 2000).

Although the content of Type 2 change and Type 3 change can be isolated, their nature is inversely encompassing, as lower levels of analysis reinforce higher level changes. Beliefs and values can be targeted, but without supporting performance systems and operations, the tangible elements of the organization remain static, undermining the applicability of the change. Using the example developed in this section, if increased ethical thinking and acting are desired, introducing procedural and evaluative systems will reinforce this change (Locke, 2006).

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article began with the assertion that change research has been hampered by three fundamental issues: (a) The intent and impact of change has often been arranged into discrete categories that do not fully acknowledge its reach; (b) a macro orientation to change has diluted the role of the individual, and (c) an inclination to depict change as fundamentally rational has limited the incorporation of emotions. These three issues may help to explain why more than 50% of change efforts fail (Bovey & Hede, 2001). In line with this point, Siegal et al. (1996) present a list of distressing statistics about scholarship's contribution to managing change initiatives, ending with a call to reorient change research to "human systems issues" (p. 55). This article is a response to that call.

The model presented in the preceding is a systemic conceptualization of individual resistance to change rooted in the common theme of loss. By introducing loss we address the first issue, as this construct transcends content, context, and process to interface directly with the breath and scope of change initiatives. By using TM to inform the discussion of loss we address the second issue, developing a systemic view of reactions to change based upon individual attempts to sustain their existential buffers. Finally, the third issue is addressed

by aligning loss into its underlying cognitive and affective components, ensuring that emotions are fully incorporated in the model.

Organizational change is all too often painted in broad brushstrokes oriented toward the bold strategic thrust and ignoring the complexity exposed by multiple levels of analysis (Caldwell, 2005). Ultimately, the success or failure of change must account for the individuals as well as the organization in aggregate. For change agents, the primary value of this model is in understanding that the content of an initiative is less important than the psychological bulwark it invades. From executives to supervisors, the recognition and appreciation of what employees are concerned about losing in change—their consistency, standards/justice, and culture—comprise a critically important leadership variable. Mitigating such loss becomes the basis upon which employees adjust capabilities to organizational demands, facilitating satisfaction and success.

The causal factors involved in accentuating positive reactions and mitigating negative ones provide practical guidance for change agents. Supplying sufficient time for the iterative interdependencies to cascade through the levels of analysis is helpful because it allows employees to address the loss inherent in change. Without this opportunity, the uncertainty and anxiety are often construed with the change itself, resulting in negative reactions. When change is proposed, managers must also strive to understand how employees will foresee their individual capabilities being influenced. During this process, management must not be overly optimistic (Fronza & Moriceau, 2008) or deny that loss will occur, as loss is inevitable. In response, effective management can reduce, mitigate, and ameliorate uncertainty and anxiety by reassuring employees that certainty and TM's existential buffers and individual capabilities will be reestablished. Through this process, employees are given time to evaluate not only whether they are ready to change, but whether the organization has processes in place to ensure it is ready to change (Eby et al., 2000). Involving employees and obtaining feedback throughout the process enhances the possibility that loss will be seen as less likely or well enough planned to limit unproductive cognition or emotion. Although similar recommendations have emerged within the change literature, none has located the primary causal mechanism.

We argue that successful or failed change efforts can, in part, be explained by managerial neglect of the core causal factors, as well as the iteratively interdependent and inversely encompassing nature of change. Those designing change can have greater control over these variables and can provide the clarity necessary to avoid false assumptions that cause ascent, descent, or both. Indeed, by relying on a mixed-effect model, how variables interact across levels of analysis becomes increasingly clear, permitting a more accurate assessment of exactly how change progresses.

Arising from this model are several areas for future study. First, it is designed to bolster Grant and Wade-Benzoni's (2009) attempt to cultivate an interest in Terror Management

Theory. Although TM appears removed from life in organizations because of its focus on mortality, the model presented herein could spark interest in its relevance and applicability. Indeed, a number of empirically verifiable propositions flow from this article that could lend intellectual coherence to relevant motivational systems prevalent during change.

A promising area for future research is in individual difference. We previously argued that people react differently to content change as a result of their subjective assessments about the likelihood and degree of loss entailed (Eby et al., 2000). In any given organization, some will interpret a change as welcome and positive, generating readiness, while others will interpret it as threatening and negative, generating resistance (Raelin & Raelin, 2006). Attached to this assessment are the individual's feelings about whether he or she is capable of effectively adapting to the change (Cataldo et al., 2009). A host of other variables, such as openness to change, risk preference, tolerance to ambiguity, and perceived ambiguity (Randall & Procter, 2008), may moderate individual reactions and should be explored further.

However, future conceptualization of the model presented here should take into account that organizational cultures can be functional, dysfunctional, or anywhere in between. Additionally, it is impossible to completely disentangle culture from politics.

Although the literature on culture and politics is vast, we refer to Baum's classic 1998 paper "Organizational Politics Against Organizational Culture: A Psychoanalytic Perspective." We do so because Baum's analysis—like that presented herein and inherent in TM—privileges the individual emotion. He makes a convincing case that individuals unconsciously yearn for intimacy at work. The resulting caring environment provides a way for them to deal with shifting and challenging occupational realities. However, organizational politics occasion almost debilitating anxiety in employees because of their often capricious nature. This leads employees to become emotionally detached and causes the quality of their work to suffer.

We wholeheartedly agree with Baum's analysis. A toxic culture created by rampant politics is unarguably delirious. However, this logic is not contradictory, but rather complementary, to the model presented herein. TM would argue dysfunctional culture fails to provide a needed existential buffer, which compromises the individual capability of identify, which certainly could lead to emotional withdraw. Baum is describing an extant situation where anxiety is created by counterproductive politics. TM helps explain the emotional withdrawal but locating it cause in the compromised existential buffer.

This opens up a series of questions for future validation. First, does emotional distancing accompany identity crisis during Type 3 change? Second, are Type 3 attempts to reduce anxiety-inducing politics viewed as comforting as opposed to threatening, as TM would predict? Finally, how does pervasive politics impact iterative interdependence as change permeates across boundaries?

The model also introduces a strong connection between reactions to change and affect. By announcing change, an affective reaction likely occurs that alerts workers to real or anticipated loss (George & Jones, 2001). We have argued here that subjective assessments confirming a threat to TM's existential buffers will probably cause uncertainty and anxiety due to compromising individual capabilities, in a cascading fashion. However, affective reactions will vary in style and intensity depending on the degree that people believe their prized individual capabilities will be threatened. While such connections can be hypothesized (and have been by George & Jones, 2001), only through direct empirical tests can affect be related to change. Indeed, affect may be a means of translating environmental cues to worker reactions to change.

Given the inherent complexity of the multiple variables that interact during change scenarios, it is hoped that this article motivates scholars to return to the thick description advocated by contextualist scholars of change (Caldwell, 2005). While contemporary research is quick to resort to quantitative methods, statistical analysis cannot sufficiently capture the interrelated and inherently complex nature of change.

The concept of loss, as well as the uncertainty and anxiety it generates, is elemental to human existence in a world that is perpetually shifting. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find that loss permeates organizational change. The model presented herein outlines the theoretical and applicable implications of such a proposition by focusing on the human systems that may be at the root of management's tepid record of explaining individual reactions to organizational change.

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