

The Effect of Leaders' Threat Communication on Employees' Resistance to Organisational Change: Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy: An Empirical Evidence

Dereje Abi Damtew*, Abeba Beyene Mengistu**

Abstract

This study aimed at examining the effect of leaders' visionary communication on employees' resistance to organisational change. The data was collected from 675 randomly selected employees working in five public enterprises in Ethiopia. Confirmatory factor analysis using structural equation modelling was conducted to confirm validity of measurement instruments; reliability was tested by generating Cronbach's alpha values. The hypotheses were tested based on the results from multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed that the visionary communication of leaders during organisational change has a significant and negative effect on employees' resistance to change, implying that leaders who use visionary communication are likely to face less resistance from employees. Moreover, the moderation effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between visionary communication and employees' resistance to change is found to be significant, implying that a higher level of employees' change-related self-efficacy makes the effect of visionary communication on employees' resistance to change stronger. The findings of this study contribute to making the change literature more comprehensive, revealing this new relationship; recommend change leaders to use visionary communication as an effective mechanism to reduce employees' resistance during organisational change; and shows the moderating role of change-related self-efficacy in making the effect of visionary communication on employees' resistance to change stronger. Limitations and suggestions for further studies are forwarded.

Keywords: Visionary Communication, Resistance to Change

Introduction

Nowadays, broader and faster changes are happening everywhere, impacting the success or failure of an organisation (Matos et al., 2012). Despite all the efforts to implement changes successfully, a larger rate of implementation failure has been reported by companies around the world (Mckay, 2012). Many factors contribute to the failure of organisational change implementation; however, the critical contributing factor is the mismanagement of the human element, which is mostly recognised as employee resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Georgalis et al., 2015; del Val et al., 2003; Mathews et al., 2016). Good ideas and best practices fail due to resistance to change (Johansson et al., 2014).

Resistance to change is a socially constructed phenomenon that is created and conceptualised through interaction and communication (Dijk & Dick, 2009). As a result, communication has been intensively discussed as a relevant dimension in the change management literature, more specifically as a strategy for managing resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Serban & Iorga, 2016; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Communication is important in creating change readiness, reducing uncertainty, and is a key factor for gaining commitment to changes (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). Communication as a tool

* Lecturer, Addis Ababa University, School of Commerce, Ethiopia. Email: dereje.abi@aau.edu.et

** Associate Professor, Addis Ababa University, School of Commerce, Ethiopia. Email: abeba.beyene@aau.edu.et

within the context of change has been used as a means to inform, involve, and motivate change participants with greater commitment (Matos et al., 2012). However, the change management practice focused only at providing more information to reduce resistance to change with the notion that “the more information employees receive about the change, the less they will resist it” (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). This claim is based on the premise that employees’ resistance to change is irrational and is a result of confusion and uncertainty about the details of the change. However, employees resist change for convincing reasons, not merely because of lack of information and misunderstanding about the change (Oreg, 2006). Therefore, providing more information gives more reasons to resist the change, if employees believe that they have something to lose due to the change. This created a debate on why employees resist change. Following this debate, Oreg (2006) tested the relationship between information and resistance to change and found a non-linear relationship, that is, more information does not result in less resistance to change. He noted that the manner in which information is communicated with the respective content of information appeared to be more relevant to affect resistance to change, than the mere existence of the information itself. The study suggested the need to identify modes of change communication which are effective in reducing resistance to change, though it did not address which mode of communication reduces employees’ resistance to change.

Therefore, the current study follows the claim that employees’ resistance to change is rational and needs specific modes of communications with the relevant contents to reduce it. As a result, threat communication is identified and its effect on employees’ resistance to change was tested. Moreover, the moderation effect of employees’ change-related self-efficacy was investigated to see how the intervention of this variable changes the main effect.

Methods of the Study

The aim of this study is to test the causal relationship between leaders’ threat communications and employees’ resistance to change. To test this relationship, it was felt that the explanatory research design would be best in which the cause-and-effect relationship between variables is to be tested. Moreover, it is a two-step

longitudinal study in which data about the subjects of this study were collected in two steps. In the first step, data was collected about the leaders’ threat communication and the employees’ change-related self-efficacy. In the second step, data about employees’ resistance to change was collected. The longitudinal survey helps control the common method bias from a cross-sectional survey through separation between the measures of the predictor and the criterion variables (Podsakof et al., 2003). This means that a time delay between measures of variables (known as temporal separation) is introduced, so that it reduces the respondents’ ability and/or motivation to recall previous answers to answer subsequent questions (Podsakof et al., 2012). Temporal separation allows a previously recalled information to leave the short-term memory (Podsakof et al., 2012). This action reduces the artificially inflated correlation between variables (Johnson et al., 2011). There is no agreement on what the appropriate delay for a given relationship should be; three weeks is set to be used for the current study based on the findings of Johnson et al. (2011), that is, a three-week delay reduced correlation between variables by 43%.

The data for this study was collected from 675 employees of seven public enterprises in Ethiopia. A proportionate number of respondents were selected from employees of these companies using the random lottery method. Data was collected through a survey, using a self-administered close-ended questionnaire on a seven-point Likert scale. Confirmatory factor analysis using structural equation modelling was applied in checking the model fit and instrument validity. For this purpose, comparative fit index (CFI); goodness-of-fit index (GFI); and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used. The reliability of the measures was also checked using Cronbach’s alpha with the sample employees. Hypotheses were tested using hierarchical linear regression, in which different variables are added to the model in separate blocks. Using this two-step procedure helps avoid the interactions between the measurement model and the structural model; consequently, the true relationships between constructs will be shown (Bagozzi, 2012).

Theory, Empirical Evidence, and Hypotheses

The theory used to explain the relationship between threat communication and employees’ resistance to

organisational change is the fear appeal theory. According to the fear appeal theory, the subsequent actions and responses to the threat depends on the extent to which the threat is perceived as serious and whether individuals are susceptible to the threat or not.

In the evaluation process, individuals who believe that there is a low perceived threat ignore the fear appeal as irrelevant. However, if individuals believe that there is a serious threat and they are susceptible to the threat, they tend to be scared and are motivated to take any possible action to reduce their fear, either to control the danger or control the fear itself. The decision to control the danger or the fear itself depends on their perceived self-efficacy (Witte, 1992). This means that individuals who are exposed to a threat-based message make two different cognitive evaluations. First, they evaluate the extent to which the message is threatening (the vulnerability of an individual to the threat and severity of that same threat). Once assumed to be threatening, the second appraisal is where individuals evaluate whether they have the ability to use certain strategies (self-efficacy) to remove or reduce the danger from the threat (Witte, 1992).

This theory is specifically applied to explain the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to change. Self-efficacy is among the conditions for fear appeal communication to bring behavioural change. The impact of threat communication in creating adaptive behaviour is a function of self-efficacy of the recipients of the message (Rogers, 1983).

Change agents need to communicate the consequences of no change through threat communication. Threat communication deals with creating fear of remaining stagnant, a negative consequence one faces for a choice to maintain the status quo. One of the key activities in the organisational change is to create a feeling of discrepancy, a belief that some change is needed (Armenakis et al., 2007). A feeling of discrepancy creates a sense of urgency in the change participants (Kotter, 1995). Threat communication in the current study addresses that there is discrepancy between the organisations' current state and what it ought to be, and possible consequences if it remains stagnant without response to the discrepancy. It communicates that a change is needed through demonstrating the existing discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, and the danger the employees face if they maintain the status quo.

Threat communication has been used to bring behavioural changes in the society for different societal issues, like climate change, HIV AIDS prevention, breast cancer examination, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, car accident, insurance, and other public problems. Fear appeal is a means of forcing individuals to pay attention to the message through creating an emotional state interrupting the cognitive process (Tanner et al., 2013). According to Janis (1967), arousal of an emotional state of fear is necessary for the fear appeal communication to be effective in influencing behaviours. It is the fear reduction process that leads the recipient of the message towards the desired behaviour.

Threat communication as a means of persuasion reminds people about the consequences of their behaviour (Gjalt Jorn Y Peters, Ruiter & Kok, 2014). Threatening communication has been designed to evoke emotions aiming at diverting attention to the intervention with the assumption that participants would act rationally to the risk they are exposed to and in a self-protecting manner, which would result in desirable behaviour (Gjalt Jorn Ygram Peters et al., 2013). Increasing risk perception of the target population and achieving awareness of that risk would result in change in behaviour. Evoking strong emotion to the negative consequences of a given risky behaviour is the goal of threat communication (Gjalt Jorn Ygram Peters et al., 2013). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is forwarded.

Hypothesis 1: Change leaders' threat communication is negatively related to employees' resistance to organisational change.

Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy in the Relationship between Threat Communication and Employees' Resistance to Organisational Change

In threat communication, people facing a high perceived threat proceed to the evaluation of the perceived self-efficacy of the individual to cope with the threat as conditional variables (Witte & Allen, 2000). Communication of threat and the subsequent higher perceived threat leads to fear control if there is a low perceived coping appraisal. This is because individuals think that they cannot cope with the threat and tend to be frustrated and consequently prefer to be involved in fear

control than controlling the danger. When people believe that they are not able to execute the recommended action (i.e., low perceived self-efficacy), they develop an attitude that it is difficult to control the danger, and are motivated to find other fear control mechanisms, like eliminating their fear through denial (justifying that the risk does not exist or will not happen to them), defensive avoidance (not to think about the issue), or resistance to the message showing different reactions (Witte & Allen, 2000).

When people believe that they are able to implement the recommended action against the threat (high perceived self-efficacy), they are likely to accept the message and adopt the recommended message as a means to control the danger (Witte & Allen, 2000). A high level of threat and self-efficacy increases acceptance and reduces rejection of messages (Witte, 1992).

When perception of efficacy is strong for a given threat, individuals tend to be involved in danger control response (cognitively controlling the danger, such as involvement in positive responses about the threat and accepting the recommended response) (Witte, 1992). On the other hand, individuals with a stronger perception of threat with lower efficacy are likely to be involved in fear control responses (their emotions dominate their thoughts and deny their perceived susceptibility) (Witte, 1992; Witte et al., 2001). This means that individuals who develop a thought that they cannot control a threat from happening give up controlling the danger and shift to threat control, consequently failing to accept the recommended response. Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is forwarded.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to organisational change would be stronger for employees with a higher perceived self-efficacy, as opposed to those with a lower perceived self-efficacy.

Results of the Study

Validity of One-Factor Measurement Model of Threat Communication

The threat communication construct consists of 11 measurement items. The CFA result of the proposed one-factor congeneric measurement model satisfies the goodness-of-fit (GOF) statistics values of acceptable standards (CFI = .979, SRMR = .0203, RMSEA = .076),

indicating admissible convergent validity (Table 1). The standardised factor loadings (SFL) are also 0.7 and above, indicating a satisfactory value to claim a model fit (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Summary of GOF Indices for Threat Communication

Model	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	P-value
Threat Communication	.979	.0203	.076	.000

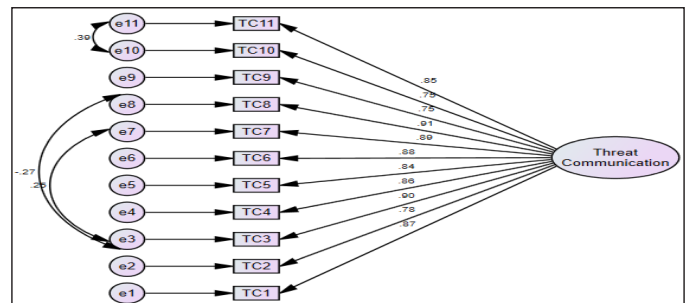


Fig. 1: One-Factor Measurement Model of Threat Communication (Errors Co-Varied)

Employees' resistance to change construct consists of 15 measurement items. The CFA result of the proposed one-factor congeneric measurement model revealed that goodness-of-fit (GOF) statistics values satisfy acceptable standards (CFI = .962, SRMR = .0297, RMSEA = .076), indicating admissible convergent validity (Table 2). The standardised factor loadings (SFL) are also 0.7 and above, indicating a satisfactory value to claim a model fit (Fig. 2).

Table 2: Summary of GOF Indices for Employees' Resistance to Change

Model	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	P-Value
Employees' Resistance to Change	.962	.0297	.076	.000

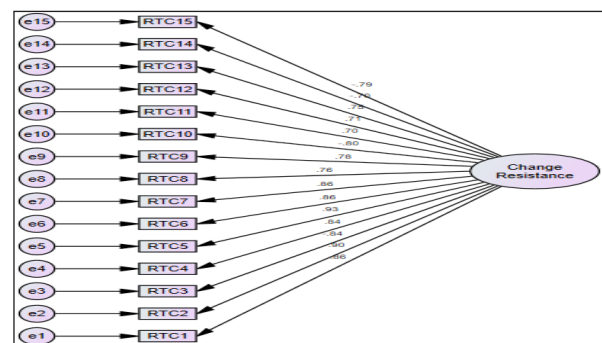


Fig. 2: One-Factor Measurement Model of Employees' Resistance to Change

One-Factor Measurement Model of Change-Related Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy construct consists of four measurement items. The CFA result of the proposed one-factor congeneric measurement model of self-efficacy (Table 3) revealed that goodness-of-fit (GOF) statistics values satisfy acceptable standards (CFI = .999, SRMR = .0078, RMSEA = .022), indicating admissible convergent validity. The standardised factor loadings (SFL) are also 0.7 and above, indicating a satisfactory value to claim a model fit (Fig. 3).

Table 3: Summary of GOF Indices Self-Efficacy

Model	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	P-Value
Self-Efficacy	.999	.0078	.022	.000

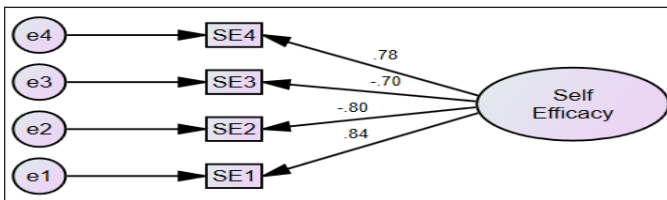


Fig. 3: One-Factor Measurement Model of Employees' Self-Efficacy Construct

Instruments Reliability

After the validity of instruments are evaluated and validated, the reliability of same instrument is checked. The purpose of reliability is to test how many items measuring the construct are consistent and stable to measure what it is intended to measure (Hair et al., 2010). Reliability ensures trustworthiness of the measurement instrument. A common statistical method of assessing reliability is evaluating internal consistency (called Cronbach's alpha) of the instrument (Churchill, 1979). Higher alpha values indicate higher reliability of measurements. A reliability of 0.70 or higher, with 0.60 as the lowest threshold (obtained from substantial sample) (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988) however, lack both empirical support and a theoretical rationale. We used a Monte Carlo procedure to systematically vary sample size, number of variables, number of components, and component saturation (i.e., the magnitude of the correlation between the observed variables and the components, is acceptable. The lowest threshold is acceptable when measurement items are few (Field, 2005). As indicated in

the Table 4, the Cronbach's alpha values are higher than the minimum threshold and the reliability of instruments for all the constructs is acceptable.

Table 4: Instrument Reliability

Research Variable (Major Constructs)	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Threat Communication	11	.965
Resistance to Change	15	.965
Self-Efficacy	4	.904

Effect of Leaders' Threat Communication on Employees' Resistance to Change

It was predicted that leaders' threat communication would negatively be related to employees' resistance to organisational change. In testing the relationship between variables in the current study, employees' managerial position, age, gender, and educational level are controlled so as not to create differences in the relationship due to their intervention. The results are presented in Table 5.

The results showed that the effect of threat communication on employees' resistance to organisational change is statistically significant and the two variables have a negative relationship ($b = -.58$, $s.e. = .03$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .31$). Moreover, R^2 value of .31 indicated that 31% of the variation in employees' resistance to change is explained by variations in threat communication. Therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Table 5: Regression Results for Resistance to Change as a Dependent Variable

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	.01 (.09)	.03 (.07)	-.00 (.08)	-.038 (.07)
Sex	.14 (.14)	.19 (.12)	.13 (.12)	.155 (.12)
EduL	-.17 (.18)	-.10 (.15)	-.06 (.16)	-.059 (.16)
MgtL	.48** (.23)	.28 (.19)	.48** (.20)	.42** (.20)
TC		-.58*** (.03)	-.51*** (.03)	-.46*** (.03)
SE			.15*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TC * SE				-.06** (.03)
R ²	.01	.31	.19	.33
ΔR ²	.01	.30	.02	.01
F	1.5	60.12	25.54	46.44
ΔF	1.52***	291.85	15.55***	5.49***

Note: N = 675 (pairwise). Dependent variable: Employees' resistance to change, Standard errors in parenthesis. ***p < .001 (two-tailed), **p < .05 (two-tailed), TC = threat communication, SE = self-efficacy, eduL = educational level, MgtL = management level

Moderation Effect of Self-Efficacy in Threat Communication–Employees' Resistance to Change Relationship

It was hypothesised that the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to organisational change would be stronger for employees with a higher perceived self-efficacy, as opposed to those with a lower perceived self-efficacy. As shown in Table 5, the overall regression model that includes the effects from the predictor and the moderator is significant (p < .001). Moreover, the interaction term is significant (b = -.06, s.e. = .02, p < .001), explaining additional variance in resistance to change.

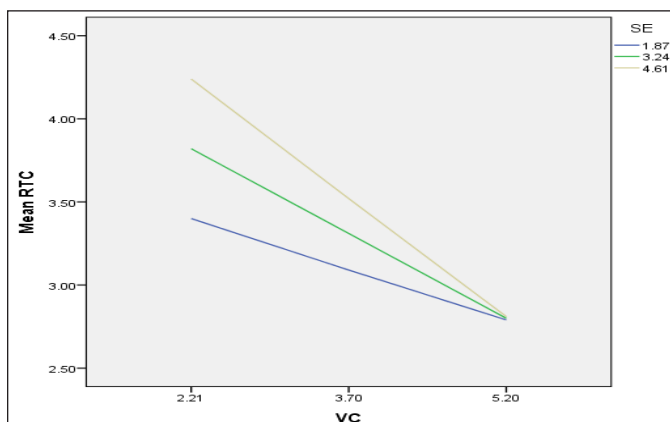


Fig. 4: Threat Communication and Self-Efficacy Interaction Effect on Resistance to Change

Results of slop analysis also showed that the interaction effect of self-efficacy and threat communication on employees' resistance to change is significant. As indicated in Fig. 4, the slope appears to be increasing as we move from a low level of self-efficacy to a high level of self-efficacy. Moreover, the interaction effect of self-

efficacy in the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to change is significant at all the slopes (b = -.21, s.e. = .04, p < .001 at 1 SD below the mean; b = -.34, s.e. = .03, p < .01 at the mean; and b = -.48, s.e. = .04, p < .01 at 1 SD above the mean). Therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Discussion of Results

Effect of Threat Communication on Employees' Resistance to Organisational Change

The regression analysis about the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to change is found to be statistically significant (P < .001) and negative (coefficient = -.58). Consequently, the hypotheses that proposed a significant and negative relationship between the two variables is supported, implying that more threat communication results in lower employees' resistance to change. This means when the leader communicates to employees about the threats they face at a state of no change or if the change fails, resistance to change will decline. This is because fear of negative consequences employees face if they maintain status quo motivates them to have less resistance to the change. They do not resist change once they are told about the negative consequence of maintaining the status quo.

Result of this study is consistent with the fear appeal theory and empirical evidence. Fear appeal theory states that fear appeal messages are to scare people by describing the terrible things that will happen to them if they do not do what the message recommends (Rogers, 1983). Fear appeal as a persuasive message scares someone with the intent to motivate individuals to act against the threat (Schutz, 2013). Fear appeal message attempts to create behavioural change through communication of the negative consequences of failing to support the proposed action, which is signalled as a means of avoiding the negative impact (Dillard, 1994).

Armenakis and Harris (2009) suggested that fear appeal is highly relevant to change research and may be used in reducing employees' resistance to change. Change leaders communicate to change participants that staying stagnant has serious consequences to the interests of the organisation and employees. This arouses fear of maintaining the status quo and informs employees that

they are susceptible to the problem if they resist the planned change.

Employees' beliefs that a change is urgent and needed is among the reasons why change recipients support change efforts and consequently make the change successful and sustainable (Armenakis & Harris, 2009a). This is ensured through the leaders' communication that there is a significant gap between the current state at which the organisation is operating and what is expected of it for it to be competitive and survive in the dynamic environment.

Overall, this study is not about the role of reducing fear of change as a mechanism to reduce resistance to change as it was researched in the past. It is about how inducing fear of no change reduces resistance to change. It examined whether communication of the possible threat employees face if they maintain the status quo motivates them to have less resistance to the change. Accordingly, it was found that employees' resistance to change decreases once they are told about the negative consequences of maintaining the status quo (shown by a significant and negative effect of threat communication on employees' resistance to change). Communicating fear with strong threats therefore reduces employees' resistance to change.

Interaction Effect of Employees' Self-Efficacy in Threat Communication—Employees' Resistance to Change Relationship

It was hypothesised that the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to organisational change would be stronger for employees with a higher perceived self-efficacy, as opposed to those with a lower perceived response efficacy. For this purpose, the interaction of threat communication and self-efficacy on employees' resistance to change was tested. The result revealed that the interaction effect is negative and significant at all levels of self-efficacy, but stronger at a higher level of self-efficacy. This means that the higher the employee's self-efficacy, the stronger the relationship between threat communication of leaders and employees' resistance to change. The slope of interaction (Fig. 4) also showed that the moderation effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between threat communication and employees' resistance to change becomes stronger at a high level of self-efficacy than a low level of response efficacy.

The finding of this study is supported by the fear appeal theory and empirical evidence. According to fear appeal theory (Rogers, 1983), individuals' belief that there is a serious threat and they are susceptible to the threat makes them scared and will motivate them to take any possible action to reduce their fear, either to control the danger or control the fear itself. The decision to control the danger or the fear itself depends on their perceived coping appraisal, called self-efficacy (Witte, 1992). This means that once the message is assumed to be threatening, individuals evaluate whether they have the ability to use such strategies (self-efficacy) to remove or reduce the danger from the threat (Witte, 1992). Individuals' self-efficacy is among the conditions for fear appeal communication to bring behavioural changes. The impact of threat communication in creating adaptive behaviour is a function of self-efficacy of the recipients of the message (Rogers, 1983).

When people believe that they are able to implement the recommended action against the threat (high perceived self-efficacy), they are likely to accept the message and adopt the recommended message as a means to control the danger (Witte & Allen, 2000). A high level of threat, supported by high self-efficacy, increases acceptance and reduces rejection of messages (Lewis, Watson & White, 2001).

Based on these theoretical explanations, empirical evidence, and the findings of this study, it is possible to claim that employees' self-efficacy moderates the relationship between the leaders' threat communication and the employees' resistance to change. Therefore, it is important for change leaders to make sure that employees have a good level of self-efficacy, to strengthen the effect of threat communication in reducing employees' resistance to change.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations. First, the data used in this study was collected from the Ethiopian public enterprises, which may have a specific organisational culture and management system. Due to the fact that they are owned by the public and are under the supervision of the government, the leadership styles, modes of communications, and other change management methods

might be different from privately owned companies. It will not be possible to generalise if the relationship between variables of the current study would be altered for the private sector. Therefore, it may be difficult to generalise the results found in this study to other private companies. It would increase the generalisability of the results if the data were also collected from private companies in the country. Subsequent studies may be needed to ensure external validity of the results in this study.

Second, the data for this study was collected in Ethiopia, which is known for its intermediate uncertainty avoidance culture (Hofstede, 1991). Though there are scholarly critics of the Hofstede cultural framework, it is widely used in organisational analysis (Casey et al., 2015). The Hofstede cultural dimensions of collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991) affect the innovative behaviour of organisations (Starren, Hornikx & Luijters, 2013). This means that the differences in culture may affect change behaviours of employees, and so, their resistance to change. Thus, the results of this study may not be generalised to countries with a different national culture. Future studies using other samples make the study more valid.

Suggestions for Further Study

First, the current study uses resistance to change as an individually and psychologically based single higher order variable. However, the tripartite model of resistance to change is the predominantly used view in change literature (Georgalis et al., 2015). This tridimensional construct comprising affective, cognitive, and behavioural components (Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000) gives a more comprehensive view of the subject and is used to measure the multi-dimensions of resistance to organisational change. Treating each of the dimensions of resistance to organisational change and examining their relationship with the leaders' threat communication make the study more comprehensive and help leaders know which dimension of resistance to change is more related to threat communication in dealing with resistance to change.

Second, this study was conducted in the public organisations' context, which may have differences in the leadership styles and modes of communication the leaders use in managing organisational change. Therefore, conducting a similar study in the private organisations'

context is suggested to improve external validity of this study.

Practical and Theoretical Implications of the Study

This study observed the complexity and multi-faceted nature of resistance to organisational change. It is affected by many factors. For this purpose, the study tries to examine employees' resistance to change, integrating it to two other variables: threat communication (predictor of employees' resistance to change) and employees' change-related self-efficacy (moderating variable). This integrated study makes the literature much more comprehensive and helps practitioners see the complex nature of employees' resistance to change and set appropriate mechanisms to deal with it.

Results of this study implied that the theoretical understanding of employees' resistance to change and factors affecting it go beyond the existing literature and need the integration of more variables and scenarios. This moves the literature one step further, revealing that specific modes of communication of leaders could affect resistance to change than the generic role of communication which was addressed in previous literatures. The examination of threat communication and its relationship with resistance to change moderated by employees' change-related self-efficacy shows a much more complex picture than earlier studies which depicted the relationship between resistance to change and the generic form of communication.

In addition to the direct effect of threat communication on employees' resistance to change, the moderation effect of self-efficacy between threat communication and employees' resistance to change was examined, which revealed a new conditional relationship between the leaders' modes of communication and the employees' resistance to change, which helps the change management literature conceptualise the subject differently and comprehensively.

Taken together, this study implied the need-to-know interaction of variables through which change leaders work towards reducing employees' resistance to change, for the successful implementation of the change. More specifically, the way leaders communicate to followers during the change and the level of employees' self-efficacy at times of change are important variables that

need attention in managing employees' resistance to organisational changes.

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