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## Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice

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## Resistant, Ready or Engaged – with What Change? A Review and Transformative Research Agenda

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### ABSTRACT


Over the past twenty-five years the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM) has been an important platform for advancing our understanding of how employees orient themselves toward organizational change. In this paper, we provide a critical overview of studies published in the JCM addressing readiness for change, resistance to change and employees' engagement over the past 25 years. Our synthesis reveals that readiness, resistance, and engagement are relational, dynamic, and contextually embedded processes. Rather than viewing readiness, resistance, and engagement as separate or opposing states, the journal's contributions highlight their interrelatedness as regards how employees make sense of, negotiate, and act upon change initiatives. After critically assessing these concepts from the perspectives of agency and change, we conclude by outlining a transformative future research agenda that revolves around the question of what kinds of changes the individual/manager of the twenty-first century needs to be ready for, resist and/or engage in. In sum, there is a need to reconsider our agency and relationship to change.

### MAD statement

This paper makes a difference by synthesizing 25 years of research from the *Journal of Change Management* to demonstrate that readiness, resistance, and engagement are not static states, but rather dynamic, relational and contextually embedded processes. By reframing these concepts through the lenses of agency and change, we challenge binaries and show how employees actively negotiate change. The paper sets out a research agenda to help researchers and practitioners in today's turbulent organizational and societal landscapes, where it is more critical than ever to discern what changes to resist, be ready for and engage with.

### KEYWORDS

Change management; resistance to change; change readiness; employee engagement

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## Introduction

Organizations change. In private organizations, change is enacted by a variety of corporate events, such as the decision to ally or acquire (Capron & Mitchell, 2012) or the need to hand the family firm over to a successor (Handler, 1990). Change is also triggered by external pressures, including geopolitics, natural disasters, or changes in markets. In public sector organizations, as in the example of health care, change is planned to ensure personalized care (Corbett et al., 2025) or to pursue efficiency in resource allocation (Maynard, 1994). In short, regardless of the nature of the organization or the trigger, change is an unavoidable part of organizational life.

When looking at how organizational change is managed, it appears that the individuals, the groups or even the entire organization are not passive change recipients (Oreg et al., 2011). Even when carefully planned, change brings uncertainty that may disrupt organizations and individuals' daily lives (Allen et al., 2007). Organizational change literature highlights that change arouses cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions from employees that may either support or hinder a change program.

Employees' resistance to change has attracted a great deal of attention in change management research to better understand the consequences of change upon individuals, groups and the organization (Oreg et al., 2011). Over time, scholarly interest has been placed on whether individuals or organizations are ready for change (change readiness) and employees' engagement as a tool to foster change. Taken together, change readiness, resistance to change and employees' engagement represent intertwined themes. This is also visible in the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM), which, over the past twenty-five years, has been an important platform for advancing our understanding of how employees orient themselves toward organizational change. The journal has published influential work on the concept of readiness for change (e.g. Holt & Vardaman, 2013; Vakola, 2013), resistance to change (e.g. Lines, 2004; van Dijk & van Dick, 2009) and on employee engagement in the context of change (e.g. Haudan & MacLean, 2001; Vardaman et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies illustrate the complexity of employee responses (from willingness and optimism to skepticism and opposition) but also show that such responses are rarely fixed or dichotomous. Instead, the collective JCM body of research posits readiness, resistance, and engagement as relational, dynamic, and contextually embedded processes that are central to how change unfolds.

The 25th Anniversary Special Issue offers the opportunity to pause, look back and reflect on 25 years of research on these important themes in the JCM. By looking back and synthesizing previous research, we aim to develop a research agenda that will hopefully ignite ongoing conversations, while spurring novel ones. We start by providing a review of articles published in JCM from 2000 to 2024 that have explored change resistance, readiness and employees' engagement during organizational change. In a second phase, we proceed to a critical analysis of how this literature connects to the concepts of agency and change, in order to identify gaps in the current literature, before closing with a transformative research agenda.

## Past Research on Change Readiness and Employee Engagement in JCM ('Taking Stock')

Over the past 25 years, the Journal of Change Management has published 32 articles focusing on the topics of resistance, readiness or engagement. In reviewing these articles, we were interested in disentangling the distinctive contribution of JCM on these topics. Table 1 provides an overview of these studies (listed in alphabetical order). Besides authors' information and year of publication, Table 1 categorizes articles along the following dimensions:

- **Focus:** CR (change readiness), RC (resistance to change), EE (employees' engagement).
- **Type of contribution:** Empirical, conceptual, review.
- **Level of analysis:** Individual, group, organization.
- **Unit of analysis:** Employees, managers, change agents
- **Trigger of change (or context):** event triggering change.
- **Key findings:** summary of findings and contributions.

Overall, Table 1 highlights that despite (10) conceptual papers, the majority of the articles are empirical (22). Change readiness stands out as a major topic (17 articles); relatively less attention has been devoted to resistance to change (nine articles) or employees' engagement (two articles). Four articles investigate a combination of two topics. An individual-level of analysis prevails (in 25 articles), though often in conjunction with an organizational level of analysis. Similarly, employees represent the oft-studied unit of analysis (19 articles). In addition to individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis, several JCM contributions approach readiness, resistance, and engagement through a practice lens, examining how orientations toward change are accomplished through situated activities (e.g. Cunha et al., 2013), discursive positioning (e.g. Grønvdal et al., 2024), and interactional practices (e.g. Endrejat et al., 2020).

Articles feature a variety of changes triggered by corporate events, including a merger (van Dijk & van Dick, 2009), also in conjunction with downsizing and outsourcing (Fuchs & Prouska, 2014). Change is further triggered by strategic reorientation (Lines, 2004), reforms (Bergström et al., 2014), or the introduction of gender quota (van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). Change is also connected to organizational crisis (Cunha et al., 2013) or ethical leadership (Moutousi & May, 2018). Change also involves social movements and civic engagement (Hartley, 2009). Taken together, these studies highlight that change is an unavoidable part of social and organizational life.

By looking closer at the studies, it appears that much of the work on change readiness published in JCM is grounded in the classic conceptualization by Armenakis et al. (1993): readiness is understood as a cognitive precursor to action, encompassing employees' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding both the necessity for change and the organization's capacity to enact it. Particularly between 2010 and 2020, several JCM contributions adopt this framework, either expanding or critiquing it. To this end, Vakola (2013) proposes a multilevel approach, spanning individuals, groups, and organizations, while Holt and Vardaman (2013) argue for an expanded conceptualization integrating psychological and structural factors. Amis and Aïssaoui (2013), in turn, provide an institutional perspective, showing how readiness is shaped by collective cognitions, power,



**Table 1.** An overview of JCM studies on change readiness, resistance and employees' engagement (2000–2024).

Author(s) & year	Type of contribution	Method	Focus	Trigger/Context of change	Level of analysis	Unit of analysis	Key findings
Caldwell (2013)	Conceptual (commentary)	Theoretical critique	CR	General organizational change	Individual & organizational	Employees	Challenges readiness assumptions; identifies boundary conditions; readiness is not always required
Gärtner (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical propositions	CR	General organizational change	Individual & organizational	Employees, culture	Mindfulness enhances readiness via flexibility, learning, openness at both individual and organizational levels.
Endrejat et al. (2020)	Empirical	Quantitative experiment	CR	Behavioural change interventions (workshops)	Group	Employees	Solution-focused communication elicits and sustains readiness; participatory interventions outperform lectures.
Sadaric & Skerlavaj (2023)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	Organizational change (various industries)	Individual (dyadic, leader-follow)	Employees, managers	Leader championing and prosocial sense-giving foster readiness via psychological need satisfaction; narratives matter.
Kirrane et al. (2017)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	Public sector organizational change	Individual	Employees	Psychological capital mediates link between management support and readiness; resources and support are key.
Gondo et al. (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical propositions	CR	General organizational change /strategic change	Individual	Employees	Readiness shaped by awareness of automatic behaviours; mindfulness enables authentic readiness beyond attitudes.
Grønvdal et al. (2024)	Empirical	Qualitative comparative case study (interviews)	RC & CR	Participatory intervention in nursing homes	Organizational/managerial	Line managers	Managers' reactions as discursive subject positioning; cannot be reduced to readiness/resistance dichotomy.
Vakola (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical propositions	CR	General organizational change	Individual, group, organizational	Employees, groups, organizations	Proposes multilevel readiness framework (micro, meso, macro); clarifies multidimensional, dynamic nature of readiness.
Grimolizzi-Jensen (2018)	Empirical	Quantitative experiment	CR	Organizational/job-related changes	Individual	Employees	Motivational interviewing increases readiness by addressing ambivalence; readiness as dynamic, not static.
Amis and Aissaoui (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical propositions based on an illustrative case	CR	School district consolidation	Organizational/Institutional	Organizations, constituents	Readiness emerges from institutional logics, discourse, and power, shaped collectively beyond individual cognition.
Øygarden and Mikkelson (2020)	Empirical	Qualitative case study	CR	Hospital ICT system introduction	Organizational/Group	Physicians, departments	Readiness fosters 'good translations' of management idea and mediates between strategic translation (top-down) and operative translation (local adaptation).



Neves (2009)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	New performance appraisal system (public)	Individual	Employees	Affective commitment mediates link between change appropriateness and turnover; self-efficacy reduces turnover.
Ferrari (2024)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR & RC	Hospital restructuring & merger	Individual	Healthcare workers	Change cynicism mediates readiness-outcomes link; cynicism can reduce anxiety and intention to quit.
Dzrzensky et al. (2012)	Empirical	Quantitative longitudinal survey	CR	Organizational change in German firm	Individual	Employees	Organizational identification predicts readiness; readiness mediates evaluation of change; coping resources moderate.
By (2007)	Empirical	Qualitative (interviews)	CR	Organizational change (UK tourism industry)	Individual & organizational	Managers	Proposes continuous readiness; adds implicit communication to readiness model; readiness as performance oriented.
Seggewiss et al. (2019)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	Manufacturing organizational change	Individual & group	Employees	Commitment predicts readiness only when commitment targets advocate change; highlights social dynamics.
Lyons et al. (2009)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	US Air Force organizational change	Individual	Military personnel	Leadership behaviours predict readiness; readiness varies by rank; aligns with Transtheoretical Model stages.
Gigliotti et al. (2019)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR	Restructuring & new leadership (restaurant chain)	Individual	Employees	Perceived organizational support increases readiness via trust; nonlinear effects with diminishing returns.
Holt and Vardaman (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical framework	CR	General organizational change	Individual & organizational	Employees, organizations	Expands readiness conceptualization: individual beliefs, structural context, multiple levels; integrated framework.
Klonek et al. (2014)	Empirical	Quantitative experiment	RC	Simulated change conversations	Dyadic/individual	Change agents and recipients	Resistance emerges in interaction; autonomy-restrictive behaviours provoke sustain talk; reciprocal dynamics matter.
Cunha et al. (2013)	Conceptual	Theoretical	RC	Organizational crises (BP oil spill)	Organizational/system	Organizations	Critiques mechanistic action – reaction views; resistance and change co-evolve via improvisation and semi-structures.
van den Brink and Benschop (2018)	Empirical	Qualitative case study	RC	Gender quotas in Dutch police	Organizational/group	Managers, officers	Resistance to quotas can be productive; surfaces inequalities, stimulates reflexivity; enables deeper cultural change.
Moutousi and May (2018)	Conceptual	Theoretical model building	RC	Organizational change with unethical leadership	Individual (leader – follower)	Followers, leaders	Unethical leadership triggers resistance; mediated by ethical ideologies, justice sensitivities; resistance can preserve integrity.
Lines (2004)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	RC	Strategic reorientation (telecom)	Individual & organizational	Employees	Participation reduces resistance, boosts commitment and goal achievement; cultural compatibility moderates.

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s) & year	Type of contribution	Method	Focus	Trigger/Context of change	Level of analysis	Unit of analysis	Key findings
van Dijk and van Dick (2009)	Empirical	Mixed method (qualitative interviews and quantitative survey)	RC	Law firm merger	Individual & dyadic	Employees, leaders	Resistance tied to identity threats; socially constructed via interactions; leaders/employees use self-enhancement.
Bergström et al. (2014)	Empirical	Qualitative case study	RC	Swedish Armed Forces reforms	Organizational	Managers	Cynicism part of sensemaking; paradoxification identifies contradictions between formal decisions and realities.
Turtut and Neuhaus (2020)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	RC	Career self-management	Individual	Employees	Dispositional resistance negatively affects career behaviours; mediated by self-efficacy, moderated by identification.
Burnes (2015)	Conceptual/historical review	Review	RC	General organizational change	Individual, group, organizational	Employees, organizations	Resistance is contextual, not innate; revisits Coch & French (1948); advocates multidimensional, historical view.
Fuchs and Prouska (2014)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR & RC	M&As, downsizing, outsourcing	Individual	Employees	Organizational, supervisor, coworker support fosters positive evaluations; participation mediates support – evaluation link.
Haudan and MacLean (2001)	Conceptual	Theoretical with illustrative case	EE	Organizational transformations (general)	Individual & organizational	Employees, leaders	Engagement is central to change success; leaders must engage themselves first; offers tools for engagement.
Hartley (2009)	Empirical	Qualitative study	EE	Civic disengagement & critique of HE	Organizational/ social movement	Faculty, admin, students	Grassroots leaders: sustain engagement; adapt ideologies strategically; coalition-building sustains movement.
Vardaman et al. (2024)	Empirical	Quantitative survey	CR & EE	Hospital digital patient handoffs	Individual	Nurses	Positive change history predicts acceptance via job embeddedness; attachment fosters engagement with change.

and discourse, while Øygarden and Mikkelsen (2020) tie readiness to translation processes, demonstrating how the transfer of management ideas into practice simultaneously generates and depends on readiness. Meanwhile, Gärtner (2013) and Gondo et al. (2013) connect readiness to mindfulness, presenting it not only as explicit beliefs but also as awareness of routines and capacities for reflexivity. Lastly, Grønvad et al. (2024) explicitly blur readiness and resistance, showing how change actors take up discursive subject positions that cannot be neatly categorized as one or the other.

In parallel, empirical studies reinforce these conceptual developments by identifying concrete antecedents and outcomes of change readiness. First, leadership emerges as a consistent driver. For example, Lyons et al. (2009) show in a military setting that change leadership from senior executives was the strongest predictor of readiness and that readiness evolved in stages resembling the transtheoretical model of change, a stage-based model that describes how individuals progress from precontemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance when adopting new behaviours. Sadarić and Škerlavaj (2023) demonstrate that leaders' narrative intelligence and prosocial sensegiving boosted follower readiness by satisfying psychological needs, while By (2007) argue that readiness should be seen as continuous rather than a 'one-off' precondition, highlighting the importance of leaders' implicit communication. Second, other studies highlight the role of perceived support. Kirrane et al. (2017) find that managerial support enhanced readiness via psychological capital, while Gigliotti et al. (2019) show that perceived organizational support fostered readiness through trust, though with diminishing returns at high levels. Third, identity and commitment also play important roles. Drzensky et al. (2012) find that organizational identification predicted readiness and positive change evaluations, while Seggewiss et al. (2019) show that commitment only translates into readiness when its target actively advocates for the change.

Emphasis on identity, support, and leadership connects to adjacent work on employees' resistance published in JCM. Early studies such as Lines (2004) demonstrate that participation reduces resistance, strengthens commitment, and improves change outcomes. van Dijk and van Dick (2009) provide a complementary perspective by showing that employees resist change in order to protect threatened work-based identities, while leaders interpret resistance through their own identity lenses. Such findings resonate with the change readiness literature in highlighting identity and relational processes as central to change reactions. Later resistance contributions further extend on these perspectives. For instance, Bergström et al. (2014) examine cynicism in the Swedish Armed Forces, showing how ironic and cynical talk can paradoxically expose contradictions between official change narratives and lived practice. Cunha et al. (2013) conceptualize resistance as improvisational practice within relations of power, while Burnes (2015) revisits Coch and French's foundational study to argue that resistance should be seen as contextual rather than irrational. In more recent years, van den Brink and Benschop (2018) show that resistance to gender quotas in the Dutch police surfaced inequalities and spurred reflexivity, while Moutousi and May (2018) argue that unethical leadership during change provokes resistance that serves as a moral safeguard. Turgut and Neuhaus (2020) add a dispositional dimension, showing that resistance as a personality trait predicts weaker career management behaviours, mediated by self-efficacy and moderated by identification. Readiness and resistance are not only conceptually adjacent, but also methodologically intertwined. Both literatures show a shift from treating employee

responses as static states to seeing them as enacted in practice and constantly evolving. To this end, Endrejat et al. (2020) use interaction coding to demonstrate how solution-focused communication elicits 'change talk,' which spreads readiness through motivational contagion. Grimolizzi-Jensen (2018) conducts an experiment showing that motivational interviewing increases readiness, treating it as a dynamic, malleable state. In a parallel methodological move, Klonek et al. (2014) apply sequential analysis to workplace conversations, showing that autonomy-restrictive leader behaviours triggered sustain talk (resistance), which in turn provokes more controlling leader responses, creating a cycle. Both readiness and resistance thus emerge not simply as internal dispositions but as interactional accomplishments, continuously produced and reproduced in communication between change agents and recipients.

Overall, readiness studies published in JCM center on willingness, while resistance studies revolve around protective or skeptical responses as well as paradox, and engagement papers emphasize the importance of employees' enthusiasm, involvement, and sense of attachment during change. Taking a closer look, in one of the earliest contributions, Haudan and MacLean (2001) frame engagement as the cornerstone of organizational transformation, arguing that leaders who connect employees' work to purpose and meaning unlock discretionary effort during change. Hartley (2009) explores engagement in the context of civic change initiatives in academia, showing how grassroots activism interacts with strategic adaptation. Vardaman et al. (2024) bring in the construct of job embeddedness, showing that employees who are more socially and psychologically embedded in their jobs are more likely to accept change. Relatedly, Fuchs and Prouska (2014) examine how different levels of organizational support and change participation shape employees' evaluations of change, demonstrating that engagement is mediated by perceived fairness and involvement. All in all, these papers suggest that engagement is conceptually linked to readiness, yet distinct in its emphasis on affective energy and attachment rather than cognitive appraisal alone.

In addition to the studies reviewed above, JCM has also published work that approaches employees' orientations toward change through the perspective of sense-making and emotional dynamics. This work is focused on how individuals and groups interpret, feel, and attribute meaning to change, and how these processes shape their engagement with or resistance to change efforts. For example, Santos de Souza and Chimenti (2024) examine how emotional dynamics underpin employees' evolving responses to change, while Meier and Ingerslev (2023) show how simulation-based practices support actors in making sense of uncertain futures and enacting change-related identities. These contributions argue that readiness, resistance, and engagement unfold not only as cognitive or behavioural states, but also as interpretive and affective accomplishments situated in broader relational and processual contexts. In so doing, they further our understanding of change dynamics.

Across the reviewed articles, readiness, resistance, and engagement are consistently shaped by contextual conditions. Yet, 'context' is conceptualized in multiple ways. In some studies, context is treated as relatively stable, captured through structural or situational features such as the type, scale, and pace of change, sector, or organizational crisis and reform (e.g. van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). In others, it is reflected in organizational and relational conditions, including leadership behaviours, histories of prior change, organizational and supervisor support, identity dynamics, and relations of power (e.g.

Sadarić & Škerlavaj, 2023). Quantitative studies typically operationalize these aspects of context as antecedent or moderating variables (e.g. change history, culture, or perceived support) (e.g. Vardaman et al., 2024), whereas qualitative studies treat context more as an unfolding, situated environment in which actors interpret and negotiate change demands (e.g. Grønvdal et al., 2024). Taken together, these contributions suggest that readiness, resistance, and engagement are not solely individual attitudes or behaviours but emerge within particular structural, relational, and temporal conditions. However, more should be done to fully capture the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship between context, action, and change that recent work has begun to foreground.

From a methodological standpoint, much of the research on readiness, resistance, and engagement relies on survey designs that operationalize context, leadership, identity or support as antecedent variables, thus conceptualizing employee orientations as stable individual cognitions rather than emergent, situated accomplishments. Conceptual papers further extend these arguments. In contrast, qualitative studies (e.g. Grønvdal et al., 2024) argue that resistance, readiness, and engagement are realized through dialogue, interaction, performative positioning and improvisation. Ethnographic and practiced-based approaches remain scarce, and this limits our understanding of how change processes develop over time and how employees' orientations evolve. Consequently, theories about change tend to reflect what can be assessed through self-reports rather than how people actually experience change.

The synthesis of readiness, resistance, and engagement research published in JCM reveals the following commonalities. All three streams emphasize that employee orientations toward change are relational, shaped by leadership, trust, identity, and participation. They are also dynamic, unfolding across time and interaction rather than fixed traits. Moreover, they are contextual, influenced by institutional logics, structural supports, and cultural conditions. Importantly, JCM has been at the forefront of challenging binaries: readiness is not always positive, as shown by Ferrari's (2024) finding that cynicism mediates its outcomes, while equally resistance is not always negative, as shown by studies portraying it as ethical, reflexive, or paradox-exposing (e.g. Moutousi & May, 2018; van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). Employee engagement, in turn, reinforces the idea that energy and meaning are as crucial as belief and efficacy. Together, these studies have broadened the concept of change readiness, challenged the notion of resistance to change, and connected with employee engagement, providing a more nuanced, processual understanding of how employees experience organizational change. Rather than viewing readiness, resistance, and engagement as separate or opposing states, the journal's contributions show their intertwined aspects in how employees make sense of, negotiate, and act upon change initiatives.

## **A Critical Assessment of Research on Change Readiness, Resistance and Engagement**

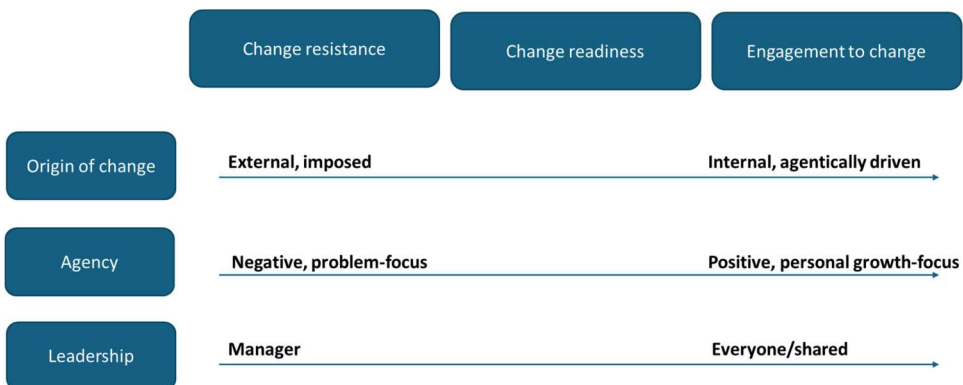
In this section, the academic study of readiness, resistance and engagement toward change is dissected via a critical analysis of research foci, while identifying blind spots and opportunities for future research. To this end, the three concepts are first critically assessed from the perspective of agency, and second, from the perspective of change.

### **Change Readiness, Resistance and Engagement from the Perspective of Agency**

Upon comparison, the concepts of change readiness, resistance to change and engagement toward change adopt different perspectives on how individuals, oftentimes employees, but also managers and executives, react to change. We have organized the analysis along three dimensions: (1) origin of change, as well as perspectives on (2) agency, and (3) leadership, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

To begin with, the concepts of change resistance, engagement and readiness relate differently to the origin of change, i.e. whether the impetus for change stems from external or internal origins. To this end, resistance to change represents situations where a change comes as a surprise, as it is either imposed upon the individual or triggered by external, societal or workplace circumstances. In contrast, building on the concept of employee engagement, an individual is engaged to change, when one eagerly, actively and agentically drives change, i.e. one is intrinsically motivated about the change and acts upon it. The concept of change readiness, in turn, co-exists between resistance and engagement toward change. It represents the state, wherein an individual is cognitively and emotionally ready for change, regardless of whether this change bears extrinsic or intrinsic origins.

Secondly, research on change resistance, readiness and engagement can be further placed into the broader spectrum of theorizing on agency. Broadly speaking, there are two perspectives to human agency. Building on economics, management scholars have adopted agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), which bears a ‘negative’ perspective on human agency (Ghoshal, 2005), considering individuals to be self-interested and rational, needing to be controlled. Similarly, psychology has traditionally focused on the problems that individuals face, e.g. stress or burnout. All the while, in social sciences (Bandura, 2006; Giddens, 1984), agency is considered to be an individual’s or collective’s un/intentional capability to act. Such a perspective adopts a growth and developmental perspective on agency, mirroring positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Analyzed against these perspectives, the traditional concept of change resistance can be considered to represent a ‘negative’ perspective on human agency, via its focus on employees’ problems, i.e. resistance, as well as employees as



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for positioning research on change resistance, change readiness, and engagement to change.

problems, as they resist change. In contrast, the concept of employee engagement builds on a growth paradigm to human agency. Yet, change resistance can also mark an intentional stance toward change, and thereby represent an act of active agency, as in the example of citizen resistance toward authoritarian regimes or employees' resistance against a morally unjust change. Therefore, one's reaction to change, be it resistance or engagement, depends on the type and justifications for change. Going forward, there are opportunities to shift the lens from individuals reacting to change toward considering what kinds of changes individuals are engaged in and potentially ready to drive as change agents (Caldwell, 2006). In order to further our appreciation of change resistance from a growth perspective, there are opportunities for cross-concept learning, e.g. from research on different forms of activism (Mäkelä & Olkkonen, 2021), sustainability agency (Teerikangas et al., 2021) and leadership development.

Third, these considerations relate to the development of leadership theorizing. Research on leadership has evolved from considering only the formal manager as bearing leadership potential, to considering leadership as shared and/or at the reach of anyone (Gerard et al., 2017). Similarly, research has shifted from individual-level leadership toward appreciating relational, shared and collective forms of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Such developments further the above considerations of agency by asking, where is leadership and who takes leadership? Such lenses empower individuals in non-formal managerial roles, and add theorizing power in the study of individuals and collectives, as they exercise their agency.

In closing, it deserves recognition that the experience of resistance-readiness-engagement is a fluctuating, flowing, lived experience and, therefore, ontologically escapes neat categorizations. Regardless of the change type and the individual's agency toward that change, one's reactions materialize on a spectrum of resistance-readiness-engagement – albeit differing depending on person, situation, and change type, while further changing over time. Indeed, different reactions and emotions toward change are part of the human experience and therefore are to be expected, as change, however defined and of whatever magnitude, represents novelty and difference to one's status quo. To this end, classical linear frameworks, such as Kubler-Ross's (1969) highlight that individuals experience a variety of emotions, when faced with change and before being able to acknowledge and settle with a novel situation. Similar linear frameworks representing an individual's reactions and temporal adjustment feature in other disciplines. For example, the culture shock curve (Furnham & Bochner, 1986) represents an individual's reactions when moving from one culture to another. These frameworks recognize the complexity of reaction types, and further that over time, individuals can transition from resistance to acceptance of change, whether this be the example of patients recovering from cancer or expatriates adjusting to a new country (Ward et al., 2001). Yet, whether and how such adjustments occur warrants inquiry amid the contemporary, messy and complex change landscape that escapes neat and linear analyses. For example, amid a globalized context, individuals might have experienced a multiplicity of cultural transitions within a lifetime. How does such experience translate to the next change, be it of similar or different nature? All the while, these theories recognize that adjusting to change is not straightforward while occurring over time. The temporal lags and learning cycles involved deserve further attention. Also, the various roles of resistance warrant inquiry. On the

one hand, a resistant attitude can cause stress, which in medical research has been found to cause mental and/or physical illness (Maté, 2019). On the other hand, active forms of resistance can be sources of personal growth and development. Going forward, these dynamics deserve further exploration.

### Change Readiness, Resistance and Engagement from the Perspective of Change

In this section, a critical assessment of the academic study of change readiness, resistance to change and engagement toward change continues via an elaboration and dissection of the concept and theorizing on change. We have organized the analysis along five dimensions, which are (1) the level of analysis, (2) the amount of change, (3) the type of change, (4) the locus of change, and (5) the systemic context, as illustrated in Figure 2.

We start our exploration by considering the level of analysis utilized in prior research. In other words, from whose perspective are resistance, readiness and engagement to change studied? Taking a closer look, the bulk of research on organizational change has focused on the individual, oftentimes the employee’s experience of change. Interestingly, less emphasis has been placed, overall, upon managers, be they line managers, middle managers, senior managers, executives, board members, or organizational change agents’ experience of change. While this offers avenues for future research, it also raises the question of the one-sidedness of management research and practice, where, critically speaking, a manager-led view of agency and leadership prevails. Moreover, opportunities to explore resistance, readiness and engagement toward change at collective levels of analysis abound, be it as regards teams, social movements, collectives, organizations, or societies.

Moving forward, we continue our analysis by considering the amount of change, i.e. the number of changes taking place in parallel. Strikingly, the bulk of research on

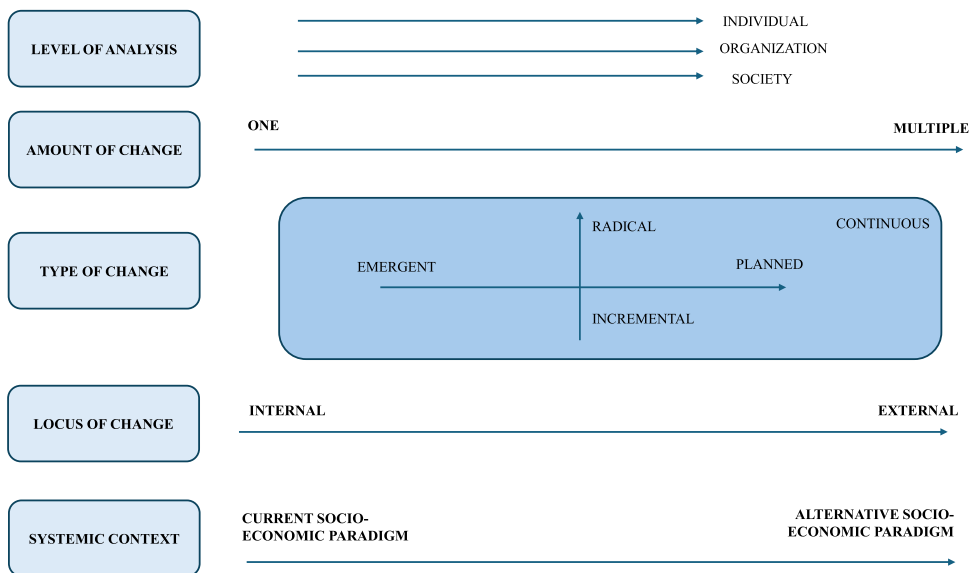


Figure 2. Conceptual dimensions of organizational change.

organizational change explores individual change initiatives. Despite the operational feasibility enabled by this focus, it omits the broader setting of contemporary organizations, where multiple simultaneous change initiatives co-evolve in parallel (e.g. Rouzies et al., 2019; Geraldi et al., 2022). Therefore, the validity of results on studies focused on an individual change initiative can be questioned, given the multiplicity of simultaneous or previous changes. Going forward, this opens ample opportunities for future research as regards the dynamics of resistance, readiness and engagement amid numerous simultaneous changes.

Next, we shift our focus to the types of change studied. Acknowledging the variety of change types, for the sake of simplicity, the classic divide between incremental, planned, continuous and emergent change is used. The bulk of organizational change research builds explicitly or implicitly on the planned change paradigm, thereby assuming that change and employee reactions can be managed. Notwithstanding, this explains an emphasis on change resistance, as resistance counter-acts the assumptions of rationality, linearity and neat cause–consequence effects inbuilt into the planned change paradigm (Burnes, 2017). All the while, research has arguably been less interested in the study of employee resistance, readiness and engagement in the contexts of other types of change, be it incremental, continuous or emergent change. Taking a closer look, owing to their different characteristics and connections to parallel theories, across disciplines, each of these change types opens up future research avenues. To begin with, connections between incremental change as a form of structuration (Giddens, 1984) deserve exploration. As structuration theory builds on the interplay between structure and agency, this offers opportunities to explore the structure-agency dynamic in the context of incremental change. For example, future research could consider the role of a proactive stance toward everyday incremental change as a means of exercising one’s agency, engaging in (small-scale) change, in so doing building one’s change readiness. Moving on, continuous change in the twenty-first century landscape not only features within organizations but also characterizes the external environment. This context calls for (re)-reflecting the ontology, nature and characteristics of change resistance, readiness and engagement. As an example, what is the human condition in the twenty-first century, marked by continuous change? Further, what is the experience of, as well as the difficulties in, and opportunities for human agency, whether individually or collectively exercised, amid continuous change? Finally, there are opportunities to consider the individual’s resistance, readiness and engagement vis-à-vis emergent change. While the latter escapes neat definitions, it represents the in-situ agency that an individual or collective engages in, as well as the ability to be ready for and to engage with (vs. resist) the emergent properties of organizations and the natural environment (Cox et al., 2022; Rosenhead et al., 2019). In summary, theorizing on resistance, readiness vs. engagement to change, beyond the context of individual planned changes offers versatile avenues for future research.

Locus of change, in turn, refers to the classic dichotomy between internal and external change. In this regard, the bulk of organizational change research adopts an internal lens to change by focusing on change taking place inside organizations, as in the example of a reorganization or IT program implementation. All the while, parallel streams of research explore organizational change initiatives at the intersection of organizations, be it in the example of ownership change via mergers, acquisitions, corporate restructuring via

divestments, and outsourcing arrangements. Despite the inter-organizational nature of these phenomena, the focus of managerial practice and academic study tends to be on the integration of one organization into the parent organization. In other words, a within organizational lens is maintained, despite an outward appearance of an inter-organizational encounter. In contrast, research on industry evolution, corporate responsibility and sustainability science take their interest in how organizations engage in and shape broader societal transformations, be it industry evolution, sustainability transitions (Pesch, 2015), e.g. toward carbon-neutrality, or sustainability transformations toward nature-positivity (Panwar, 2023). The choice of an internal vs. external locus of study bears effects on the experience and dynamics of change resistance, readiness and engagement. Going forward, there are opportunities for cross – and inter-disciplinary exploration.

Finally, we shift our attention to the systemic context, i.e. what societal and systemic context is adopted. Taking a critical stance, business and management research is largely positioned within the prevailing socio-economic, anthropocentric paradigm. Such a positioning is amenable to critique at a time, when planetary boundaries are being crossed (Rockström et al., 2023), largely owing to human-caused economic and business activity (Dasgupta, 2021; Díaz et al., 2019). In seeking sustainable future pathways, alternative economic and business models such as degrowth, sufficiency or regenerative strategies are being developed. Yet, research on change resistance, readiness and engagement is also set into the existing socio-economic, anthropocentric paradigm. Going forward, opportunities abound as regards theorizing these concepts amid the transition and transformation toward alternative socio-economic and socio-environmental paradigms.

## **Toward a Transformative Future Research Agenda**

In this section, we outline a transformative future research agenda. In so doing, this section answers the question of ‘what kinds of changes do the individuals, managers and collectives of the twenty-first century need to be ready for, resist and/or engage in? This calls for reconsidering our individual and collective agency and relationship to change.

To begin with, in light of the disrupted systemic landscape coupled with the plethora of within-organizational changes, it can be argued that going forward, instead of considering change resistance, readiness or engagement toward *one* individual change initiative, future research could explore the role of resilience amid ongoing, continuous, and disruptive change. Examples of external, systemic changes include geopolitical instability and the reordering of the world order, climate and biodiversity crises as part of overall ecological collapse and the crossing of planetary boundaries, and socio-technological transformation resulting from the speedy introduction of artificial intelligence-based tools into organizations alongside an increasingly digitalized workplace and society. All the while, human rights, such as democracy, freedom of expression and peace are being torn apart, while transformations to prevailing economic and social paradigms are impending. Such a transformative, if not revolutionary, landscape calls for a reflection on what it means to be human in an increasingly virtual and digitized age, how to live balanced, healthy, purposeful and responsible lives, while consuming planet-mindfully.

Notwithstanding, ample opportunities exist to conceptually and empirically explore the role of individual and collective resilience amid contemporary times, the type of resilience that these times call for as well as means of achieving and maintaining such resilience. Whose responsibility is resilience, amid disruptive times?

Second, it deserves to be asked, what changes are actually needed? As organizations are caught in cycles and over-loads of change, research could explore how senior executives navigate amid the multiplicity of changes, while strategically prioritizing the organizational change portfolios within their organizations. In this respect, there are opportunities to connect with the concept of absorptive capacity (Zahra, 2002), at individual and collective levels. Until such prioritization of change initiatives takes place, interesting research avenues relate to appreciating how individuals maintain balance amid continuous change. Yet the responsibility for balancing does not rest solely on individuals. Is there an optimal balance between self-leadership (Neck & Houghton, 2006) vs. organizational support for wellbeing? In a neo-liberal era that individualizes responsibility, there is arguably a need for a counter-force in the form of collective action, mutual support and caring. Faced with such a change-overloaded canvas, instead of change resistance, readiness or engagement, questions related to executives' strategic prioritization of change initiatives as well as collective, mutually supportive action and self-leadership might take precedence.

Third, from the perspective of change resistance, readiness and engagement, the contemporary landscape of change and organization theorizing leads to asking, what kinds of changes to be individually and collectively ready for and engage in versus resist? In democratic regimes, this relates to questions of free will, volition and agency. In terms of their objectives, change initiatives are not value-neutral nor free of ethical and moral consideration. While research has found some degree of resistance toward imposed or sudden change to be natural, arguably resistance toward unethical change is healthy, similarly readiness and engagement toward unnecessary, unethical or unsustainable change can be foolish. Therefore, individuals, regardless of their hierarchical position, need to carefully tread their ground when making decisions as to the kinds of changes one resists versus engages in. In other words, there is a place for change resistance, change readiness and engagement, yet the decision as to when and which of these to enact, arguably depends on the person, the situation and the change in question. This opens opportunities to explore the ethical and moral grounds on which individuals, be they professionals or executives, decide on the kind(s) of change(s) to pursue, whether at individual, organizational or societal levels of analysis.

Fourth, this leads to the question of what kind of future are we engaged in building? In other words, what kinds of changes to pursue that enable the development of a future that is sustainable for humankind and other species? Humankind's increasing trespassing of the planet's ecological boundaries offers a lever for prioritization in decision-making (Rockström et al., 2023). Instead of collapse, future-proof decisions are ones that enable planetary, instead of merely anthropocentric thriving, on the long-term. To this end, engaging in changes that aim for carbon-neutrality and nature-positivity, while securing social and economic justice and viability is needed. Arguably, this calls for transitional and transformative change. Yet, such engagement and change do not go without their challenges.

Amid a twenty-first century that has been not only termed existential for humanity but also on the verge of collapse (Bendell, 2023), the decision of what change to engage in

and what kind of future to build is arguably not only a management question but a question of individual and collective leadership. Notwithstanding, such leadership is also called for from management scholars as regards (re)-theorizing leadership, organizing and change in securing future-proof societies. This entails courage and risk-taking as well as interdisciplinary effort and collaboration. Yet, are we individually and collectively ready, resisting or engaged toward, actually, making a difference? And what difference do we, actually, want to make?

In light of the challenges faced by humankind in the twenty-first century, there is a need for individuals, organizations and societies alike to find ways of making sense of the world order. For one, there is a need to find one's authentic and impactful place individually and collectively amid this world order (Gardner et al., 2011). This calls for meaning and purpose-making, at individual-, organizational and societal levels. For what causes does one live and work for, for what causes to make a difference? This calls for individuals to enact their agency (Bandura, 2006), connect to themselves and the authentic leader within. In parallel, this calls for managers to engage in servant and transformational leadership to support the flourishing of others. In so doing, cycles of mutual engagement can be initiated (Teerikangas & Välikangas, 2015). For another, organizations, businesses, industries and societies need to (re)-consider their purpose and role amid the economic, environmental, political, technological and social world order that is being globally renegotiated.

As regards the way in which change is studied, future research on readiness, resistance, and engagement would benefit from approaches that treat context as dynamic and co-constituted with change, rather than as a static backdrop (Meier & Dopson, 2019). Our review shows that context is typically specified once (e.g. sector, type of change, change history, perceived support) and then modelled as an antecedent or control. There is considerable scope for longitudinal, ethnographic, and practice-based studies that trace how contextual conditions are enacted, reconfigured, and contested over time, and how these evolving contextualizations shape when, how, and for whom readiness, resistance, and engagement become possible.

In synthesis, it can be argued that by developing change resilience amid ongoing disruption, while prioritizing the amount and type of change(s) to engage with, individuals and organizations develop their capability for future-proof transformative change. In essence, the landscape of change resistance, readiness and engagement research needs to shift from passive victimhood to resilient and courageous individual and collective leadership. As contemporary grand challenges are societal, regarding future research, opportunities for inter-disciplinary and impactful exploration abound. What is the difference that we want to make, be ready for, resist and engage in?

## Conclusion

Over the past 25 years, the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM) has been an important platform for advancing our understanding of how employees orient themselves toward organizational change. After summarizing JCM contributions on resistance, readiness and engagement towards change, we have critically assessed these concepts from the perspectives of agency and change. In so doing, we have dissected established categories, including the distinction between planned and emergent change, the idea of manager-

led change, or the emphasis on within-organization changes to rethink our agency and relationship to change. We finish by envisioning a transformative future research agenda that revolves around the question of what kinds of changes do individuals, managers, and collectives of the twenty-first century needs to be ready for, resist and/or engage in. In essence, what kind of a future are we building, and what is our role in this endeavor? What do we resist, what are we ready for, and/or engaged toward?

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