Resisting Organizational Change: Paradox, Process and Power

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It has been suggested that organizational change is as inevitable as birth, death and taxes (Burke, 1995: 159). With the globalizing economy, a deteriorating environment, the recent financial crisis, and an insatiable desire for new management fashions, managers and employees alike are exhorted to play their part in organizational change (Bennebroek Gravenhorst & in’t Veld, 2004; Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008). Yet, the majority of these initiatives appear to run into difficulties (Romano; 1995; Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997; Boonstra, 2004). For “every successful corporate transformation, there is at least one equally prominent failure” (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1996: 23). Beer and Nohria (2000: 133) report that “the brutal fact is that about 70 percent of all change initiatives fail”; while Beer and Eisenstat (1996) argue that most change programs fail to yield benefits that are proportional to the resources invested in them. In other words, organizational change “has a tendency to produce failure” (Sorge and van Witteloostuijn, 2004:1212).

The blame for this failure is typically attributed to resistance by employees whose behaviour, attitudes or emotions stymie the change effort (see Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Resistance is thus framed as a problem – a dysfunctional but common response by employees who, deliberately or inadvertently, obstruct efforts to bring about change. It results from such factors as: a low tolerance for change; parochial self interest; a lack of trust; or differing assessments of the need for, and effects of, change (Kotter & Schlesinger 1979; Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In’t Veld, 2004). Regardless of the cause, resistance is viewed as a pathology that requires some form of treatment or intervention to overcome it. Some measures may appear to be relatively benign, such as education, communication, and participation; but manipulation, coercion and the use of power are not ruled out (Hardy & Clegg, 2004). The implications are clear: change is the responsibility of managers or change agents who have the right – if not the duty – to use whatever means necessary to prevent resistance to it.

The effectiveness of such interventions would appear to be in considerable doubt, however, if the statistics on failed change are accurate. The countless articles and books
written to purportedly “manage” change and “overcome” resistance to change have clearly failed to provide conclusive ideas on how to do so (Furst & Cable, 2008; Grey, 2009). The futility of efforts to overcome resistance has led some researchers to argue for a different approach (Piderit, 2000; Balogun, 2003; Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006). They suggest that what senior managers and change agents may label as resistance may, in fact, represent novel ideas for the change program or an awareness of potential problems that have not yet been properly recognized (e.g., Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008; Lüscher & Lewis 2008). Resistance can thus play an important role in successful organizational change. This work celebrates – rather than demonizes – resistance, but it still poses problems for subordinates. Specifically, it maintains the distinction of earlier work between change agents and change “recipients” and retains the emphasis on the former as the group responsible for the change initiative. In other words, the power relations implied in the earlier traditional work have not changed – it remains the prerogative of the change agent to decide what constitutes resistance. In fact, the celebration of resistance may place change recipients in a more invidious position than its demonization – employees encouraged to “resist” for the good of the organization, but they still risk sanction if they do so in a way that is not deemed acceptable.

What happens to these relationships and relations when taking a strong process (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005) or “organizational becoming” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) approach? This work is distinguished by two key ontological assumptions (Thomas, Sargent & Hardy, 2010). First, it rejects the notion that organizations are fixed entities and, instead, sees them as unfolding processes. An “organization” is an emergent outcome of organizing (cf. Weick, 1995): a temporary pattern constituted by and shaped from micro-interactions among actors as they perform their everyday work (Weick & Sutcliff, 2005: Carlsen, 2006). Change is no longer an episodic event occurring within an organizational entity; organizations themselves are continuously changing. Second, this work argues that organization is contingent upon language and meaning (Tsoukas, 2005). If organizations appear to be fixed entities, it is because they are
held in place through language; while changes in patterns of organizing depend upon new
language, the meaning of which is negotiated among actors (Thomas, Sargent & Hardy,
2010). Hence organizational change – and stability – is a “multi-authored” process (Buchanan
and Dawson 2007: 669). From the perspective of an organizational becoming approach, then,
the distinction between change agents and change recipients disappears but so, too, does
consideration of the power relations. While not incompatible with an analysis of power, most
studies using this approach have not yet examined how power relations affect the negotiation of
meaning.

We are then left with a paradox: recent developments notwithstanding, the work on
resistance to change continues to privilege and justify the power of the change agent to decide
what resistance constitutes and who is resistant; while recent developments in organizational
change see resistance as integral to the negotiation of meaning, but attribute insufficient weight
to the asymmetrical power relations that permeate organizations.

The remainder of this paper will use a strong process approach to examine the
intersection of power and resistance in a change initiative. It is organized as follows. The next
section will examine the literature on change and resistance. We then present our research
study and findings. Finally, we discuss how our study contributes to understanding resistance
to change.

**Change and Resistance**

Change is firmly established as a priority for organizations. The 1980s and 1990s saw
organizations experiment with such innovations as TQM, customer service initiatives,
reengineering, right-sizing, downsizing, culture change, various forms of teamwork and
countless other managerial fads and fashions (Reichers et al., 1997). More recently, global
environmental, technological and financial shocks are requiring organizations to adapt,
modify and transform their activities. To realize such changes, organizations rely on the
cooperation of their employees. As a result, it has been argued that any resistance on their part can severely hamper the change initiative (Piderit, 2000). In this section, we examine the literature on resistance to change. We first examine the traditional literature which tends to demonize it. We then examine more recent work that celebrates it. Finally, we review the work on organizational becoming, which takes a very different view to resistance – instead of singling it out as a distinctive act(s), resistance is fully integrated into change processes.

**Demonizing Resistance to Change**

The concepts of both change and resistance have been attributed to Kurt Lewin (Dent & Goldberg, 2009; Burns, 2004). Lewin’s (1947) work focused on the notion of planned change and a major contribution was his 3-step model. The first step involved “unfreezing” of existing behavior; followed by a step in which individuals move to the new behavior; finally, when the new behavior is achieved, it is refrozen in a new quasi-stationary equilibrium. This model has played an important role in the Organization Development (OD) approach to change (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 1997; French & Bell, 1995) and, despite being criticized as being too simplistic (e.g., Kanter et al., 1992), Lewin’s basic ideas are evident in a wide of different change approaches (Elrod & Tippett, 2002; Burns, 2004).

The concept of resistance – also attributed to Lewin (Dent & Goldberg, 1999) – received an early impetus through a study at Harwood Manufacturing Corporation in the US. John French – a professor and former student of Lewin – was approached by Lester Coch, a manager at Harwood. Coch had found that when the female workers were moved to new jobs within the factory, their output fell and they took longer to learn the new skills than raw recruits. They also reacted to these new jobs by quitting, being absent, restricting output and showing hostility towards management. Coch deduced that there was some sort of resistance to the changes; and the study was designed explicitly to study resistance. The research questions were: Why do people resist change so strongly? What can be done to overcome resistance? The resulting article (Coch & French, 1948) was entitled “Overcoming Resistance
to Change.” In a subsequent study, Lawrence (1954: 4) argued that employee resistance to change was one of “the most baffling and recalcitrant of the problems which business executives face.” Other studies followed, the majority of which focused on overcoming, managing or dealing with resistance (e.g., Zander, 1950); terminology that continues to be popular today (e.g., Harvard Business School Press, 2005). Nor was the problem of resistance confined to planned approaches to change, such as OD; it also characterized processual and political approaches (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973; 1987; Quinn, 1980; Kotter, 1995). This work criticized the planned approach for being unrealistic – for not capturing the “messiness” of change, particularly in large organizations. In doing so, researchers explicitly acknowledged the strong possibility of resistance by organizational members to change initiatives.

Not surprisingly, studies went on to investigate the causes of and solutions to resistance. Causes were typically conceptualized in terms of shortcomings in individuals’ attitudes, emotions and/or behaviours (Piderit, 2000; Van Dam, Oreg & Schyns, 2008). For example, parochial self-interest on the part of employees leads them to resist change because it costs them something they value. In this situation, employees “focus on their own best interests and not on those of the total organization”, as a result of which “resistance often results in ‘politics’ or ‘political behavior’” (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979: 107). Other deficiencies on the part of employees included misunderstanding of the change; a lack of tolerance for change; and cynicism towards change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Reichers et al., 1997; Furst & Cable, 2008; Van Dam et al., 2008). Some work did argue that resistance could be caused by the actions of CEOs and the mishandling of the change by senior managers (Greiner, 1992; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996; Reichers et al., 1997) but, even so, subordinates were still held responsible for it (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). What is consistent across this literature, therefore, is that “the prescriptions offered” to deal with resistance “are for the supervisor to implement, not for the supposed resistors of change” (Dent & Goldberg, 1999: 37).
Some of these prescriptions may appear to be benign insofar as they revolve around education, facilitation and participation (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Furst & Cable, 2008). For example, many change models provide suggestions for developing an effective communication strategy as a means of avoiding resistance (Klein, 1976) by, for example, engaging in the right kind of conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995), metaphors (Marshak, 1993) or talk (Kabanoff et al., 1995). In the unhappy event that employees remain unconvinced of the benefits of change, however, managers are justified in resorting “power and conflict to force movement through the process by overcoming resistance” (French & Delahaye, 1996: 22). Employees can be forced to cooperate through such strategies as manipulation, withholding information, implying future benefits such as promotions or raises, and using coercion in the form of sanctions, edicts, threats and dismissals (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Poole, Gioia, & Gray, 1989; Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In’t Veld, 2004). Managers are thus justified in using the stick as well as the carrot (see Hardy & Clegg, 2004); to use punishment as well as rewards in their attempts to eradicate resistance (McCarthy et al., 2008).

In sum, a “Newtonian” view (Thomas & Davies, 2005) of the relationship between change and resistance – and between the agents and recipients of change – has been firmly established. Change is something imposed by the former and resisted by the latter; and it is the responsibility of the former to ensure that resistance does not arise or, if it does, it is quickly quashed. Resistance is viewed unequivocally in “negative terms, as a sign of failure … or as a problem to be eliminated or minimized” (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005: 1816). It is the reason why change initiatives fail. It involves activities by employees that “according to the official structure, culture and rule of the organization, ‘should not happen’” and which “contain an element of challenge to the dominant modes of operating and dominant interests in the organization” (Watson 2003: 230). According to this view “management and employees are opposing parties” (Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In’t Veld, 2004: 321) and studies tend to take the perspective of those seeking to bring about change (Klein, 1976) and,
in so doing, promote a managerialist agenda (Piderit, 2000; Symon, 2005).

Because these writers tend to grant a privileged position to the objectives of managers or owners, the “resisters’” goals are of peripheral concern … To the degree that these goals deserve to be understood at all, it is mainly to find ways to keep them from interfering with “better” [organizational] goals (Nord & Jermier, 1994: 401).

This work “places the change agent on the side of the angels, and the people being changed as mulish and obstinate, resisting innovations that have proved successful elsewhere” (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz 2006: 2030). This conceptualization of resistance has become taken for granted in both management practice and theory (Dent & Goldberg, 1999); and continues to characterize studies of change that range from firms in Russia (McCarthy et al, 2008) to public utilities in Italy (Giangreco & Pececi, 2005) to hospitals in New Zealand (Kan & Parry, 2004). It clearly marks out the power-resistance relations among management and employees – between change agent and change recipient. The former is dominant and privileged and “if there is resistance (on the part of the employees), there is justification for the use of power (on the part of managers)” (Hardy & Clegg, 2004: 352).

**Celebrating Resistance**¹

More recently, a different conceptualization of resistance has emerged which, rather than demonizing it and seeing as something to be removed, views it as part of successful change implementation. Such work points out that the demonizing of resistance has not provided sustainable ways of managing change and argues that this mindset interferes with successful change implementation (Furst & Cable, 2008; Dent & Goldberg, 2009). Further, researchers “have largely overlooked the potentially positive intentions that may motivate negative responses to change” (Piderit, 2000: 783). For example, it has been argued that,

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¹ In this regard, we are focusing directly on the resistance to change literature, rather than the work that views resistance as a response to capitalist relations (e.g., Collinson, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Ackroyd & Thompson 1999; Fleming & Sewell 2002).
increasingly, middle managers can make an important contribution to change by questioning the claims and understandings of senior managers (Lüscher & Lewis 2008; Woolridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Similarly, participation by employees and other stakeholders can also enhance change initiatives by challenging taken for granted assumptions (Van Dam et al., 2008). Therefore resistance can, despite challenging change agents and senior managers, increase the chances of successful implementation and lead to better change.

Resistance is thus a resource for change; something to be encouraged and celebrated (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz 2006; Ford & Ford 2009). According to this view, resistance is a series of “counter-offers” i.e., “a move in a conversation made by someone who is willing and receptive to the request yet is seeking some accommodation” (Ford et al., 2008: 373). Subordinates “resist” by making a counter-offer and demanding an accommodation to it; senior managers and change agents should then be willing to make an accommodation, even if it is not what they initially had in mind. Such “thoughtful” (Ford et al., 2008) or “facilitative” (Thomas et al., 2010) resistance thus hinges on counter-offers being made by subordinates and reciprocal accommodations being made by senior managers. In this way, different positions and the values that inform them are resolved, “not through conflict, but through the negotiation of mutually sensible meanings (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006: 2030).

If resistance is celebrated as a core element of effective change; the role of managers and change agents is to harness its value in designing and implementing successful change initiatives. Resistance ceases to be an internal psychological response or even externalized dysfunctional behavior. It is seen, instead, as a product of interactions between change agent and change recipient, whereby the former makes sense of the reaction of the latter.

[T]here is no resistance to change existing as an independent phenomenon apart from change agent sensemaking. This does not mean that recipients don’t have reactions to change, nor does it mean that their actions can’t have an adverse impact on change; they can and they do. What it does mean, however,
is that none of these actions/reactions are, in and of themselves, resistance, and they do not become resistance unless and until change agents assign the label \textit{resistance} to them as part of their sensemaking (Ford et al., 2008: 371)

In other words, resistance does not exist per se; it only exists if change agents label the actions of change recipients as such; and a tendency on the part of the former to do so precipitously or unthinkingly may do more to hinder the change effort than help it.

In many respects, this approach appears to be diametrically opposed to the work that demonizes resistance. However, some important similarities remain. First, the conceptual distinction between the change “agent” and “recipient” is retained. Second, in retaining this distinction, it remains the responsibility of the change agent to determine exactly which responses constitute resistance and which do not. Thus the conceptualization of the power relations between the agent and recipient of change remain unchanged from the earlier work: change remains the responsibility of the change agent who is privileged over the change recipient in terms of responsibility for the change and the determination of whether particular actions constitute resistance or not.

In sum, the work celebrating resistance is not so different, in terms of theoretical assumptions, from the work that demonizes it. Both bodies of work create separate categories of change agent and change recipient and accord all power and authority to the former. The result has been that although the concept of resistance to change has been widely studied, there are serious practical, ethical and theoretical limitations to the extent that some writers have argued for retiring the phrase “resistance to change” altogether (Merron, 1993; Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

**Integrating Resistance**

One approach to organizational change that does not single out resistance as a distinct category of behavior on the part of employees or change recipients is what is known as “strong” process approaches to change (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005) or organizational
becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). According to this view organizations are not entities but unfolding enactments that are brought into being through interactions among actors. Strong process studies of organizing examine emergent actions and activities by which collective endeavors are achieved (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Certain social structures may appear to be privileged and solidified (Carlsen, 2006) but they are, in fact, held in place through countless communicative interactions among organizational members as they carry out their work.

What looks – from outside – like behavior controlled by rules and norms is actually a delicate and dynamic series of interactionally located adjustments to a continual unfolding and working out of ‘just what’ is going on and being made to go on, which is to say, the organizing of action (Boden, 1994: 42).

The focus is of this work thus on “situated human agency unfolding in time” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 572). In these processes, the constitutive nature of language is particularly important. It may hold certain meanings in place such that there appears to be a clearly defined organizational entity (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004). Equally, the construction of new ways of talking and acting forms the basis of organizational change (Morgan & Sturdy, 2000; Tsoukas, 2005).

From this view, no longer do we see change agents introduce particular change plan as intended. At best, senior managers may be in a privileged position of being able to bring in a new discursive template. But such a template is only “a punctuation in organizational life” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 579). It is best understood as a text2 which has to be consumed and interpreted by those whom it addresses as its meaning is negotiated with other organizational members (Thomas et al., 2010). Thus meanings are influenced as much by the consumers of

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2 Text refers to “any kind of symbolic expression requiring a physical medium and permitting of permanent storage” (Taylor & Van Every, 1993: 109) and is not confined simply to written texts. Talk is therefore also a kind of text (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997a), and, in fact, the texts that make up discourses may take a variety of forms, including written documents, verbal reports, artwork, spoken words, pictures, symbols, buildings, and other artifacts (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004).
texts as their producers (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). In order to lead to change and to become institutionalized in the form of new organizational behaviours, the meanings of these texts must “stick” (Hardy & Phillips, 2004; Harley & Hardy, 2004) insofar as the text transcends the local circumstances of its production (Taylor et al., 1996) and comes to act as trans-situational organizing mechanisms (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). However, as texts travel in this way, their meaning is “translated” as texts are consumed and interpreted, and new texts produced (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Individual acts of translation, cumulatively and over time, can change meanings but not necessarily in the ways intended by authors – meanings are as likely to be transformed or even subverted as they are to be reproduced (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). From this perspective, the distinction between change agents and recipients collapses. Instead, organizational change – i.e., the negotiation of new meanings – is a “multi-authored” process (Buchanan and Dawson 2007: 669) whereby all actors participate in the negotiation of meaning as texts are produced, consumed, and translated with varying degrees of “fidelity” to authors’ original intentions. Further the boundaries between change and resistance blur such an extent insofar that both are iteratively and interactively are integrated into negotiations around meaning.

The strong process literature has, however, so far assumed that the negotiation of meaning occurs in a relatively unconstrained manner when, in fact, it is situated in a larger web of power relations (Foucault, 1980). Meanings are negotiated in social interactions that are contextually embedded, as well as historically and culturally situated (Gergen et al., 2004). As such, they are permeated by hierarchical relations, occupational differences and vested interests. Thus, the negotiation of meaning is a political process in which not all actors have an equal voice (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). So far, little research adopting an organizational becoming perspective has explicitly examined the power relationships among actors involved in those negotiations. In other words, while the change agent/recipient distinction may be problematic so, too, is assuming that there are no distinctions among
actors.

We are then left with a paradox: the recent work on resistance to change distinguishes between change agent and change recipient and, in doing so, gives all the power to the change agent to decide what can be constitutive of resistance and who can be resistant. Strong process approaches to change remove this distinction and see resistance as fully integrated into the negotiation of meaning but, in doing so, downplay the asymmetrical power relations that characterize organizations. This paper adopts a strong process approach to analyze organizational change, in order to explore how relations of power and resistance might influence the unfolding interactions.

Methods

Our study was conducted in a telecommunications company referred to here as UTel.³ UTel is a pioneer in licensing open-standard GSM/GPRS, EDGE and WCDMA⁴ technologies to manufacturers of mobile phones and other mobile communication devices. At the time of the study, UTel employed approximately 1,500 employees, most of whom were located at the European head office, with the remainder working in sites in UK, mainland Europe, Asia and North America. The company had been formed in 2001, when it was “spun off” from being an internal division of GlobalTel, a global telecommunications company that was undergoing major restructuring and redundancies at the time, as a result of low cost competitors and lower growth in the mobile phone market worldwide. UTel changed from being part of a much larger company that made mobile phones for the end-user to an independent organization that sold “knowledge” to mobile phone manufacturers.

Senior management, together with external consultants, had devised a cultural change program involving a series of 80 workshops to be rolled out across the company. Each workshop was organized around a “culture toolkit” that consisted of a brochure, a video and a

³ This case study is discussed further in Thomas et al., (2010).
⁴ GSM – Global system for mobile communication, GPRS – General packet radio system, EDGE – Enhanced data rates for global enhancement, WCDMA – Wideband and code-division multiple access.
set of instructions for conducting the workshops. The brochure entitled \textit{UTel’s Target Culture: Involving Every Employee} specified a target culture for the company in broad terms related to four drivers of business success (unity in team work; technological innovation; excellent customer service; and leadership) and four shared values (trust, empowerment, commitment, and quality). The brochure also described an implementation process involving additional workshops that were to be run by middle managers who would use the culture toolkit to review the target culture in order “to discuss how it affects their team, themselves as individuals, and Utel.” The video, shown during the workshop, was a 10-minute question and answer session between the CEO and another senior manager. It explained why a new culture was needed and provided further information on the drivers and the values that underpinned it. The instructions specified the activities for each half-day workshop: (a) a presentation of the target culture, using the brochure and accompanying video; (b) a discussion of the relevance of the target culture to the particular group attending the workshop; and (c) exercises to build agreement on actions to be taken to implement the target culture.

\textbf{Data Collection}

Background information on the change program was gathered through the collection of company documents such as reports, press releases, and preliminary interviews. One of workshops, conducted as part of the change program, was observed by one of the authors, recorded and fully transcribed. Finally, follow-up interviews were conducted with workshop participants.

The workshop lasted three hours and was attended by three head office managers, two senior managers from the UK plant, and 31 middle managers – support staff managers and senior software and hardware engineers. The participants represented a mix of ethnic groups, ranged in age from early thirties to mid forties, and were predominantly men (three women were present). A senior site manager from the UK plant started the session by welcoming participants and introducing the head office managers, one of whom provided an overview of
the outline and goals of the workshop. Another senior manager made a PowerPoint presentation that described his interpretation of the local culture and its strengths and weaknesses, followed by a general discussion about whether this interpretation was accurate. Following a coffee break there was a discussion about the mission statement specified in the brochure, and the video was shown. Then participants completed a “stop/start/continue” exercise to identify one behavior that was hindering cultural change and needed to be stopped, one new behavior that needed to be started, and one existing behavior that should be continued, the results of which were collected by the head office managers. The workshop concluded with a discussion of how to implement the change program.

Eighteen semi-structured follow-up interviews with workshop participants were conducted. They were held six months after the workshop, allowing sufficient time to follow-up on any implementation following the workshop. The interviews ranged from 75 minutes to 105 minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees included software engineers, hardware engineers, support staff and senior management. The interviews focused on understandings of the current culture at the company; the need for a customer orientation; who they thought the customer was; the culture change program, workshop and toolkit; and the development and future of the company in general.

Data Analysis

In order to build on an organizational becoming approach, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the workshop transcript to explore patterns in the negotiation of meaning. To make this analysis more manageable, we selected a key theme where there appeared to be resistance by middle managers to the plans of senior managers.\(^5\) This theme concerned the implementation of the new culture and, by focusing on this single theme we were able to conduct a more finely grained, in-depth analysis. We extracted all instances of talk about

\(^5\) For analytical purposes, we have differentiated senior and middle managers. Note that these were not homogenous groups. Senior managers consisted of managers from the headquarters and the local site; middle managers consisted of both hardware and software engineers and managers from support staff functions.
implementation from the workshop transcript. We placed all the relevant discussion in chronological order and identified who made each intervention i.e., a specific statement or interjection i.e., managers from Head Office; senior managers from the local plant; software engineers; hardware engineers; support staff managers. These groups were subsequently clustered into two categories – senior managers and middle managers.

We first tracked how the negotiations over meanings unfolded during the workshop by examining: the development of different meanings over time; the order or flow of interventions; whether interventions built on or disagreed with earlier meanings; whether different groups engaged with each others’ meanings or engaged in defensive reiterations of previously held meanings; and when and how the negotiations of meaning ended. We then noted the patterns in terms of how each intervention engaged with earlier interventions e.g., whether it built on, affirmed, asked questions of, or disagreed with earlier interventions and whether interventions proposed new meanings or repeated earlier meanings. We also noted other patterns such as the use of authority, and different ways of referring to the culture toolkit, which are discussed in more detail in the findings. This allowed us to identify eleven different communicative practices used in the negotiations (Table 1).

—Table 1 near here—

Findings

In this section, we first present patterns in the negotiation that appear to conform to established understandings of resistance to change. We then turn our attention to how power relations operate between these two groups.

Resistance

We first present our findings that show apparent resistance by middle managers to senior managers’ implementation plans as the meaning of implementation was negotiated between the two groups, leading to two distinct, polarized meanings emerging during the
process of negotiation (see Figure 1 for a summary). At the start of the workshop, a head
office manager sets out one of the workshop’s aims as being to arrive at a collective
identification of the actions to be taken to implement the change program at the local site
[#1].\(^6\) Fifty minutes later, a software engineer picks up the issue of implementation,
suggesting that it requires a clear direction, something which is currently lacking: “we need to
know where we’re going …” [#2]. A software engineer then suggests that, rather than a lack
of direction, the issue is a lack of information [#3] although this is countered by another
software engineer as the discussion returns to a lack of direction [#4]. At this point, a head
office manager tries to divert the debate by arguing that it is difficult to establish a clear
direction [#5]. Another engineer attempts to press the head office manager for implementation
to be defined in terms of the need for direction [#6]. A middle manager attempts to clarify the
debate at this point by questioning whether the issue they are debating is in relation to
implementation being about setting time frames [#7]. A software engineer returns to the issue
of implementation requiring locally agreed direction [#8]. A senior manager switches the
issue to argue that implementation involves an awareness of the culture at the different sites
[#9]. A head office manager defines implementation in terms of the first step being an
increased awareness of the existing culture, which is immediately reinforced by another head
office manager.

—Figure 1 near here—

At this stage, the video is shown: it defines implementation in terms of the next step,
which is to involve everyone [#10]. Following the video, a software engineer asks for
feedback on whether actions identified in previous workshops were implemented. In response,
a head office manager returns to implementation as collectively identified actions to be taken
at the local site [#11]. Later, a software engineer again raises the issue of implementation
requiring direction [#12]. A discussion ensues among the engineers that link direction to:

\(^6\) The numbers in square brackets provide a cross reference to Figure 1.
long-term costs, timescales, information and empowerment, and the need for road maps.

However, this definition is ignored by a head office manager, who returns to implementation as requiring further workshops [#13]. The discussion among senior managers turns to the culture kit, as directives are issued for the specific timing and conduct of subsequent workshops [#14].

Later, the engineers return yet again to the need for a road map, milestones and action plans as a necessary part of implementation [#15]. In response, there is a strong assertion of managerial control as a head office manager defines next step as reports and actions to be decided by head office, contradicting an earlier point that actions are to be collectively identified [#16]. A hardware engineer returns to the need for a time line [#17], while a head office manager returns to the first step being the need to conduct further workshops by August [#18]. Again, a software engineer raises the need for road maps [#19] and, again, a head office manager defines implementation in terms of a set of activities decided by head office [#20]. This is reinforced by another head office manager who returns to the first step requiring greater cultural awareness, emphasizing process, rather than activities, setting out instructions for timing, reports, and noting that decisions will taken by head office [#21]. There is another attempt to define implementation in terms of time lines and success criteria by a support staff manager [#22]. Measurement is dismissed as unfeasible by a head office manager (contradicting the earlier video) [#23]. A hardware engineer returns to the original definition, reminding participants that implementation was defined as collective actions to be taken by the local site [#24]. This is directly refuted by a head office manager, thereby contradicting the opening statement at the start of the workshop and the message from the CEO in the video, by saying: “that’s not the actions that you should be doing” [#25].

In sum, our analysis shows two polarized meanings concerning implementation. Senior managers repeatedly reproduce the meaning of implementation in terms of their predetermined program i.e., the continuation of the workshops. Engineers and support staff
tried to propose a different meaning of implementation in terms of local actions, which required the need for clear direction and measurable outcomes. As such there was apparent resistance by middle managers to the implementation plans of senior managers.

**Power**

In presenting this second set of findings, we now revisit what has so far been framed as resistance, to examine the power relations between senior and middle managers. At the start of the workshop, a senior manager makes an initial *invitation* to middle managers to participate in identifying implementation actions:

And we’re here today to learn more about your current culture in [the local site] but also together to identify actions that you can take here in [the local site] to support the target culture… [head office manager].

However, as we show here, senior managers “resisted” the alternative meanings proposed by middle managers. Thus we appear to have an example along the lines described in the work that celebrates resistance i.e., senior managers could have harnessed “resistance” to improve the change initiative – in this case by reformulating ideas of implementation – but failed to do. We examine the role that power plays in this “resistance to resistance” (Ford et al., 2008) and identify three different forms of power relations.

Our analysis shows that senior managers relied on a number of communicative practices that we refer to as *dismissing, reiterating, deploying authority, invoking hierarchy, and reification* (see Table 1). Some of these practices are primarily linguistic, such as statements that serve to rebuff or ignore alternative meanings proposed by other actors (dismissing) or statements that refer to superiors in order to justify the elimination of alternative meanings proposed by other actors (invoking hierarchy). However, power relations do not exist purely in what is said, but in performance more generally. For example, the senior managers make particular use of the artifacts associated with the culture toolkit. They refer to the culture toolkit (in the case of the video), point at it (in the case of the PowerPoint slides on
By incorporating the culture toolkit as a prop in this performance, senior managers are using it, not to facilitate the negotiation of different meanings as might be implied by their initial invitation to middle managers to participate in identifying implementation actions, but to present a non-negotiable and fixed meaning of implementation.

Such performances intensify as the workshop progresses – senior managers escalate their use of coercive communicative practices, deploying a number of them simultaneously. For example in the following intervention, a head office manager dismisses a request to change the timing of the workshops, reiterates the meaning proposed by another senior manager, invokes hierarchy and reifies the culture toolkit:

I think the first step is really to create an awareness about … [the] culture … And then as [another senior manager] says, what will happen in August
[pointing to the timeline on PowerPoint] is that the result, the outcome of all the different workshops … will be compiled into an analysis; a report that will be presented to the [head office] management which [a third senior manager] and I are part of. And then there will be decisions taken about what the next step is.

As Figure 2 shows, senior managers relied on the increasing use of interventions towards the end of the workshop that reinforced their preferred meaning of implementation, at which point middle managers appeared to give up trying to negotiate its meaning and, around the 2 hour mark, the number of middle managers’ interventions started to decline (Figure 3).

—Figures 2 and 3 near here—

Our study also shows that the power effects of communicative practices are related to the hierarchical relations that permeate organizations in a two-way relationship. Specifically, senior managers engaged in communicative practices that were derived from and helped to reproduce hierarchical distinctions between the two groups. For example, dismissing is a declarative speech act (Cooren, 2004) – an authorized pronouncement that instructs (Searle, 1969) and, as such, derives from seniority. Practices such as dismissing, deploying authority, and invoking hierarchy rely on actors being positioned appropriately in wider organizational power relations. In the following quotation, it is not simply that the hardware engineer’s suggestion regarding implementation is dismissed; it is that it is dismissed by a senior manager.

Can I make a suggestion for something we could do locally? … when we brief our individual groups, could each manager then take for example three or four of the actions and say right I’m now going to implement these within my team….Then at least we’re showing some results from this exercise (hardware engineer).

… that’s not actions that you should be doing (head office manager).
Deploying authority and invoking hierarchy will also likely only have power effects if these communicative practices are grounded appropriately in differences in status and rank that position people at different levels in the organization, as is clear from the following exchange.

What we’re trying to do is to identify what kind of culture do we have in [Head Office]; what culture do we have in [different sites in different countries] because this system is an ongoing process and we really must identify at each site what kind of culture, current culture we have... (head office manager).

But are you saying we should ask if the [Head Office] guys have problems with us? (support staff manager)

Yeah that’s a good point and I think… (senior plant manager)

[But] you know it’s them and us and we always have to do what [Head Office] says… (support staff manager).

Similarly, the ability to reify the culture tool kit is linked to senior managers’ declarative powers (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) to produce the discursive template in the first place. So although they may not be able to control how such artifacts are interpreted, senior managers are in a privileged position in so far as they are able to embellish their performances with these props.

In this way, senior managers’ use of communicative practices were founded on existing hierarchical relationships and, in turn, served to reproduce them. It is also important to note that middle managers played an equally important role in these processes. By holding their senior managers to account by demanding success criteria, time lines, and action plans, middle managers’ communicative practices also served to reproduce these relationships by acknowledging – and helping to bring into being – senior managers’ responsibilities (see Figure 4). Thus what may appear to be solid organizational structures and processes are held in place through language and the negotiation of meanings by all parties.

—Figure 4 near here—
Finally, power relations were enacted in terms of whether meanings negotiated during the workshop survived and had wider organizational effects. In this regard, interviewees expressed considerable skepticism.

People will invest their time and give good ideas if they see something coming back. But they want to see: right, we do a workshop, a month later [something happens] … and here’s what we’re going to try and do next. Unless I’ve misunderstood it, it seems like all this information is going into a black hole and then a year later out will come some set of guidelines that we should all follow (hardware engineer).

I don’t think there’s anything I can say or do that would get anything changed in the process (software engineer).

The majority of participants felt that the workshop ultimately turned out to be “a waste of three hours” because of the lack of implementation – there was “no statement in there that said ‘we are going to use the information that you give us and you are going to change things’” (hardware engineer). “You just hear of the decisions being made and passed down” because Head Office “wanted to keep control” (hardware engineer).

Senior management was thus able to exercise power insofar as it was responsible for translating the meanings negotiated during the workshop in the texts they produced of the workshop. So, for example, a head office manager said the outcome of the workshop was to be reported back to Head Office:

... what will happen in August is that the result, the outcome of all the different workshops … will be compiled into an analysis; a report that will be presented to the [head office] management which [and another senior manager] and I are part of. And then there will be decisions taken about what the next step is.

However, middle managers were sceptical about exactly what was reported back:

Unfortunately when the summary was done, the wrong things were
summarized and sent back to [Head Office]. So there were a lot of things that people said … that weren’t summarized and the things that were summarized [were what they wanted us to think] (software engineer).

Accordingly, there was little evidence that the meanings proposed by middle managers regarding implementation would survive to have an impact on the wider organization. The saying is that [Head Office] has made the decision and will tell you what the decision is. And I think that’s quite true. That’s what most people feel. We all talk that we’ve got this empowerment to put our own views forward, like in the cultural workshop, but at the end of the day the decision will already have been made (support staff manager).

As one middle manager put it: “if they’ve got control then they haven’t got to rely on anybody else.”

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Our study draws on a strong process approach to the study of organizational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) to argue that organizational change arises through “the process of constructing and sharing new meanings and interpretations of organizational activities” (Tsoukas, 2005: 98). A strong process approach is distinct from other processual research in that it argues that organizations should be studied as social processes rather than as social entities (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Whereas a considerable amount of work has produced synoptic accounts of change processes in organizations (e.g., sequences of events, or stages and cycles of change); there are far fewer “strong” or performative accounts of change that examine the unfolding actions through which change is accomplished. We therefore develop a framework for a “strong” process approach that encompasses three key components: discourse, performance and power-resistance relations. We draw on discourse because language is an integral component of a “strong” process approach (Tsoukas, 2005), and
discourse theory provides a well established set of theoretical assumptions and methods for analyzing language (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). We include an analysis of how performance influences the construction of meaning since “bodily performances” have hitherto been neglected (Rashe & Chia, 2009). Finally, because change is never enacted in a social vacuum (Contu & Willmott, 2003), we consider the historically situated power-resistance relations within which change takes place.

Organizational discourse theory (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant et al., 2004: Hardy et al., 2004) is an important component of strong processual approaches to change (Tsoukas, 2005). Language is a generative mechanism through which the collective actions (Hardy, et al., 2005) and discursive coordination (Gergen et al., 2004) that enact organizations – and organizational change – are achieved (Robichaud et al., 2004). Existing organizational structures and processes are held in place through language, the meaning of which is negotiated among actors through the production, consumption and distribution of texts (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004). Similarly, change results from the production, consumption and distribution of texts that construct new meanings (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

This approach cautions against thinking of change programs simply as the realization of a particular management plan and, instead, views such plans as texts, the meanings of which have to be interpreted by other organizational stakeholders (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Texts are symbolic expressions that are inscribed by being spoken, written, or depicted in some way (Taylor & Van Every, 1993: 108), making them “accessible to others” (Taylor et al., 1996: 7). They include written documents and talk, such as speeches, presentations and various forms informal and formal conversations (van Dijk, 1997; Hardy et al., 2005). Management plans for change may therefore be drawn up in the form of written or verbal texts – reports, memos, speeches, press conferences, etc. – that are produced and distributed by senior managers or change agents. However, these “discursive templates” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) still have to be interpreted by other stakeholders who consume these texts. In
other words, as part of a change initiative, texts are produced that are intended to convey particular meanings about the change (Colomy, 1998). These meanings are, however, neither unequivocal nor inherent to a text; nor are they simply passed intact from one text to another. Instead, meanings are negotiated between the text’s author and its readers (Czarniawska, 1997) as the text is consumed i.e., read and interpreted. Recent work has shown that as these texts are interpreted by other stakeholders, intended meanings are “translated” i.e., modified and transformed in ways that can have major implications for change processes (Davies & Thomas, 2008; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Thus the study of organizational change requires the study not only of patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of texts, but also how meanings are changed.

Finally, we draw on recent conceptualizations of power (e.g., Thomas & Davies, 2005) to locate discourse and performance in the context of power-resistance relations. Negotiations around meaning that occur in organizations are permeated by hierarchical relations, occupational differences and vested interests (Fox, 2000; Faulkner & Runde, 2009). Different actors struggle with each other “to frame discursive and nondiscursive practices within a system of meanings that is commensurate with that individual’s or group’s own interests” (Deetz & Mumby, 1990: 32). As a result, different meanings will be proposed, only some of which are likely to “stick.” The distinctions between change and resistance, as well as between change agent and change recipient collapse in the struggle around the meanings contained within the change initiative, located in a complex web of power-resistance relations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inviting</td>
<td>Statements that encourage participation by other actors in negotiation of meanings.</td>
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<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>Questions that open up negotiation of meanings.</td>
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<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>Statements that serve to rebuff or ignore alternative meanings proposed by other actors.</td>
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<td>Reiterating</td>
<td>Statements that return to and repeat meanings.</td>
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<td>Deploying Authority</td>
<td>Statements that contain directives that eliminate alternative meanings proposed by other actors.</td>
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<td>Invoking Hierarchy</td>
<td>Statements that refer to superiors in order to justify the elimination of alternative meanings proposed by other actors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reifying</td>
<td>Statements that invoke the culture toolkit to represent a particular, non-negotiable meaning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposing</td>
<td>Statements that introduce a new meaning.</td>
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<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Statements that reject or critique alternative meanings proposed by other actors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undermining</td>
<td>Statements that criticize other actors in order to discredit their proposed meanings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holding to account</td>
<td>Statements that demand action from other actors (or question a lack of action) to undermine or discredit their proposed meanings.</td>
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Figure 1: Summary of Negotiations around Implementation

Left axis numbers refer to time i.e., minutes after the commencement of the workshop; the light, dashed arrows indicate the order of interventions, which are numbered; the bold arrows indicate the development of the different meanings. The phrases at bottom of the figure refer to the different meanings proposed and developed during the workshop.

SM = Senior Manager, MM = Middle Manager
Figure 2: Communicative Practices of Senior Managers during the Workshop
Figure 3: Communicative Practices by Senior and Middle Managers during the Workshop
Figure 4: Communicative Practices of Middle Managers during the Workshop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (mins.)</th>
<th>Proposing</th>
<th>Challenging</th>
<th>Undermining</th>
<th>Reiterating</th>
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References


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