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Enabling Change in Malaysia: Leadership, Commitment to Change, and the Mediating Role of Change Readiness

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Abstract

There has been little empirical analysis on the complex relationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change in the context of Asian countries. This study proposes a research model to analyze the interrelationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change using the partial least square technique. Results of the study suggest leadership positively and significantly affects change readiness but not commitment to change. Change readiness is found to significantly affect commitment to change. In other words, change readiness is found to mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and commitment to change. This may suggest that the influence of leadership is a sequential process affecting change readiness and, in turn, the commitment to change, as opposed to the conventional belief that it affects both change readiness and commitment to change simultaneously. The implication of the study is discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational change has been an issue of growing interest among scholars and practitioners (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999; Pettigrew et al. 2001; Burnes 2004; Whitely and Whitely 2007). For Asian companies striving to become world leaders, change is imperative to achieve success in a globalized world characterized by stiff competition from both developed nations and emerging economies such as China and India. Therefore, in many developing countries, major organizational change is required to compete in this globalized world. In Malaysia, emphasis on low-cost labor advantage in sustaining competitiveness is less relevant. Competitiveness requires major organizational changes, especially in the way organizations manage market and demand, innovative capability, technological change, and rapid changes in many other aspects of a dynamic environment. All these efforts require organizations to make changes to their current operations and businesses including structure, processes, culture, vision, and mission (Armenakis et al. 1993). However, many of these change efforts are unsuccessful because of numerous factors that may have different degrees of influence in different contexts (ex. different countries) (Kotter 1995; Judge and Douglas 2009). Among these factors are issues of leadership, readiness, and commitment to change, which are perceived to be important (Eisenbach et al. 1999; Armenakis et al. 1993).

To date, despite the relevance of understanding change, these issues are largely neglected in Asia. Empirical research on organizational change in the context of Asian countries is lacking, thus limiting any possible insights for managers and practitioners in Asia to rely on as a guide for management practice (Bruton and Lau 2008). Indeed research tends to show that evidence from the more stable environments, from developed countries, can underestimate the relevant success of change efforts in developing countries (Chiaburu 2006). Owing to differences in cultural context, the validity of previously established models and theories needs to be empirically tested in the context of Asia. Consequently, the complexity of the relationship is less explored to provide sufficient understanding on how the variables affect each other (ex. link between leadership and change process) (Almaraz 1994; Eisenbach et al. 1999). Untangling this complex relationship helps provide sound managerial practice to improve the success of any change effort. However, despite analyzing varied

aspects of change, to date no conclusive research focuses on the interrelationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change.

The objectives of this study were to examine employees' perceptions with regard to readiness to change, commitment, and leadership during transformation initiatives. The authors examined the fit among leadership, readiness, and commitment, and attempted to answer the following questions: (1) How does transformational leadership affect change readiness? (2) Is there any relationship between change readiness and commitment to change?; and (3) Is the effect of leadership on commitment to change direct or indirect?

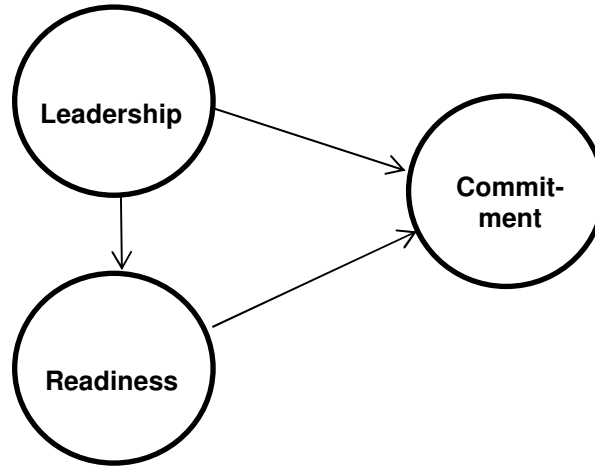
Therefore, this paper aims to provide several conclusions to address one of the key questions on the complexity of the relationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change. Furthermore, this study is expected to give insights and lessons, both practical and managerial, on the relevance of leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change which could limit transformation initiatives in developing countries.

The next section gives the literature review and discusses the importance of readiness for change, commitment, culture, and leadership to achieve successful organizational transformation. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the study, and Section 4 provides the empirical findings. Section 5 describes the implications of the study, and the last section concludes the study.

2. RESEARCH MODEL, THEORETICAL GUIDE, AND HYPOTHESES

The following figure illustrates the research model used in this study. The model examines the link among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change. The model contends that leadership influences both change readiness and commitment to change. Furthermore, change readiness is suggested to influence commitment to change. It is also suggested that leadership influences readiness and, in turn, commitment to change. This relationship reflects the indirect role of leadership in influencing commitment to change. Our main objective is not only to observe the direct link between leadership and commitment, but also to unveil the complexity of such relationship by examining the mediating role of readiness.

Research Model



Scholars (Coghlan 2000; Sullivan and Buffton 2002) argue, as the authors of this study do, that understanding changes at the individual level (ex. individual process changes: attitude to change, commitment to change, and leadership) is an important part of managing organizational change. The next section describes the theoretical ground for each of the relationships, in specifics, and further establishes the hypotheses of the study.

2.1 Leadership and Change Readiness

A review of literature on organizational change emphasizes the role of leadership (Armenakis et al. 1993). Scholars suggest numerous antecedents of change readiness, yet little empirical analysis is available (Wanberg and Banas 2000). Effective leaders tend to provide support that eventually changes the basic values, beliefs, and attitudes of the employees so that they are ready to accept and understand the change efforts (Eisenbach et al. 1999; Podsakoff et al. 1996). Armenakis et al. (1993) argued that proactive managers acting as coaches and champions of change are more successful in preparing employees for change efforts than managers who only monitor for signs of resistance to change. Interestingly, the leader or change agent's attributes are also important in the process of creating readiness. Attributes such as honesty, trustworthiness, sincerity, and commitment are associated with the leader's reputation, serving as essential ingredients to promote change readiness. In addition, fostering acceptance to the proposed change requires leaders to communicate and provide quality leadership. Manz and Sims (1990) argued that transformational leaders facilitate the creation of the necessary culture and shape the behavior of employees. This kind of

leadership is able to create the vision and institutionalize change efforts (Tichy and Devanan 1990). Similarly trust in leaders and knowing they support change efforts are also important to ensure readiness (Walker et al. 2007). The authors therefore hypothesize that

H1: Leadership is positively related to change readiness.

2.2 Leadership and Commitment to Change

Aside from creating readiness, leaders should also be able to encourage employees to commit to the change efforts. Esienbach et al. (1999) argued that leaders should possess the necessary skills and attributes to get employees involved in the transformation process. McShane and Von Glinow (2004) argued that leaders must be able to enable others to commit and contribute to the success of the change efforts. For such purpose, leaders should have certain skills and competence such as integrity, motivation, drive, emotional intelligence, self-confidence, intelligence, and knowledge of the business. Similarly, Kotter (1995) emphasized empowering and developing a sense of urgency to facilitate the change process, including employee commitment. Ford and Ford (1994) established that leaders should create change by attracting followers rather than creating dissatisfaction. In this effort, leaders should be supportive enough to ensure employees' commitment to change. Furthermore, leaders should create the environment conducive for employees to commit to the change efforts (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997). Indeed commitment to change is associated with the amount of information employees receive from change agents (Miller et al. 1994). On the other hand, passive leaders would not be able to provide sufficient information and actively prepare employees for change. The authors therefore hypothesize that

H2: Leadership is positively related to commitment to change.

2.3 Change Readiness and Commitment to Change

Having the right mindset for change is an important determinant of the success of any form of transformation. The pioneering work of Lewin (1947; 1951) suggests that for change to be successful, it is important that negative attitudes towards change are overcome to avoid any resistance. Emphasizing the change process, Armenakis et al. (1993) suggested that, for successful change to occur, employees need to be prepared for the change. This involves proactive attempts by the change agent to change the belief, attitude, and behavior of the

employees that will be involved in the change effort. Indeed Walker et al. (2007) argued that change agents have to prepare employees for change via open and honest communication. Moreover, effectiveness in implementing change is affected by the beliefs of the change targets about to undergo change. As a whole, it is argued that commitment to change depends on the understanding of and belief in the proposed change. Therefore, the authors hypothesize that

H3: Change readiness positively affects commitment to change.

2.4 Mediating Role of Change Readiness between Leadership and Commitment

Leaders are influential in the sense that they will be able to motivate change targets by improving commitment and readiness for change (Whelan-Berry et al. 2003). However, despite the argument that leadership has a direct influence on readiness and commitment to change, it can also be argued that leadership has an *indirect* influence on commitment to change. In other words, although leadership may influence commitment to change, it may also influence the change readiness necessary to prepare the change targets and consequently influence commitment to change. Thus, change readiness can be facilitated by leadership and, in turn, influence commitment to change. To test for any existence of the mediating role of change readiness, the authors hypothesize the following:

H4: Change readiness mediates the impact of leadership on commitment to change.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from a well-established organization (local, not multinational) in Malaysia. This organization was selected because it recently underwent significant transformation in its culture, structure, technology, and systems. Respondents were asked to indicate the types of changes their respective units/departments had undergone in the past five years.¹ They indicated that vision change, strategy change, system change, process improvement, and restructuring of organization units were the major changes of the

¹ Sections A and B of the questionnaire requested respondents to indicate the types of changes and reasons for the change efforts.

organization. In total, 73 respondents participated in this study. In addition, a few selected respondents were met at different periods for a brief interview before the data collection to check the content validity of the questionnaires and to gather first-hand information on the types of organizational change implemented in the selected organization. With the support of the human resource manager, the schedule was arranged for the respondents to fill up the survey forms. Finally the survey was gathered for further analyses.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The survey on organizational change consists of several sections. Section A outlines the initiatives for change, especially the types of and reasons for the change efforts. The other sections measure the variables of interest of the study—leadership, readiness for change, and commitment to change. The variable measurements were developed by reviewing definitions established in past literature and adapting measures of construct that had been validated by other studies. Several definitions exist to reflect the construct of readiness for change. Lewin (1951) described organization change as a process of unfreezing, moving, and freezing.

Change readiness is perceived as a process of unfreezing when members of the organization are prepared for change efforts. Miller et al. (1994) defined readiness for change as openness to change, which includes support for change and positive affects of the potential consequences of change. Armenakis et al. (1993) referred to the cognitive precursor to the behavior of either resistance to or support for change efforts. Despite the use of different definitions in previous research, a consensus emerged wherein readiness for change is commonly referred to as “a state of mind reflecting a willingness and receptiveness to change in the way one thinks” (Bernearth 2004).

In this study, **readiness for change** was measured using six items from the Change-Related Self-Efficacy Scale (Holt et al. 2007). The scale uses a five-point agreement-disagreement Likert format with 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree. Commitment to change can be assessed by affective responses to change efforts (Walker et al. 2007).

On the other hand, **commitment to change** was measured using six items from the Affective Commitment to Organizational Change Scale (Hersovitch and Meyer 2002). The scale uses a five-point agreement-disagreement Likert format with 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree.

Transformational, charismatic, and visionary leaders are increasingly important to manage change effectively (Eisenbach et al. 1999). More importantly, leaders' capabilities drive the change processes. In measuring **leadership**², the authors concentrated on the favorable attributes and capabilities important to readiness and commitment to change. The respondents were asked to indicate what they thought about the change agents based on the attributes and capabilities chosen. A total of 15 items were included to measure the leadership construct. A five-point scale was used with 1=rarely to 5=almost always. Questionnaire items measuring each construct are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Construct	Scale
Commitment to Change	1= strongly disagree 5=strongly agree
I believed in the value of the change/s. (C1)	
This change was a good strategy for this organization. (C2)	
I think management made a mistake by introducing the change/s. (C3)	
The change/s served an important purpose. (C4)	
Things would be better without the change/s. (C5)	
The change/s was/were not necessary. (C6)	
I supported the change/s. (C7)	
Change Readiness	1= strongly disagree 5=strongly agree
I was able to perform successfully after the change/s was/were made. (R1)	
I had the skills needed to make the change/s work. (R2)	
When we implemented the change/s, I felt I could handle them with ease. (R3)	
When I heard about the change/s, I thought it suited my skills perfectly. (R4)	
After the change/s was/were implemented, I was confident I would be able to do my job.(R5)	
I expected to succeed after the change/s was/were implemented. (R6)	
Leadership	1=rarely 5=almost always
Set a personal example of what he or she expected from others (L1)	
Praised people for a job well done (L2)	

² Eisenbach et al (1999) gave an interesting account on the issue of transformational leadership that is essential for effective change management. Other literatures (Nadler and Tushman 1989; Podiakoff et al. 1996; Tichy and Devanna 1990) on leadership also provide sufficient information in developing the leadership construct. Kouzes and Posner (1995) measured five important dimensions of leadership practices, including model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. The authors used these dimensions in the questionnaire.

Construct	Scale
Challenged people to try out new and innovative approaches to their work (L3)	
Described a compelling image of what our future could be like (L4)	
Actively listened to diverse points of view (L5)	
Made it a point to let people know about his or her confidence in their abilities (L6)	
Searched for innovative ways to improve on what we do (L7)	
Appealed to others to share an exciting dream of the future (L8)	
Treated others with dignity and respect (L9)	
Followed through on the promises and commitments that he or she made (L10)	
Asked “What can we learn?” when things did not go as expected (L11)	
Supported the decisions that people made on their own (L12)	
Experimented and took risks even when there was a chance of failure (L13)	
Was enthusiastic and positive about future possibilities (L14)	
Gave the members of the team lots of appreciation and support for their contributions (L15).	

3.3 Techniques of Analysis

The complex relationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change is examined using the partial least square (PLS) method. The PLS method offers a number of advantages. It is suitable for theory confirmation (Chin 1998), whereby the focus is on theoretical development, compared with other methods (LISREL) preferred for confirmatory testing of theoretical models (Gefen et al. 2000). Thus PLS is more appropriate if the study intends to involve predictive analysis and exploring complex problems that have limited theoretical knowledge. Another advantage is that PLS requires only a small sample size and does not impose strict requirements on distribution constraint (Chin 1998; Hulland 1999).

3. FINDINGS

PLS analysis involves two stages. In the first stage, the authors tested the measurement model by assessing the validity and reliability of the construct. Items loading more than 0.5 (Janz and Prasarnphanich 2003; Saade' 2007) suggest item reliability while the Cronbach's alpha values should exceed 0.6 for the construct reliability (Nunnally 1967). The convergent validity can be assessed using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted

(AVE). The value of CR and AVE should be greater than 0.6 and 0.5 respectively (Bagozzi and Yi 1988).

In the second stage, the structural model was tested by estimating the significance of the path coefficient using *t*-test. The use of variance explained (R^2) of the endogenous variable indicates the model fit. As suggested by Chin (1998), the relationship is examined using the bootstrapping procedure with 500 sub-samples. The authors first conducted PLS analysis to examine item reliability. Table 2 reports the item loading and value of Cronbach's alpha. Items with loading less than 0.5 were removed. Since both the values exceed the recommended values, the overall measurement items have adequate item reliability. The authors further assessed the convergent validity by examining composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) from the measures. The AVE and CR are well above the recommended value, confirming the convergent validity (see Table 3). In addition, the square roots of the AVE are greater than the correlation levels of the respective construct, confirming discriminant validity. Since the correlation coefficients are below the cutoff of 0.8 (Bryman and Cramer 1994), any possibility of multi co-linearity can be ruled out.

Table 2. Item Loading and Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Item Loading	<i>t</i>-statistics	Cronbach's Alpha
Commitment to Change			0.804
(C1)	0.890**	33.489	
(C3)	0.531**	3.667	
(C4)	0.784**	17.423	
(C7)	0.909**	45.418	
Change Readiness			0.839
(R1)	0.817**	18.812	
(R2)	0.807**	19.689	
(R4)	0.790**	14.382	
(R5)	0.870**	26.996	
Leadership			0.946
(L1)	0.820**	18.830	
(L2)	0.816**	19.767	
(L3)	0.766**	12.008	
(L4)	0.796**	16.725	
(L5)	0.819**	21.368	
(L6)	0.802**	13.635	
(L7)	0.857**	22.385	
(L8)	0.801**	20.297	

Construct	Item Loading	<i>t</i> -statistics	Cronbach's Alpha
(L9)	0.704**	10.162	
(L10)	0.835**	25.536	
(L12)	0.754**	15.183	
(L13)	0.716**	10.897	

Note: Few items were removed due to low loading values. ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Variables	Commitment	Readiness	Leadership
Commitment	<i>0.793</i>		
Readiness	0.652	<i>0.822</i>	
Leadership	0.339	0.444	1
AVE	0.629	0.675	0.627
CR	0.867	0.892	0.953
Mean	4.102	3.877	3.544
SD	0.521	0.468	0.658

Note: The italic numbers in the diagonal row are square roots of AVE.

Table 4 reports the results of the model and hypothesized relationships. The *R*-square values (0.197 for readiness and 0.429 for commitment) suggest a good model fit. The results support the prediction that leadership ($\beta=0.444$, $p < 0.001$) has a statistically significant relationship with readiness. However, the significance of the proposed relationship between leadership and commitment to change has no support. In contrast, change readiness ($\beta=0.626$, $p < 0.001$) poses significant influence on commitment to change. This confirms the importance of leadership on readiness and readiness on commitment to change.

In testing the mediating role of change readiness, the model was estimated by dropping the change readiness construct from the model. The authors can conclude that change readiness fully mediates the relationship between leadership and commitment to change if the path coefficient of leadership increases and shows significant relationship with commitment to change. Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested examining the mediating role of a variable in these ways: First, the variable is considered mediating if the independent variable (leadership) is significant on the mediating variable (readiness); and second, the mediating variable (readiness) is significant on the dependent variable (commitment). In addition, a variable is fully mediating if the independent variable (leadership) has no influence on the dependent variable (commitment) when the mediating variable (readiness) is

controlled in the model. It is said to be partially mediating when the significance of leadership on commitment is less than the significance of readiness on commitment.

The results of Panels I and II are compared in Table 4. This study found leadership to significantly influence commitment ($\beta=0.365$, $p < 0.001$) without the mediating variable (see Panel II). However, when readiness is added as the mediating variable, leadership becomes insignificant ($\beta=0.062$) to commitment to change. The authors therefore confirm that readiness acts as the fully mediating variable between leadership and commitment to change.

What is the explanation for this rather contradicting result? First, it suggests that without readiness, leaders will find it harder to convince and pursue employees to commit to change efforts. Second, readiness is required to minimize resistance to change,³ eventually allowing greater commitment to change by employees. Thus, leaders planning to directly influence employees' commitment may lead to failure. Indeed Armenakis et al. (1993) argued that leaders who screen and monitor change-resisting behavior are unlikely to be successful in enforcing commitment. However, the attributes of leaders that favor and facilitate readiness consequently encourage employees to commit to change efforts by minimizing resistance (Armenakis et al 1993).

Table 4. Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	β	t -statistics	R^2	Results
Panel I: Model with mediating role				
H1: Leadership \rightarrow change readiness	0.444	6.145**	0.197 0.429	Supported
H2: Leadership \rightarrow commitment to change	0.062	0.830		Not Supported
H3: Change readiness \rightarrow commitment to change	0.626	11.167**		Supported
Panel II: Model without mediating role (change readiness)				
Leadership \rightarrow commitment to change	0.365	6.0251**	0.133	
H4: Mediating role of readiness ⁺				Supported

⁺ To assess whether readiness acts as a fully mediating variable, the authors compared the model with and without the readiness variable. If leadership exerts significant influence on commitment without the mediating variable and becomes insignificant after adding the mediating variables, then readiness can be confirmed to be a fully mediating variable. ** $p < 0.001$.

³ See Armenakis et al. 1993 for a complete review of the differences between readiness and resistance to change. The study also provides reviews on the link between readiness and resistance to change. Similarly, the term unfreezing process (Lewin, 1949) also involves creating awareness or readiness.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examines the effects of leadership and change readiness on commitment to change and the effects of leadership on change readiness. The results indicate that leadership has a positive and significant relationship with change readiness. In addition, the study fails to find any direct relationship between leadership and commitment to change. However, leadership is found to affect commitment to change indirectly through change readiness. Finally, the study found that leadership has a significant effect on readiness and, in turn, affects commitment to change.

Managers must therefore understand the sequence of the effects of leadership. Leaders must first prepare employees to be ready for change and subsequently prepare them to commit to change efforts. In other words, leaders who try to directly intensify commitment to change will be unable to successfully transform the organization without initially creating readiness for change. The resulting effect is for managers to focus on readiness before any attempts to improve commitment to change. Less emphasis on issues of preparing employees for change will ultimately lead to failure in change efforts, even with improved leadership. Neal (2008), using a case study, suggested that a practical guide is for CEOs and change agents to offer clear and consistent communication channels to assist employees through the change process.

Besides providing insights to managers on the interrelationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change, this study also makes theoretical and new contributions that can direct future research in these areas. Despite evidence suggesting the effects of leadership on commitment, this study discovered that the order of effects is not direct. The sequence of influence is this: Leadership influences readiness, and in turn readiness influence commitments. Furthermore, leadership has indirect effect on commitment.

However, to strengthen the theoretical contribution, more research is required. The authors strongly suggest the replication and application of the research model in different settings (ex. different countries, industries, levels of analysis) to validate the theoretical contribution of this study. Perhaps a case study is also needed to deduce practical reasoning for the observations made through the data analysis of this study.

5. CONCLUSION

Research on organizational change⁴ is not completely understood in developing countries, especially with respect to the change process itself. Furthermore, the complexity of the organizational process cannot be explained by just using comprehensive, one-way, predictive models. What is required is an understanding of the inter-linkages among the variables of the study. Therefore, this study contributes to understanding the interrelationship among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change using the partial least square methodology. Leadership was once thought to affect commitment directly. However, empirical evidence in this study proves the opposite. Moreover, the generalization made in the study is limited to the organization under study. More research is needed to explore the issues in greater detail. However, the authors believe that this study has paved the path for future research to consider and expand the link among leadership, change readiness, and commitment to change.

⁴ It is also less understood elsewhere due to the complexity and lack of research that goes beyond descriptive analysis (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999).

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