



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

Understanding how balancing autonomy and power might occur in leading organizational change

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 March 2015
 Received in revised form
 10 May 2016
 Accepted 22 August 2016
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Leading change

ABSTRACT

Leading organizational change involves many leadership skills. The literature indicates that there is one basic underlying skill: the ability to form and use judgment that is informed by analysis and experience. The literature also indicates that constructing and implementing good judgment from analysis and experience requires discretion in terms of *autonomy* and *power*. However, the findings from a field study of leaders with strong reputations as change agents demonstrated that it was difficult for change agents to have both autonomy and power. This result introduces critical but underexplored dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power in leading change. This article argues that balancing might occur when change agents have learned to understand and handle the dilemmas, and it describes enabling conditions for this learning. Furthermore, a future research agenda is indicated.

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1. Introduction

Leading change so that an organization can adapt to new demands and challenges related to efficiency, effectiveness, social image, and legitimacy involves a number of leadership skills (Burke, 2014; Burnes, 2014; Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 1999); Kotter, 2005; March & Weil, 2005; Northhouse, 2010; Schein, 2010; Yukl, 2012). The literature indicates that there is one basic underlying skill: the ability to form and use judgment that is informed by analysis and experience (March 1994). The literature also indicates that constructing and implementing good judgment from analysis and experience requires *discretion* (Hambrick, 2007; Kotter, 2005; March & Weil, 2005; Northhouse, 2010; Yukl, 2012).

A large portion of contemporary research on organizational change envisions organizational change as the result of the intentions and actions of leaders, and a high level of discretion is assumed to enhance leaders' impact on the outcomes. When leaders as change agents have discretion, they have freedom of choice and, in turn, the autonomy and power to influence and structure the field of possible actions in change processes. In relation to this perspective, Foucault (1982) claimed that influencing the actions of others requires not only the capacity to act freely but also the capacity to exercise power. If there is no space to act freely, then there is no way for power to influence the actions of others. Hence, leaders have to combine or balance autonomy and power in

leading change. This article is concerned with discretion in terms of *autonomy* and *power*, but the focus is on what actually happens when change agents attempt to balance autonomy and power in leading organizational change. In exploring this issue, the article proceeds as follows. First, I will outline the main features of the study's theoretical concepts. Second, the method employed in a field study will be discussed. I will then present the results from the study and elaborate on the findings to identify principles for understanding how and under what conditions balancing autonomy and power might occur in leading organizational change. This discussion is followed by a conclusion.

2. Literature

2.1. What is discretion?

Proponents of discretion argue that leaders greatly influence what happens in their organizations, but this influence depends on how much discretion exists. In other words, discretion, in terms of autonomy and power (as mutually related moderators), affects the strength of the relationship between leadership and organizational outcomes (Espedal, 2009; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick, 2007; Kotter, 2005; Stewart, 1989; Yukl, 2012).

In an increasingly dynamic world, organizations are being forced to make room for discretion to enable change and adaptiveness (Hambrick, 2007). Discretion is assumed to enhance a leader's impact on organizational outcomes, as the organizational

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constraints common to leadership are generally less severe in a context that allows for discretion. Such constraints relate to job demands, expectations, rules, routines, formal control systems, resources, social embeddedness, and networks (Hambrick, 2007; Stewart, 1989). From this point of view, Hambrick (2007, p. 335) argues that “discretion exists when there is an absence of constraint and when there is a great deal of means-ends ambiguity—that is, when there are multiple plausible alternatives.” Hence, the exercise of discretion implies reduced organizational limitations in the form of demands and constraints.

In addition to the organizational determinants of discretion, Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) identified individual determinants in the form of personal commitment, cognitive complexity, tolerance of ambiguity, and mindfulness. Therefore, discretion is not only shaped by organizational demands and constraints but also by the individual factors that form a leader's conception of the basis and motivation for action (March & Weil, 2005). This conception influences leaders' choices, the justification of those choices, and how leaders ultimately act after making a choice.

Leaders need discretion to influence strategy and performance, but they also need discretion for motivational reasons, namely, to help them believe they can make a difference in situations in which there may be ambiguity about outcomes and who is responsible for them (March & Weil, 2005). This belief can justify the considerable commitments demanded of leaders, but it can also lead to complacency, which may affect how leaders interpret success or failure in an organizational change process.

In summary, this article focuses on what actually happens when change agents attempt to balance autonomy and power in leading organizational change. To explore and examine how and under what conditions change agents can combine or balance autonomy and power, I will first outline the main features of the two dimensions.

2.2. Leading change: the role of autonomy

The freedom to make and use judgments informed by knowledge is viewed as the central hallmark of discretion (Hambrick, 2007). Freedom of choice (autonomy) is especially important when leaders have a role as change agents (Burke, 2014; Kotter, 2005; Schein, 2010). Such leaders act by making choices, and they need autonomy to make the decisions they see fit in different settings and at different stages in a change process.

From a change and adaptiveness perspective, autonomy may allow for exploration, which is sometimes associated with new possibilities. March (1991, p. 71) defined exploration as “search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation.” This definition is quite broad in scope and open to various interpretations. In a subsequent study, Levinthal and March (1993, p. 105) restricted the scope of these activities to the knowledge domain, stating that exploration involves “a pursuit of new knowledge.” Novelty, in terms of new knowledge, can be viewed as the lifeblood of the process of organizational adaptation. Adaptation suggests change, and the notion of change in turn suggests a shift to a new course of action, to a new knowledge base, to a set of new practices, and to a new form. Hence, autonomy can be considered an arena that nurtures exploration as a source of change and adaptiveness. Such a context may enable the pursuit of novelty and new possibilities because the legitimacy associated with autonomy protects the leadership from the uncertain success of new ideas. Furthermore, leaders may have the authority to explore ideas that do not appear to be justifiable in terms of internal organizational norms, but the ideas may have high potential in the view of external stakeholders. In these ways, leaders can

sustain exploration because they have both the opportunity and the capability (autonomy/legitimacy) to be impatient with old ideas and patient with new ideas.

Ideally, autonomy or freedom of choice suggests that change agents make the correct decisions or avoid making incorrect decisions, specifically in relation to balancing efficiency and adaptation, the short-term view and the long-term view, stability and change, and passion and discipline. In a complex and dynamic context, however, leadership-initiated exploration might increase both the number of good new ideas that are beneficial for appropriate adaptiveness and the number of bad new ideas that are not (Elster, 1986; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; March 1994; March & Weil, 2005). In handling the resulting dilemma, an organization faces two types of risk. The first is the risk of eliminating autonomy to an extent that undermines the change agent's ability to explore to help the organization adapt to new and changing demands. The second risk is that the change agent's unbridled freedom of choice might lead to harmful organizational outcomes.

2.3. Leading change: the role of power

Leading change requires autonomy, but it also involves the power to act. A rough definition of power is a leader's capacity to obtain what he or she wants or to help others obtain what they want (Dahl, 1957). Based on this view, we evaluate power by considering resources (hierarchical position, information); processes (communication, decisions); behavioural patterns (leadership style); and organizational participants' attitudes (trust, respect, fairness, legitimacy). Thus, there are several bases of power (French & Raven, 1959; Haugaard & Clegg, 2012; Lukes, 2005; Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 2011; Yukl, 2012):

- Power of position (associated with hierarchical control)
- Power of charisma (associated with communication and co-workers' attitudes)
- Power of expertise
- Power of information
- Power of relationships (associated with social control)

Research on power in the context of change and adaptiveness has mostly focused on power bases associated with expertise, information, relationships, and charisma (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Kotter, 2005; Pfeffer, 2011; Yukl, 2012). Although these sources of power are different, links may exist between them. Expertise and information are associated with knowledge, and the transformation of knowledge is linked to social relationships. In particular, the sharing of tacit and embedded knowledge requires social networks, personal contacts, regular interaction, and trust (Kogut & Zander, 1993).

As change agents, leaders have access to power, and they may have a sense of the type of power appropriate to a given change process. However, using the appropriate power is complicated by a problem, namely, that power is at once central to leadership and a complication thereof (March & Weil, 2005). In an organizational change process, there might be tension between hierarchy and participation, power and equality, and control and autonomy. Thus, change agents operate in contexts regulated by social norms and associated with efficiency, effectiveness, adaptiveness, fairness, trust, and transparency. The feeling of power in this context is linked to reputation. A leader's reputation for powerfulness or weakness may contribute to success or difficulty during the change process. Therefore, change agents might be concerned about how they gain power and how they handle their reputation. They might endeavour to act as ostensibly legitimate holders of power. There are some problems with this approach, however. Reputation is

founded on social constructs negotiated among the interested parties and stakeholders in the change process.

3. Method

3.1. Who participated in the study?

This article examines how and under what conditions leaders as change agents can achieve and sustain a balance between autonomy and power. The sources of empirical evidence obtained to provide new insights regarding this question were semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of “successful” change agents who had been active participants in discussions about organizational change and leading change.

I selected 15 leaders based on the following criteria: (1) all of them had been change agents or had experience in leading change in organizations; (2) all of them had reputations for having done well as change agents (in at least one large organizational change process); and (3) all of them had been participants in discussions about leading change (in the media, at conferences, at seminars, etc.). In other words, the focus was on a group of leaders who had *socially constructed reputations as good and efficient change agents*. That is, purposive sampling was performed—key informants who had experience and knowledge of the area investigated or who could provide detailed information that was relevant to the inquiry were selected.

All of the respondents were senior executives on the top management team with responsibility for one or more functional areas in their organizations. Eleven of the respondents came from the private sector and worked in the following industries: petroleum, metal-working, chemical, construction, media, service, bank, and food. Four of the respondents came from the public sector: hospital and government services. Ten of the respondents were men, and five were women.¹ Their ages were between 40 and 55 years. All of the leaders came from organizations that had more than 100 employees.

3.2. How was the research conducted?

Each of the (tape-recorded) interviews took approximately one-and-a-half hours and was carried out at the participant's workplace. The focus was on the following issues: (1) change agents' sense of their own autonomy and power in organizational change processes; (2) change agents' sense of how and to what extent autonomy and power matter in leading change; and (3) change agents' sense of how and under what conditions they could combine autonomy and power in leading change.

The focus was on “successful” change agents, and a large portion of contemporary research on “successful” change agents' echoes an instrumental leadership view (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Kotter, 2005; Schein, 2010). In the pursuit of success, change agents are expected to interpret environments, process information, and formulate plans; actions are instrumental in the sense that they are performed intentionally and are based on the expectations of future consequences for the objectives of the organization (or the change agents). This reasoning suggested that when “successful” change agents are asked about their sense of their own autonomy and power in organizational change processes, they would picture success as the result of their intentions and actions. That is, the rational, instrumental leadership view would be their *espoused theory of action* in leading change (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

I was aware that there might be a difference between change

agents' espoused theory of action and their *theory-in-use*. In the interviews, I first allowed the change agents to talk about their espoused theory. My focus was on the words/ideas/assumptions they used to describe what they as change agents intended to do, what they would like others to think that they did, and how they described autonomy and power as conditions for leading change. Later, I tried to explore the change agents' theory-in-use. The focus was on the change agents' own sense of what really happened when they tried to balance autonomy and power in leading change. The change agents were asked to reflect critically on their practices and experiences to explore the underlying assumptions and norms that framed their thinking and actions, the bases and motivations for what they did, how they justify what they did, and what they explicitly and implicitly communicated about their own practices and learning concerning dilemmas, conflicts, ambiguities, etc.

3.3. How were the data analysed and interpreted?

In the study, I used a combination of “deductive” and “inductive” approaches. The deductive approach involves using a predetermined framework to analyse interview data. The inductive approach involves using the actual data itself to derive the structure of the analysis.

The study departed theoretically from the assumption that change agents' influence in leading organizational change depends on discretion in terms of autonomy and power. The intention was to examine conditions for balancing. Thus, it can be argued that the study in the beginning involved effect testing a hypothesis rather than deriving key points from a grounded type of analysis from the transcripts.

I used the predetermined, conceptual framework to organize the interview materials (tentative themes that emerged from the fieldwork were compared and contrasted with the literature) and to form a basis for explaining conditions for balancing autonomy and power in leading change. The analysis and interpretation of the interview data confirmed that the change agents believed in the instrumental leadership view described above (it was their espoused theory). However, in analysing and interpreting what really happened in leading organizational change, I learned that it was difficult for change agents to have both autonomy and power. This emerging understanding introduced critical but underexplored *dilemmas* associated with balancing autonomy and power. In examining these dilemmas, new categories and themes emerged. In other words, I derived the study's key points from a grounded type of analysis from the transcripts.

The analysis of the data followed the interviews more or less directly. The aim was to identify categories or themes to classify the descriptions, arguments, and views contained in the interviews. Analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the interviews, descriptions, ideas, reflections, etc., which were closely linked in meaning, resulted in the formation of categories. Categories that had similar meanings were combined into a theme. In this manner, the analysis and interpretation yielded main themes and sub-categories.

To increase the credibility and authenticity of the data analysis and interpretation, I used two techniques. The first technique was seeking feedback from a “critical friend.” A colleague reviewed how I had interpreted and categorized the data from the transcribed interviews. Based on this review, we discussed improvements regarding interpretation and categorization. The second technique was “participant validation,” which involved returning to the respondents and asking them to carefully read through the data analyses to validate the interpretations. Positive feedback on the interpretations reinforced confidence in the reliability of the constructed categories.

Finally, the key informants' descriptions, reflections, sense-making, learning, and understanding concerning how and under

¹ There were no gender or age differences in the manners in which problems were perceived or solved.

what conditions change agents could combine autonomy and power were subsumed under the following broad main themes:

- *The change agents espoused bases and motivation for leading change*
- *The change agents perceived problems regarding balancing autonomy and power in leading change*
- *How and under what conditions the change agents could handle the problems to balance autonomy and power*

These main themes contained sub-categories. For example, the findings show that the change agents presented two different conceptions of the bases and motivation for leading change: one related to their espoused theory and one related to their theory-in-use (logic as sub-categories). As another example, the findings illustrated problems in balancing autonomy and power that offered two different possibilities (dilemmas as sub-categories).

The findings illustrate that the change agents largely shared descriptions, views, meanings, and understandings. The agents were committed to a common set of culturally rooted assumptions, beliefs and rules about how they should manage organizational change. They had also learned the same lessons (more or less) from their experiences in leading change. In other words, the organizational contexts were different, but the same sensemaking and learning were the same.

The key findings are reported under each main theme or sub-category using appropriate verbal quotes to illustrate them. These quotes illustrate *types of shared* descriptions, views, meanings, and understandings that could be categorized under the sub-categories and main themes. That is, I selected conceptual categories that were confirmed by quotations from at least 12 of the 15 change agents.

4. Results

In general, the findings from the field study tell a simple story. The story is one that pictures change agents trying to pursue autonomy and power simultaneously. On the one hand, access to autonomy and power helped them believe that they could make a difference regarding organizational efficiency and adaptiveness. On the other hand, access to autonomy and power created self-esteem and self-worthiness that helped them believe that they could make a difference in situations in which there might be conflicts, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Hence, the findings supported the idea about autonomy and power as mutually related moderators that affect the relationship between leadership and organizational outcomes.

Within this short story, however, there is a fundamental leadership dilemma. The change agents needed both autonomy and power. Each was essential to the other, but each could also be the enemy of the other. That is, in leading change, the change agents could face situations in which there was no clear easy choice or answer or situations in which they had to balance conflicting demands. In other words, they faced dilemmas.

The change agents had social constructed reputations for having done well in leading organizational change. This fact may indicate that they had learned to understand and handle the dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power. The question therefore arises: What was enabling the conditions for the change agents' learning?

In elaborating the simple story, I will first present the findings from the field study. The findings will then be discussed, but this discussion does not intend to resolve the complications of finding appropriate answers to the dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power. The intention is to examine the dilemmas and describe ways of thinking about how and under what conditions change agents might manage to balance autonomy and power in leading change.

4.1. The change agents' espoused theory regarding bases and motivation for leading change

The words the change agents officially used to convey what they did in change processes were associated with the instrumental view of leadership. They viewed organizational change as contributing to the ways in which organizations are coordinated and controlled to improve organizational outcomes, and they treated outcomes as the primary product of change processes. Hence, they understood and justified their role as change agents in instrumental terms. Thus, consequential logic was a very strong ideology that permeated the change agents' understanding and thinking such that appropriate behaviour meant demonstrating clearly that they acted in accordance with this logic. That is, the change agents portrayed an institutional logic or a set of "global," culturally rooted assumptions, beliefs and rules about how change agents should manage organizational change.²

The change agents operated in accordance with a logic of rationality and consequentiality. This appreciation of leading change involved change agents' capacities or abilities to affect outcomes. A first capacity that had to be explicitly activated in change processes was autonomy:

"As a change agent I am responsible for achieving organizational outcomes that fulfil our desires as much as possible. My impact on the outcomes depends on how much autonomy or freedom I have."

"As a change agent I need freedom to act more directly instead of trying to 'get around' a problem"

The change agents praised themselves for making and implementing intelligent, instrumental choices, and they claimed that they needed a high level of autonomy to do so. Autonomy, however, was also related to the motivational bases of their actions, as explained below:

"In leading change I confront the organization rather than serve it. In order to motivate me confront the organization I need freedom associated with 'brutality.'"

The change agents needed autonomy to have impact in leading change, but their abilities to bring about significant effects from change processes also depended on power:

"In leading change I must perform and get results. Thus, I need power to secure compliance to my domination through the shaping of beliefs and desires and through commitment to common goals."

All of the change agents agreed that relationships³ were the most important source of power, as follows:

² Uniform pressures for acquiring and maintaining legitimacy in relation to the environment had led to uniform thinking about practices (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). However, the institutionalized and widespread prescriptions for how good and efficient change agents should think and act, could be seen as "rationalized myths" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

³ The change agents did not make a clear distinction between the power of relationships and the power of information. The change agents' positions in information networks afforded them access to information and allowed them to be the distributors of that information. The development of social relationships and social capital were considered important conditions for both power and knowledge sharing.

“Leading change involves building social relationships to mobilize their resources to create the power I need to make changes.”

“I am influenced by being involved and embedded in social networks of relationships.”

“Power in a change process is about the building and rebuilding of social relationships in order to achieve our goals.”

The change agents claimed that they needed autonomy and power for organizational and instrumental reasons. Autonomy and power, however, could also be crucial in maintaining self-esteem and an identity as a change agent:

“Autonomy and power in a change process may create personal self-worthiness... Powerlessness in a change process may create helplessness and loss of self-esteem and identity.”

Thus, access to autonomy and power helped the change agents believe that they could make a difference regarding organizational efficiency and adaptiveness, but it also helped them believe that they could make a difference in situations in which there might be conflicts, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

The change agents' espoused theory regarding bases and motivation for leading change suggests that leading change demanded great actions, which required great discretion in terms of autonomy and power. Autonomy or freedom of choice was a necessary condition for decisions, and implementation of decisions (acting) required power. With respect to leading change in practice, however, the change agents found it difficult or impossible to strike a good balance between autonomy and power. Autonomy was a complicating factor for power, and power was a complicating factor for autonomy. That is, the change agents had experienced a tension between the metaphors of leading change and the observations of leading change.

4.2. *The change agents' perceived problems concerning balancing autonomy and power*

The change agents purported to make and implement decisions in rationalistic terms. When the change agents described what really happened in leading change, however, they made a distinction between the instrumental role and the symbolic role and between leadership as an idea and a reality. “Balancing” was a nice word in the change agents' idealistic world, but they had experienced that it was a cruel concept. Thus, in the pursuit of balancing autonomy and power, they had experienced five elementary problems. The first was the problem of dependency. On the one hand, freedom and autonomy depended on the extent to which leaders as change agents were not socially embedded or constrained by social networks. On the other hand, power and control depended on the extent in which they were embedded in complex social networks (the power of relationships). Thus, the change agents experienced social embeddedness as a necessity and as a limitation in leading change:

“In leading change, I have to develop personal relationships and social networks. In doing so I get control, but it also creates dependency.”

“I have influence if my desires are in compliance with the desires of the central interests in change processes.”

“Being a change agent requires that I be involved and embedded in social networks of relationships, expectations, and norms.

Such involvement provides influence, but it also includes a loss of freedom.”

“If I want to attain freedom I have to stand apart from social networks, but without social ties I have no power.”

Thus, decisions and outcomes in change processes were a result of the interplay between the change agents' individual agency and organizational, social practices and rule structures.

The second problem was the problem of self-interest:

“I get influence from being involved and embedded in social networks of relationships. The norm is that my focus should be on how this influence advances organizational goals, creates motivation, promotes collaboration, solves conflicts, etc., but I could easily use the power to promote my own agenda or promote someone else's agenda.”

“There are problems associated with leading change, but also pleasures. Both the problems and the pleasures might create motivation for using the power to promote my own interests or promote someone else's opportunistic interests. Such action may allow self-interest optimization, short-term temptation, and opportunism at the expense of long-term organizational interests.”

A third problem was the problem of uncertainty:

“As a change agent I must be aware of reality, without falling into cynicism that can arise from the knowledge that our efforts might be in vain.”

“Organizational change is a complex process... Not everything is known. The consequences of taking one action or another are difficult to anticipate.”

“When contemplating a variety of interesting ideas I may face a problem: How is it possible to distinguish beforehand the ones that will be good from those that will be bad? ... Good ideas can only be seen as such after a long learning period.”

A fourth problem was the problem of conflict:

“Leading change demands on the one hand, cooperative endeavour and commitment to common purposes. The realities of my experience, on the other hand, show that conflicts of interest exist among people who ultimately share a common fate and are supposed to work together.”

“I seek intelligence in the name of multiple, nested interests. However, what is intelligent action from the point of view of one interest is not necessarily intelligent from the point of view of another interest.”

“Change involves handling problems when making and implementing difficult choices in settings in which I have to negotiate with powerful stakeholders.”

“I can discover that actions I thought were clever may actually be preludes to problems and conflicts.”

The fifth problem was the problem of safeguarding organizational interests and long-term objectives in the short run. To fulfil long-term intentions and desires in leading change, the change agents claimed an identity and commitment to it. By binding to an identity or by taking certain courses of action that are very costly to change (pre-commitment), they could act without regard for short-

term needs, his or her own opportunistic interests, or short-term consequences:

“Leading change refers to my ability to safeguard long-term objectives in the short run. To do so, I stick to an identity that I have decided to enact, or I stick to the vision of what I have decided to do in my role as a change agent.”

Thus, the findings showed that autonomy and power were not enough to follow through on good intentions in leading change. The change agents who had freedom of choice would need to bind themselves in another way to fulfil their long-term intentions:

“To handle uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflict in leading change I have developed a sense of myself as a change agent, and I have developed a commitment to rules and norms that I consider appropriate to follow.”

The findings illustrated that the change agents faced problems that involved conflicting demands and choices. In other words, the change agents faced dilemmas. In the following, I will elaborate in greater detail the most demanding dilemmas.

A first dilemma concerns social embeddedness. Autonomy depended on the extent to which the leaders as change agents were not socially embedded or constrained by social networks. Power depended on the extent to which leaders as change agents were embedded in complex social networks (the power of relationships). Thus, autonomy and power might each be a complication for the other. Autonomy involves freedom of choice, which implies a reduction in organizational limitations in terms of demands, constraints, rules, social control, etc. Power involves the loss of freedom of choice or implies a complex web of alliances in which a powerful leader is subject to social control.

A second dilemma regards the freedom of choice and self-interest. The proponents of discretion suggested that a high level of autonomy was essential for leading change. The findings showed that autonomy mattered, but it did not necessarily matter in the ways in which proponents of discretion want it to matter. Leading change involves the freedom and capability to make and use judgments informed by analysis and experience. This freedom and capability, however, was subject to error; the findings illustrated that as change agents, leaders may have their own opportunistic agendas. Thus, change agents who have unbridled freedom of choice may matter for good or bad in change processes.

Because unbridled freedom of choice implies risk, how do change agents handle the risk? The findings showed that leaders as change agents avoided risk by using binding mechanisms/pre-commitment: The change agents did adhere to an identity that they decided to enact.

A third dilemma is related to organizational rules and norms, which may be both necessary and limiting in leading change. On the one hand, following the rules could help leaders as change agents to act properly and hence prevent unbridled freedom of choice, which could result in myopia, opportunism, and organizational misconduct in the organizational change and adaptation processes. On the other hand, following the rules could limit the change agents' freedom of choice and hence hamper exploration in ways that prevent organizational adaptiveness.

Regarding another rule-related aspect, the findings showed that autonomy and power were not enough to follow through on good intentions in leading change. The change agents who had freedom of choice would need to bind themselves in another way to fulfil their intentions. Therefore, binding mechanisms in terms of the commitment to appropriate rules and norms (that reflected

accumulated knowledge) could be a necessary precondition for achieving long-term goals. As change agents, the leaders followed self-selected and self-imposed rules or norms (associated with an individual's identity) and disciplined themselves through a sense of self that allowed them to achieve a desired end that might otherwise be attainable only with difficulty. In this manner, the change agents implemented restrictions on freedom of choice and future decision-making power by using binding mechanisms that shaped the preferences underlying the choices. Thus, leading change appears to be a contradiction in terms: Sometimes the change agent confronted and changed organizational rules and norms, and sometimes the change agent needed stable rules and norms as a binding mechanism or as a stabilizing factor. Leading change was about escaping rules to increase freedom of choice, but it was also about following the rules to act properly. Hence, agency was both enabled and constrained by prevailing organizational rules.

The fact that the change agents had social constructed reputations for having done well or having done good in leading organizational change may indicate that they had learned to understand and handle dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power. The question there arises: What could be enabling conditions for the change agents learning?

5. Discussion: enabling conditions for the change agents' learning

The findings suggest two enabling conditions for the changes agents' learning from experience. The first was *the pleasures of the change processes*, and the second was the change agents' *positive reputations*.

The change agents' espoused theory regarding bases and motivation for leading change emphasized a consequential logic. When the change agents described what really happened in leading organizational change, however, they focused on the pleasure, satisfaction, and meaning they gained from acting and interacting in change processes rather than on the outcomes, as follows:

“What motivates me in leading change is the excitement of creativity, the excitement of making decisions and having influence, the excitement of risk, the joy of solving conflicts, the joy of involvement, and the joy of commitment.”

“Motivation arises from a feeling that I am capable of getting things moving.”

The findings illustrated tensions between the change agents' espoused theory and their theory-in-use—regarding bases and motivation for leading change.⁴ Their espoused theory was linked to organizational outcomes and unity, and it represented ideals and norms that were institutionally reinforced. Their theory-in-use was connected to the pleasures of the change process and to diversity, and it provided a viable alternative that addressed the localized, embedded, fluid and contingent nature of leadership in leading organizational change. From the espoused theory point of view, balancing autonomy and power was essential, but “unproblematic.” From the theory-in-use point of view, balancing autonomy and power was essential but “problematic.”

The pleasures of the change process are to a substantial extent independent of the process' outcomes. The change agents' motivation raised from the pleasures of the process was far from unconditional, however. The motivation was connected to the

⁴ The theory-in-use had primarily symbolic effects, e.g. increasing legitimacy in institutionalized environments.

expectation that “things would come out right.” Consequently, understanding how the change agents learned to handle dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power involves recognizing the ways in which the pleasures of the process fit into a learning process. From this perspective, the change agents were asked to reflect on how an interesting, enjoyable, and stimulating change process could be beneficial for experiential learning—regarding understanding and handling of the dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power. The change agents claimed that pleasures of the change process could create or enable the following:

- “Awareness of thought and feelings related to challenges and problems.”
- “Freedom and opportunity to formulate new and interesting interpretations of what is going on. These interpretations allow me to understand more than I did know before.”
- “A culture that encourages rich thinking and capacity to deal with dilemmas.”
- “Awareness of more nuanced appreciation of the change context and the ways to cope with it.”

The second enabling condition was *the change agents’ positive reputations*. On the one hand, positive reputations (success) might indicate that the change agents had learned to understand and handle dilemmas associated with balancing autonomy and power. On the other hand, positive reputations might create *psychological safety* that facilitated knowledge sharing and learning. The change agents indicated that they did know how they were viewed by co-workers, leaders, observers, accountants, etc. That is, they did feel that they were respected and accepted as appropriate change agents, and they had knowledge about norms of appropriateness in the community of changes agents and in change processes. As a result, they did feel psychologically safe in change processes:

“I am free to speak up in problematic change situations.”

“I do not think so much about the potential negative consequences of expressing new or different interpretations and ideas.”

“A free flow of experience or information is the lifeblood for learning and development, and change processes are arenas that allow exchange and combination of experiences.”

“I can use communication and inspiration to mould conflicting interests into a common understanding of problems and solutions.”

The findings indicated that the change agents had insights regarding conditions for balancing autonomy and power, and the insights were an outcome of experiential learning. The findings also revealed two enabling conditions for experiential learning. The first was the pleasures of the change process – associated with mindfulness (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) – and the second was psychological safety—associated with positive reputations (Edmundson, 1999).

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

This article has explored and examined the question of how and under what conditions leaders, as change agents, can balance or combine autonomy and power in leading organizational change. The empirical evidence obtained to provide new insights regarding

this question was gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with a select group of “successful” change agents who had been active in discussions about organizational change and leading change.

The findings from the field study tell a simple story. The story is one that pictures change agents as trying to pursue autonomy and power simultaneously in leading change. Within this short story, however, there is a fundamental leadership dilemma. The change agents needed both autonomy and power. Each was essential to the other, but each could also be the enemy of the other. This finding introduced critical but underexplored *dilemmas* associated with balancing autonomy and power.

In the pursuit of balancing autonomy and power in leading change, the change agents could face situations in which there was no clear easy choice or answer or situations in which they had to balance conflicting demands. Such balancing could require: awareness of tensions between experiences and consciousness; awareness of simultaneous (and not necessarily consistent) feelings and analysis; tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty; balancing; passion and discipline, self-interest and caring, unity and diversity, integration and variety; knowing that discretion and good intentions alone are not enough to follow through on their objectives; and understanding that leadership is a contradiction in terms in that sometimes leaders are expected to confront and change the organization and, at other times, are expected to serve as a stabilizing force. Balancing might also require knowledge about how certain process or organizational characteristics have the potential to enhance the gaining of appropriate insights, whereas other characteristics might inhibit such potential.

The fact that the change agents had reputations for having done well in leading organizational change indicated that they had developed vivid insight about understanding and handling the dilemmas. The change agents’ insight was an outcome experiential learning, and the findings revealed two enabling conditions for this learning. The first was the pleasures of the change process, and the second was psychological safety.

The article has used interviews with fifteen leaders described as having “reputations as good and efficient change agents” to identify a tension in the existing prescriptive literature between two central factors regarding leading change: autonomy and power. The paper has theoretical and practical interest in making the case for such a tension and in indicating some conditions under which the two factors could be balanced in practice.

6.2. Strengths and limitations

This article represents an introduction or a sketch of ideas that might enhance our understanding of how balancing autonomy and power might occur in leading organizational change. The article is clearly an incomplete exploration, and the limitations of the empirical data invite the usual caution in interpreting the generality of the results. However, the results do suggest a few principles for understanding conditions for balancing autonomy and power. The leadership literature suggests that leaders can make a difference when they have discretion (autonomy and power). Based on the findings of the field study, the article argues that autonomy and power are important conditions for leading change, but success may depend on how change agents have learned to understand and handle dilemmas associated with balancing.

The field study has several limitations. An important limitation concerns the sampling frame. First, the study focused on leaders who had reputations as “successful” change agents. Such reputations are not self-evident, however. Reputations are social constructs negotiated among many interests, observers, accountants, etc., and in change processes there might be ambiguity about

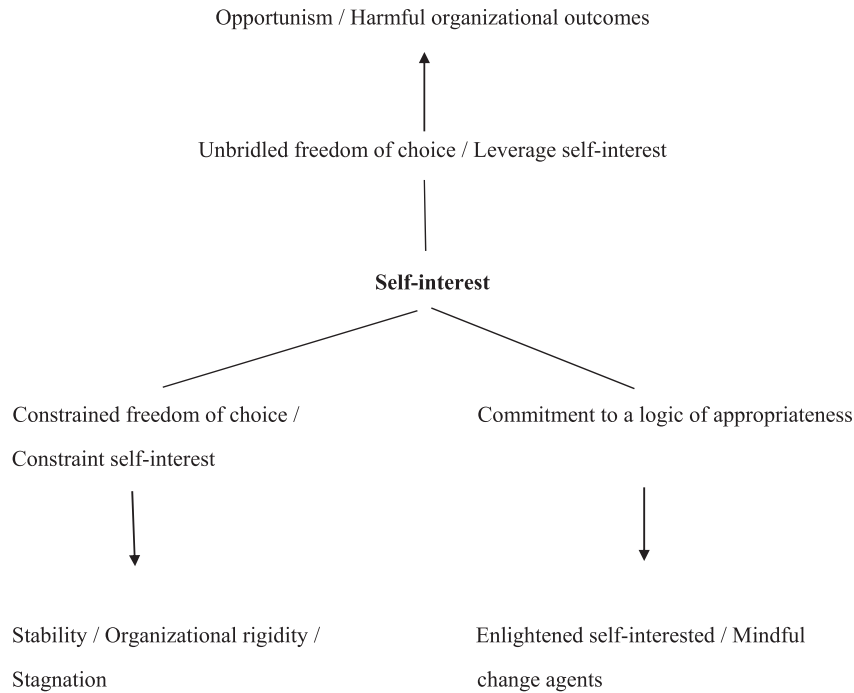


Fig. 1. Balancing self-interest and freedom of choice: Problems and solutions.

outcomes and their attractiveness and about who is responsible for the outcomes. Reputations diffuse through a population of observers and might change over time. Thus, for leading change, we may have to make a distinction between leadership as an idea and a reality and between the instrumental role and the symbolic role.

Second, the study included only “successful” change agents. Without a comparison group of “unsuccessful” change agents, the findings of the study might be difficult to interpret. For example, unsuccessful change agents may, in the same way as successful change agents, claim that autonomy and power are necessary conditions for intelligent, leadership-initiated organizational change and adaptiveness.

If both successful and unsuccessful change agents agree that leadership-initiated organizational change and adaptiveness require autonomy and power, this finding would confirm that both groups have the same espoused theory. In practice, however, there might be a large difference between “successful” and “unsuccessful” change agents. A leader who has a reputation as a successful change agent might feel that he/she is accepted and respected, which again emphasizes the centrality of psychological safety for learning behaviour—regarding balancing autonomy and power. Furthermore, a successful change agent might be willing to take more risk and make decisions that are more daring. The fact that a change agent is expected to succeed might give the change agent more autonomy and power in carrying out risky experiments in change processes. Thus, a change agent who has tasted success, in contrast to a change agent who has not, may have learned to understand and handle individual, social, and organizational conditions for balancing autonomy and power. Therefore, unsuccessful change agents may not be able to provide information that is relevant to an inquiry into the conditions for balancing autonomy and power. That is, it is difficult to ask people (unsuccessful change agents) to reflect on experiences they do not have.

The case group consists of leaders who have a reputation as “successful” change agents. However, success might be a poor teacher. Thus, successful leaders have been warned against the tendency to fall into a success or competence trap, where success

reinforces exploitation of existing competences and crowds out exploration of new competences, hindering change and adaptiveness (Levinthal & March, 1993).

6.3. Future research

The findings of the field study illustrate that it might be difficult for leaders as change agents to balance self-interest and freedom of choice. On the one hand, self-interest combined with unbridled freedom of choice (leverage self-interest) might in some situations produce harmful organizational outcomes. On the other hand, self-interest combined with constrained freedom of choice (constrained self-interest) might in some situations cause stability, stagnation, and lack of exploration. The findings suggest that commitment to a logic of appropriateness might transform self-interested change agents into enlightened self-interested/mindful change agents. Such a development could be a solution to the problems that a balance between self-interest and freedom of choice can cause (see Fig. 1 below).

The logic of appropriateness is a perspective of how human action is to be interpreted. March (1994, p. 57) defines the logic of appropriateness by emphasizing that decision making and action are viewed as driven by rules that define what is appropriate to do in a given situation. Rules are followed because they are considered natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collective, actors do what they consider appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation.

Thus, interesting avenues for further work regarding conditions of change agents’ autonomy and power include the following.

- Does commitment to a logic of appropriateness develop enlightened self-interested change agents?
- Can enlightened self-interested change agents be a solution to the problems that a balance between self-interest and freedom of choice may cause?

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