

# Viewing Organizational Change from a Micro-Perspective

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**Abstract.** Modern organizational change, a key strategy focus, has high failure rates—but research underscores employees' role: once seen as passive/resistant, they can also initiate change and shape organizational routines. With Lewin's model, this study uses routines (repetitive, interdependent patterns for stability/change) to analyze interactions. Key findings: 1) Change affects employee involvement via ostensive-to-performative routine mediation; 2) Involvement impacts change via performative-to-ostensive mediation; 3-4) Leader support moderates both links, boosting participation when stronger. This study fills micro-foundation gaps in change research, highlighting individual-routine interplay to help managers refine change strategies.

**Keywords:** Organizational Change; Routine.

## 1. Introduction

In modern organizations, organizational change continues to occur at a high pace. Therefore, organizational change—defined as altering existing work practices and strategies that affect the entire organization—has become a central focus in the literature on strategy and change management [1]. However, in many cases, sometimes estimated to be up to 50% , organizational changes fail to deliver the expected results and achieve the desired goals.

Although there are undoubtedly various explanations for the high failure rate of organizational change efforts, management researchers are increasingly concluding that employees play a crucial role in the success or failure of organizational change. The mainstream view employees in the role of change recipients, considering that employees are generally unwilling to commit to organizational change because they often perceive it as an intrusion and disruption of the routines and social relationships they rely on to complete important work tasks [2]. They may also experience an increase in workload due to the assignment of new tasks, the need to adapt to new working relationships, and the frequent introduction of new strategic goals.

However, in focusing on how leadership influences employees' response to organizational change, some scholars have noted that past research has overlooked that leaders themselves may be recipients of change [3]. This is not only because the positions and interests of leaders may be adjusted due to changes but also because, in some cases, the creative changes initiated by employees require leaders to adapt. This offers us a new perspective on employee behavior and organizational change, namely, that employees themselves may also be the initiator of organizational change [4].

The concept of routine, introduced into mainstream research by Nelson and Winter, reflecting how individuals in organizations set about getting things done, might provide a bridge for understanding this transformation between “prescriber” and “performer”. Routines are conceptualized as repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multiple participants [5]. Scholars believe that routines generate both stability and change within organizations [6, 7]. On the one hand, routines are sources of stability because they help standardize behaviors and guide individuals toward expected behaviors, increasing the speed, reliability, and efficiency; on the other hand, the variation in routine performance also makes routines a potential source of change [5]. Therefore, while organizational structures provide a source of stability for individual actions, these individuals actually engage in daily affairs through their "effortful accomplishments" [8] and reaffirm or modify the

routines they participate in through each action they take. In doing so, the execution of routines influences individuals, and the behavior of individuals reshapes these routines, and so on.

Through literature reviewing, we found that although some scholars have begun to focus on the micro-foundations of change, there are still many gaps in understanding the relationship organizational behavior, routine and change. Using organizational routines to understand organizational change may help managers capture changes at the micro-level, "zoom in" on these changes and their drivers, and thereby find a better starting point for change management. Therefore, from a routine-based perspective, we hope to further explore the mechanisms of influence between individuals and organizational change.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Organizational Change**

Organizational change refers to the transformation or adjustment of the functional mode of an organization. The earliest research on organizational change is Lewin's force field analysis [9]. According to Lewin's theory, there are driving forces and restraining forces in the process of organizational change. When the driving forces outweigh the restraining forces, change occurs. The specific process of change can be described by the "unfreezing-changing-refreezing" model. Unfreezing refers to establishing incentives or motivations for organizational change, encouraging employees to change their original behavior patterns or work attitudes, and adopting new behavior patterns or attitudes to meet the needs of the organization. On this basis, changing is the critical link. Through this stage, the organization can generate new ideas, information, behavior patterns, or attitudes. Refreezing is the process, after the change, where the organization solidifies these new behavior patterns or attitudes through various means and methods, thereby reaching a new state of balance.

Over the past few decades, the theories and literature on organizational change have developed in the following aspects:

(1) The nature of organizational change. For example, Hannan and Freeman viewed organizational change as a process of breaking structural inertia [10]. Through this behavior, the organization changes its original structure and generates a new structure, enabling the organization to adapt to a new operating environment and avoid death. Tsoukas and Chia proposed that organizational change might not always disrupt routines and change the usual order, as classical theories suggest [11]. For some organizations, organizational change is a continuous process. They also referred to this continuous organizational change as organizational becoming. These studies have supplemented the connotation of organizational change with different factors.

(2) The driving forces of organizational change. For example, Prahalad and Oosterveld pointed out that many enterprises are experiencing competitive discontinuity, where a large number of external factors (such as information technology, globalization, consumerism, direct investment in securities, and open standards) force them to step out of their comfort zone and into the opportunity zone, and through this process, organizational transformation (a type of organizational change) occurs [12]. Dehler and Welsh pointed out that the main goal of organizational change is to improve organizational performance and realign with organizational values [13]. Additionally, organizational change accompanies a series of changes in individuals (cognition, emotion, action) and the organization (vision, leadership, etc.). These studies explain why organizational change occurs.

(3) The restraining forces in organizational change and measures to overcome them. This is also an important part of Lewin's theory. McShane and von Glinow summarized six restraining forces (direct costs, saving face, fear of the unknown, breaking routines, system incompatibility, team dynamics incompatibility) and pointed out at least six coping methods (communication, training, employee involvement, stress management, coordination, coercion) [14]. Rafferty and Griffin analyzed employees' perceptions during change and found that continuous change, planned change, and

transformational change all lead to a state of uncertainty among employees, thereby forming resistance (restraining forces) [15]. Fiedler (2010) used this framework to conduct a case study on a mobile communication company, discovering various forms and causes of resistance behaviors and observing five stages in managing resistance behaviors: 1) identifying and evaluating potential resistance behaviors; 2) planning resistance behavior management; 3) preparing accordingly; 4) resolving resistance situations; 5) controlling resistance behaviors and further identifying (cyclic) [16]. Within this framework, organizational change is seen as a process of managing restraining forces.

(4) The outcomes of organizational change and individual behaviors within it. For example, Smith summarized a series of previous research results and analyzed the success rates of different types of organizational change [17]. Herscovitch and Meyer developed the concept of commitment to organizational change based on the classic organizational commitment theory, which can predict employees' responses to change [18]. Currently, this branch of organizational change has been flourishing, with extensive research on a series of employee reactions to organizational change (e.g., job crafting, resistance behaviors), as well as the impact of leadership traits and behaviors on employee acceptance of change [19, 20].

## **2.2. Organizational Routine**

In early conventional studies, emphasis was placed on routines as fixed patterns of individual behavior in response to certain stimuli [21]. For example, Stene compared routines to personal habits, suggesting that routines, like personal habits, have considerable stability [22]. March and Simon and Cyert and March (1963) compared routines to computer programs, emphasizing the orderliness of routines and their role as a bridge in individuals' perceptions and responses to organizations [21, 23]. At the micro-level, routines are also considered to be maintained through the cognitive structures of individual members of the organization in the form of event schemas or scripts [24]. Nelson and Winter compared routines to genes, suggesting that organizational routines, like organizational genes, have functions such as memory and dispute resolution, and can serve as targets for control, replication, and imitation, which are crucial for organizational growth and development [25].

Organizational routines can be understood as generative systems with internal structures and dynamic mechanisms [5]. Therefore, to deeply understand organizational routines, it is necessary to clarify their internal structures for analysis and measurement. A well-known model currently is the endogenous development mode [5, 26]. The endogenous development model of organizational routines mainly includes two aspects: the ostensive aspect and the performative aspect. Specifically, (1) the ostensive aspect involves the abstract side of routines, derived from the abstraction of organizational routines. In specific forms, it may be implicit collective consensus or established implicit norms, as well as explicit organizational principles or documented standard operating procedures. The ostensive aspect of organizational routines is usually principled; (2) the performative aspect involves the concretization of organizational routines, referring to the specific behaviors exhibited by particular organizational members participating in specific organizational activities at a particular time. These behaviors are governed by the ostensive aspect of organizational routines and are manifested in an improvisational manner, according to the actual situations faced by participants and the connections between specific actions.

According to the analytical logic of Pentland and Feldman, the ostensive aspect of organizational routines (rules, procedures, consensus, norms) serves as an indicator that determines the performative aspect of routines (specific action patterns), thus exerting a leading effect on the performative aspect of organizational routines. Meanwhile, the performative aspect, in specific actions, also allows for improvisational play based on actual circumstances and in conjunction with the principles of the ostensive aspect.

Although routines have become central to the analysis of organizational change, their inherent implicit characteristics make operational measurement of routines very challenging. Becker

summarized the four commonly methods for measuring routines as follows: identifying repeated sequences, identifying fixed condition-action rules, identifying task variety and analyzability, identifying the content, process, and sequence of recurrent interaction patterns [27].

### **3. Theory and rationale**

#### **3.1. Employee Involvement in Change and routine**

Glew et al. defined employee involvement (EI) as “employee involvement seeks to increase members' input into decisions that affect organizational performance and employee well-being” [28]. To overcome resistance in organizational change, employee involvement is one of the oldest and most effective strategies for formulating change plans and implementing changes [29]. Organizational change typically involves changes to workflows, structures, cultures, or strategies, which affect employees' work environment and tasks. If the change is well-conceived and the organization can effectively communicate the goals and expected outcomes of the change, employees will feel their importance in the change process, thereby increasing their level of involvement.

According to Lewin's change management model, in the first phase of organizational change, "unfreezing," the organization clearly outlines the blueprint for organizational change, formulates a relatively complete set of implementation instructions, and indicates the goals and direction to the employees. At this time, the schema of employees' past work tasks undergoes readjustment, and the internal "changing" begins. The change instructions conveyed to employees are essentially altering the ostensive aspect of daily routines—implicit collective consensus or established implicit norms, or explicit organizational principles or documented standard operating procedures, affecting the performative layer of employees' actions.

Involvement leads to high-quality change and overcomes resistance in the implementation phase. High levels of employee involvement can generate various information and ideas, which may contribute to effective and appropriate innovation in certain circumstances [30], thus facilitating organizational change. The adjustment of employees' tasks do not directly bring about organizational change; instead, they do so by altering the performative aspect of routines, i.e., improvisational events where employees adjust their behaviors according to the actual situations they face. When these events accumulate to a certain extent, the ostensive aspect of routines is correspondingly adjusted, change emerging.

Therefore, we propose the hypotheses:

Proposition1: The effect of organizational change to employee involvement is mediated by the ostensive to the performative aspect of routines.

Proposition2: The effect of employee involvement to organizational change is mediated by the performative to the ostensive aspect of routines.

#### **3.2. Leader Support and Employee Involvement in Change**

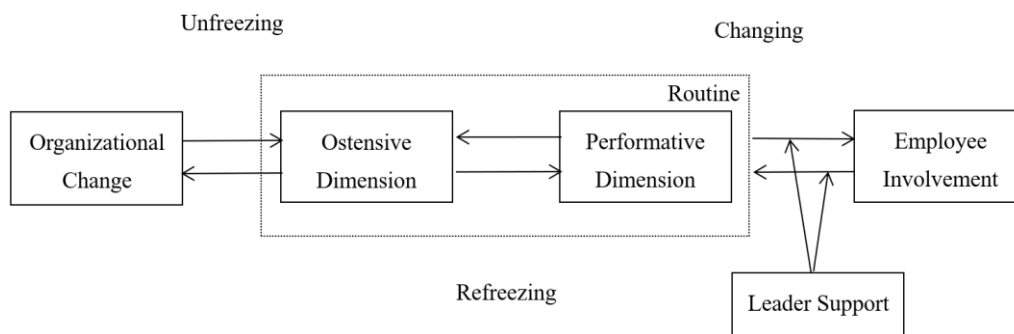
In the "changing" phase, leaders need to support employee involvement to ensure the successful completion of organizational change. Research by Pearce et al. points out that to stimulate the process, employees must understand the change [31]. Leaders should educate, communicate, involve, intervene, provide task support, offer emotional support and motivation, manipulate, co-opt, and compel employees to change. Leaders with encouraging behaviors will provide support or advice during the change process, thereby gaining the advantages of task commitment and effectiveness [32]. Employees' active roles in organizational change lead to positive feelings [33], increasing their acceptance of the change process [34], and subsequently enhancing individual involvement.

Similarly, we believe that leaders play a crucial role in transforming employees from change recipients to change initiators. When employees' adaptive changes to daily tasks remain at the operational level, it is challenging to promote organizational change. Positive leader support helps

employees gain confidence in their work groups and fosters an environment open to new work ideas [35]. Leader support, as a critical resource for employees, is essential for individuals to pursue and implement new work ideas. Leaders need to provide the necessary support to their followers so that employees can better create new behavior patterns to influence change. Therefore, we propose the hypotheses:

**Proposition3:** Leader support moderates the effect of organizational change to employee involvement through organizational routines. The stronger the leader support, the more likely employees actively involve in the organizational change.

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**Figure 1.** Theoretical Model

#### 4. Summary

This piece centers on modern organizational change, noting its status as a key strategic focus alongside high failure rates. It emphasizes a shifted view of employees—from passive/resistant recipients to potential change initiators who influence organizational routines. Leveraging Lewin's model and the concept of organizational routines (repetitive, interdependent patterns serving stability and change), the study identifies two mediation effects (change on involvement via ostensive-to-performative routines, and involvement on change via performative-to-ostensive routines) and two moderation effects of leader support (strengthening both mediation links to boost employee participation). Ultimately, it aims to address gaps in understanding change's micro-foundations and offer insights for managers to optimize change strategies.

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