

Effects of Resistance on Organizational Learning

Introduction

It is indisputable whether resistance and learning are two important issues contemporary organizational leaders have to manage. While both concepts have received considerable attention in academic research, albeit with little consensus on their conceptual underpinnings, there is still a dearth of systematic research on the actual effects of resistance on organizational learning. However, due to its supposed role in hindering organizational change initiatives, resistance has been commonly prescribed a negative connotation. This prevailing viewpoint inherently makes it easy to slip into an interpretation of resistance as dysfunctional for organizational learning. This essay contends that this dominant perception is largely a result of an assumption favoring the management or change agent as rational, and the consequential treatment of resistant behaviors as irrational. The aim of this article, then, is to offer a re-conceptualization of resistance beyond the contextual confines of change, and explore its functional roles, particularly in stimulating organizational learning. Firstly, the conceptualizations of resistance and organizational learning will be explored. In particular, due to the aim to explore the fundamental features of resistance beyond the organizational literature and the overwhelming diversity of the conceptualization, this essay will draw on the work of Hollander and Einwohner (2004), who have conducted a comprehensive review and analysis of resistance based on a large number of published work on the topic. Then, Jost and Bauer's (2003) pain metaphor and Weick's (2003) assertions on the importance of moments of interruptions will be employed to show how resistance can be seen as a resource that acts to signal that something is going wrong and needs rectification. It will be further argued that, by triggering awareness and directing attention to a problem, resistance acts to call for evaluation of and reflection on the situation, hence stimulating organizational learning. Finally, recognizing that possible limitations to the functional effects of resistance cannot go unaddressed, the last section discusses several variables that can potentially limit the capacity of resistance in stimulating organizational learning. Therefore, the central argument of this article is as follows: Re-conceptualizing resistance as a resource rather than as a deficit sheds light on its functional potentials. In view of its fundamental features, resistance does have the potential to stimulate organizational learning. However, whether or not this translates to reality remains dependent on a wide range of variables surrounding the organization concerned.

Conceptualizing Resistance

Despite a surge in studies on resistance in the past few decades, resistance remains a theoretically eclectic concept (Mumby, 2005). As Hollander and Einwohner (2004) claim, the concept of resistance is still unfocused and vague. Due to the lack of a clear and systematic definition, there is little consensus on what constitutes resistance, and the language of resistance has in fact been used in research to describe vastly different phenomena on a range of different dimensions (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In terms of its dimension and scope, resistance can describe actions occurring at the individual, collective or institutional level (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Similarly, the targets of resistance can vary from individuals to groups to work conditions to organizational or social structures (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In addition, resistance can take different directions or goals, and can be aimed at achieving change or curtailing change (Mullings, 1999). Resistance can also manifest in various modes. Among the diverse array of literature on resistance, the most frequently studied mode of resistance is one which involves physical bodies or material objects in acts of resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This can refer to formal, collective and overt actions such as protests and formation of unions (Jasper, 1997, as cited in Hollander & Einwohner, 2004), as well as informal, routine and covert individual actions such as feigning sickness and pilfering (Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Scott, 1985). Apart from the physical and material mode, resistance can also take place in various other forms. For example, resistance can be accomplished through symbolic behaviors such as silence (Pickering, 2000, as cited in Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) or breaking silence (Hughes et al, 1995, as cited in Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

From their review and analysis of the conception of resistance based on published work on resistance in the social sciences, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) proposes a seven part typology of resistance that includes: overt resistance, covert resistance, unwitting resistance, target-defined resistance, externally defined resistance, missed resistance and attempted resistance, each differing in the levels of resistor's intention, target's recognition as resistance, and other observer's (such as a researcher or other third party) recognition as resistance. Among these, overt resistance, one which is intended to be visible and which is readily recognized as resistance by targets and other observers, is the most widely accepted and recognized form of resistance and is the core of the conceptualization of resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). On the other hand, covert resistance, which is conceptually similar to everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and routine resistance (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) are both intentional and observable, but may not necessarily be recognized by the target as resistance. These two forms of resistance will form the basis of the conceptualization adopted in this essay. Amid the

vast conceptual differences, however, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) identify two core elements that are consistent across all conceptualizations of resistance: action and opposition. Generally accepted as a key component of resistance, action may involve conscious, active and expressive behavior and can emerge either at the verbal, cognitive or physical level (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In addition, as reflected by some terms commonly used to describe resistance- contradiction, tension, rejection, challenge, disruption and conflict (Alpert, 1991; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004), resistance always involves some form of opposition. Bauer (1991), however, draws a distinction between resistance and opposition in his definition of resistance in the context of resistance to change in organizations. According to Bauer (1991), resistance is an expression of conflict of interest, values, goals, or means to ends which is unanticipated by the change agent, and which transforms into opposition only after being institutionalized through formal channels of expression. As the overwhelmingly diverse nature of the conception implies, pinning down a definitive conception of resistance in organizations is unfeasible. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, the notion of resistance will draw on Bauer's (1991) definition of resistance to change and Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) two core elements of resistance. This conceptualization will, however, extend beyond Bauer's (1991) definition to include acts of opposition such as every day, routine resistance, which may not have been institutionalized through formal channels. Further assumptions are that these acts are visible, observable, and arise from conscious oppositional intentions. In other words, the forms of resistance discussed in this essay will focus on what Hollander and Einwohner (2004) term as overt resistance and covert resistance. To sum up, resistance will be conceptualized as: Unanticipated oppositional action arising from a conflict of interest, values, goals or means of achieving a goal, expressed with conscious oppositional intention and in forms that are observable.

Conceptualizing Organizational Learning

In a fashion very similar to that of resistance, the concept of organizational learning is still a vastly multi-dimensional, diverse and fragmented area with little convergence despite a proliferation of research since the 1980s (Wang & Ahmed, 2002). Organizational learning, in the simplest sense, refers to a change in organizational knowledge (Schulz, 2002). It involves acquisition of new knowledge (Miller, 1996) by means of added, transformed or reduced knowledge (Schulz, 2002). Essentially a multilevel phenomenon, organizational learning encompasses learning at the individual, group/team and organizational level (Jost & Bauer, 2003; Lim, Laosirihongthong, & Chan, 2006; Marquardt, 1995). While it is commonly acknowledged that all learning starts with individual learning, and that individual and group learning have positive effects on organizational

learning (Lim et al, 2006), the notion of what really constitutes organizational learning remains excessively broad, diverse and controversial (Wang & Ahmed, 2003). This essay adopts the perspective proposed by Belasen (2000) and Jost and Bauer (2003) that learning at the organizational level involves consolidation of knowledge generated from the individual and group level which leads to changes in formalized procedures within an organization. Formal procedures refer to 'a set of explicit constraints within which organizational activities unfold' (March, Schulz and Zhou, 2000, as cited in Jost and Bauer, 2003, p. 29). As Belasen (2000) notes, organizational learning is a realignment of the organization through reinvention of organizational settings, in which 'new missions are formulated, new plans and goals are set, structures are redesigned, processes are reengineered and improved, strategic beliefs are modified, and the operational causal map is altered (p.292). This conceptualization of learning can also be associated with Argyris and Schon's (1996) notion of double-loop learning, the form of learning which occurs when errors are detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives. Organizational learning can thus denote phenomena such as changes in formal written rules or employees' collective habits (Jost & Bauer, 2003).

Resistance and Organizational Learning

Resistance in organizations usually emerges in two opposite directions, either for the purpose of resisting existing structures or to resisting change initiatives (Mullings, 1999). Yet, the dominant perception of resistance that permeates management wisdom is arguably rooted in studies of the latter. In fact, most studies on resistance to change rest on the widely held and accepted assumption that people resist change and this is an issue management has to overcome (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). In addition, change is always taken to be initiated by super ordinates/management and resisted by subordinates (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). This results in a bias that favors the change agent as rational and objective, and treats resistant practices as inappropriate (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Jost & Bauer, 2003), irrational and dysfunctional behavior that has to be overcome if effective and lasting change is to be achieved (Collinson & Ackroyd, 2006; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008). Many studies have set out to explore the causes of resistance to change and subsequently offer strategies to overcome resistance (Examples?). Yet, most do not in fact offer ways to overcome resistance per se, but instead suggest strategies for preventing or minimizing resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Rather than offering solutions, these approaches arguably further perpetuate the view that resistance is dysfunctional and should be avoided altogether. This perception carries particularly significant implications for an era in which managing change and learning is seen as the key tasks of organizational

leaders (Marquardt, 1995), as indirectly prescribes a negative association between resistance and learning.

In today's highly turbulent and competitive business environment, the capacity to learn at the organizational level is highly valued and widely regarded as a viable survival strategy (Brockbank, McGill, & Beech, 2002; Lim et al., 2006). At the heart of this, then, is the ultimate desired outcome of organizational learning- the flexibility and ability to adapt and cope in rapidly changing environments (Brockbank et al., 2002; Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Ford, 2005). Hence, a key challenge for organizational leaders is to maximize organizational learning in order to develop an organization that has the capacity to recognize, react, enact appropriate responses, and adapt to environmental changes (Alas & Sharifi, 2002; Brockbank et al., 2002). Such capacities are inevitably embedded in an organization's knowledge base (Alas & Sharifi, 2002). In view of this, the perception that resistance to change is dysfunctional for organizational learning lies in the fact that in the context of change in which employees are expected to learn and adopt new skills or behavior, resistance is seen as a refusal to learn and consequently translated to signify disruption to the change process (Alas & Sharifi, 2002).

However, looking beyond resistance to change to studies on other kinds of resistance, one can see that resistance can in fact be viewed in a more positive light than in the context of resistance to change. In the context of everyday, routine resistance to existing workplace conditions, for example, studies have found acts of resistance to be strategies that can stimulate structural (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) or even revolutionary (Scott, 1989) change. Therefore, what is needed is an exploration of the issue beyond the confines of perspectives on resistance to change. We should look beyond the context of resistance to organizational change efforts, and explore resistance in a more general sense, based on the fundamental characteristics of various kinds of resistance that typically manifest in organizations, regardless of the goals or directions. In fact, whether aimed at resisting or instigating change, resistance in organizations can manifest in very similar ways, from more overt forms of resistance such as protests or more subtle forms of resistance such as foot dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, intentional carelessness, feigned sickness, absenteeism, sabotage, among others (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Mullings, 1999; Prasad & Prasad, 2000, Scott, 1989). Exploring the fundamental characteristics of resistance will enable us to gain a more neutral insight on the phenomenon without the constrictions of a preconception or underlying assumption, which will also enable us to better explore the functionality of resistance in organizations, and how it may, in fact, stimulate organizational learning.

Re-conceptualizing the Role of Resistance in Organizational

Learning

Following the preceding proposal, it is necessary to reconceptualize resistance not as a dysfunctional phenomenon, but as a resource that, if recognized and utilized appropriately, can produce positive effects for the organization. In fact, some scholars have already suggested that we look beyond overcoming resistance and instead focus on discerning the source of resistance and treat it as a signal that something is going wrong in the organization (Lawrence, 1954; Senge, 1997). Jost and Bauer (2003) further extend this idea with the pain metaphor to show the diagnostic potential of resistance, and proposed a shift of attention from the causes to the effects of resistance. Drawing on a functional analogy to acute pain in the human body system, they suggest that resistance plays the same role within an organization as pain does in the human body. Just like how pain functions as a signal for the body, resistance functions as a feedback loop for management, by means of an alarm signaling that problems exist and should be looked into and acted on to prevent further damage (Jost & Bauer, 2003). This can be further illustrated by a predictable cycle of events that follows the experience of acute pain in the human system. When pain occurs, it shifts attention to the source of pain, enhances the person's body image and self-reflective thinking processes, interrupts present activity and brings it under evaluation, and stimulates a new, altered course of action (Wall, 1979). Jost and Bauer (2003) argue that even though acute pain may initially disrupt and delay ongoing activities, its functions in prompting internal attention, indicating the location and types of problem, and stimulating reflection render it an important resource that can be crucial for survival.

Transferring the same diagnostic functions of pain to resistance, resistance can be seen as a functional resource for an organization to diagnose and rectify current activities that are potentially damaging (Jost & Bauer, 2003). Like a person who is unable to experience pain, an organization that is not capable of detecting resistance, or as Jost and Bauer (2003) label, 'functional collective pain' (p 11), will be disadvantaged through its inability to detect threats to survival. More specifically, when resistance occurs, whether it is aimed at resisting change initiatives or resisting existing (everyday) conditions in the organization, it is an indication that changes are needed. Regardless of the context or situation that triggers resistance, it fundamentally signifies an existence of tension and conflict of interests in the current state of affairs, implying that things are far from ideal and that there are areas that could and should be investigated and rectified.

Envisage two distinct approaches to such a situation: one organization disregards signs of resistance or suppresses the acts of resistance while another organization takes time and effort to diagnose, reflect and identify necessary changes to make. The latter will arguably be better off in the

long run because it has had the avenue to identify and rectify its problems, including any possible latent issues or conflicts that had initially caused resistance. In the former organization, however, problems will remain, if not aggravate. Therefore, threats to the organization will remain and are most certain to have effects on the organization, regardless of whether it was perceived to be so. Hence, employing Jost and Bauer (2003)'s pain metaphor, it can be argued that in situations of pain/resistance, the intuitive tendency is to approach it in ways similar to those suggested in the cycle of events proposed by Wall (1979). In this sense, resistance does not only stimulate reflection, but is itself a resource for reflection. Therefore, as will be discussed later, resistance can be particularly useful in stimulating a specific kind of learning, reflective learning, in organizations.

In addition to Jost and Bauer's (2003) pain metaphor, an alternative way to highlight the potential function of resistance is to understand it within the framework of Heidegger's (1962, as cited in Weick, 2003) three modes of engagement. Drawing on these three modes of engagement, Weick (2003) describes three modes of engagement in the organizational context- the ready-to-hand mode, the unready-to-hand mode and the present-at-hand mode, to explore the disconnections between organizational practices and theories, from which he emphasizes the function of the unready-to-hand mode of engagement in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The unready-to-hand mode refers to moments when an ongoing activity is interrupted and when problematic aspects that caused the interruption become salient (Weick, 2003). In other words, unready-to-hand mode denotes moments of interruption in organizational processes or activities. According to Weick (2003), such moments interrupt the relevant actors of the organization, prompting them to take efforts to make sense of the interruption. Because a moment of interruption causes partial detachment from the organizational activity and makes the activity more visible, it is an opportunity to get a richer and clearer glimpse of the picture, to reflect, and to gain a better understanding of the issues concerned (Weick, 2003). It is during these moments when relevancies that have previously gone unnoticed can be discovered (Weick, 2003). Therefore, being such a rich resource, the potential illumination that interruptions of organizational activities can offer should not be overlooked. For it's many similar characteristics to moments of interruptions as illustrated by Weick (2003), resistance could be seen in the same light as the unready-to-hand mode of engagement. In many ways, resistance is parallel to a scenario of the unready-to hand mode as resistance is fundamentally a form of interruption to ongoing organizational activities or processes. Therefore, drawing on Weick's (2003) viewpoint and placing resistance within this framework, we can, again, see resistance as a resource that makes underlying problems visible and allows the organization to reflect and

discover issues or problems that would otherwise remain invisible. Both Jost and Bauer (2003) and Weick's (2003) propositions highlight the potential diagnostic function of resistance in stimulating awareness and directing attention to a possibly malfunctioning area within the organization, which inherently links to its function as a useful resource in stimulating reflection and learning. The following section, then, will focus on reflective learning, and illustrate how resistance can function as a resource that stimulates reflective learning at the organizational level.

Resistance as a Resource: How resistance cans Stimulate Learning

Reflective learning refers to 'the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective' (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p.99)'. In short, reflection is the key to learning from experience. A key human mechanism for making sense of and learning from experiences (Boyd & Fales, 1983) reflection has traditionally been seen as an individual phenomenon (Kessener & Termeer, 2007). Now, however, there is increasing recognition of the rationale of reflection for work at the organizational level (Kessener & Termeer, 2007). In the organizational context, reflective learning refers to a communal process of reflection of an experience or issue which requires critical examination and reconstruction of meanings (Kessener & Termeer, 2007). Kessemer and Termeer (2007) argue that this is an important process for organizations because experience is both the dominating feature and resource in work and organizations. Therefore, capitalizing on experience and learning from it is intrinsically linked to the survival of organizations. Yet, reflective learning does not take place voluntarily and naturally. Because of the human tendency to reduce cognitive dissonance, we tend to adopt strategies to avoid perceiving information that contradicts our perceptions and beliefs (Markus & Zajonc, 1985, as cited in Kessener & Tameer, 2007). Kessener and Tameer (2007) claim that, for this reason, reflection only occurs in dynamic situations and does not generally arise during stagnant situations. In other words, reflection needs to be provoked by uncertain or ambiguous situations in which 'customary meanings are no longer satisfactory' (Schon, 1983; Rogers, 2001; Weick et al, 2005, as cited in Kessener and Tameer, 2007, p.233). At this point, the logic of bringing in resistance, as an example of such situations is clear, as resistance arguably fits the depiction and shares many parallels with situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. To different extents, all these situations can be seen as forms of unanticipated and undesirable interruptions to ongoing organizational activities which require deeper reflection and understanding. Therefore, in view of the nature of resistance and situations that trigger a 'felt need' for reflection, it can be argued that

resistance can in effect function to stimulate reflective learning in organizations.

Existing studies showing how resistance leads to change can serve to support the proposition that resistance stimulates organizational learning. While there is a dearth of studies within the organizational literature exploring the direct links between resistance and learning, the relationship can in fact be understood in relation to the connection between resistance and change, as the central aim of organizational learning is the capacity to change in order to cope and survive (Alas & Sharifi, 2002). In view of the central aim of organizational learning, some connections with resistance become apparent because dealing with resistance is fundamentally about coping. An organization that is able deal with resistance in a functional way and utilize resistance to its benefits will arguably have a greater capacity to cope and survive in unpredictable situations because ultimately, whether dealing with resistance or with other internal or external predicaments requires the same set of capabilities: the ability to recognize, react and enact appropriate responses.

As an example of how resistance can instigate changes, Scott (1989) has reported that routine forms of covert resistance, displayed through actions such as foot-dragging, pilfering, feigned ignorance and sabotage could have revolutionary capacity. In addition, Prasad and Prasad's (2000) study of technological change in a health maintenance organization has shown that although informal resistance was enacted and constituted differently in different contexts and hence produced varying effects, resistance, in general, has been observed to produce the following effects: affirm the resisters' self identities, rouse renegotiation of roles and relationships, trigger reinterpretation of the dominant managerial discourses, and challenge managerial control, albeit to different extents. The central fact is that resistance 'jolted managers and supervisors out of their habitual modes of taking employees for granted' (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p.401). While there is no basis to establish a direct link to organizational learning, this example does show an instance where resistance has functioned to stimulate learning by performing the following functions: signaling existence of a problem, stimulating a reflection on the situation, and consequently leading to some form of change. This implicitly illustrates that resistance can play a role in stimulating organizational learning.

Limitations

However, even though it has hitherto been contended that resistance can function to stimulate organizational learning, one needs to avoid slipping into an idealistic interpretation of the role of resistance and recognize the various limitations that can inhibit its functions. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that while resistance can function to stimulate organizational learning, it by no means imply that resistance will result in learning. In reality,

whether or not resistance leads to positive outcomes, or whether it stimulates learning at all depends chiefly on a wide range of other internal or external factors surrounding the organization in question.

Firstly, interactional in nature, resistance is defined by both the resisters' perceptions of their own behavior, and the targets', or even a third party observer's reactions towards that behavior (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Therefore, how resistance is perceived, or whether it is recognized at all, depends largely on the perspectives and interpretations of the relevant actors because the same action may well be perceived differently by different observers. As an example, in their studies of Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong, Groves and Chang (1999) have reported how the same behavior was perceived as resistance by one researcher (an Asian woman), but perceived as childish and deferent behavior by another researcher (a White man). This demonstrates the complexity involved in the recognition of resistance. Even when acts of resistance are intended to be visible and are in fact observable, cultural and social factors, among others, may mean that they may not necessarily be understood as resistance by the target (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Cultural differences, for instance, may be a particularly relevant variable that could come into play considering the multicultural nature of many contemporary organizations. The possibility that even observable acts of resistance may not be recognized as resistance highlights a key problem: if resistance is not recognized at all, all its potential constructive functions are completely eliminated. For resistance to be functional, it must first be recognized as resistance, and experienced as an unpleasant and undesirable phenomenon. As Jost and Bauer (2003) assert in the metaphor to acute pain, 'pain needs to be experienced as negative in order to be functional' (p.11). Therefore, for resistance to stimulate organizational learning, it has to be first recognized by its target as resistance.

Beyond the problem of the perception and recognition of resistance, other complex set of factors can come into play, adding to the complication of the issue. Even when resistance is recognized, further factors could downplay any potential functions of resistance in stimulating organizational learning. As Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Ford (2005) contend, a wide range of factors exists as 'disconnects' that widen the gap between ideals and realities. Ultimately, resistance is a deeply sociological phenomenon, encompassing issues such as power and control, equality and differences, social contexts and interactions (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This, coupled with the complex nature of organizations and organizational learning, unquestionably points to the complexities involved in conceptualizing the relations between resistance and organizational learning. Particularly, constraints to learning can stem from the existing management, organizational culture and organizational configurations

(Stebbins, Freed, Shani, & Doerr, 2006). Examples of some specific contextual factors within an organization include: power relations, politics and decision-making authority, culture of communication and interaction and level of management control.

One key factor that predisposes organizational learning is the structure and culture of an organization. As Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird and Unwin (2006) claim, the wider social structure of an organization can be essential in enabling or preventing learning. Taking horizontal and vertical organizational structures as examples, one can see that resistance is more likely to stimulate and consequently lead to organizational learning in horizontal organizational structures than in vertical organizational structures. Horizontal organizations, with their emphasis on lateral collaborations, permeable boundaries, mutual understanding and effective communication processes (Belasen, 2000; Dent & Goldberg, 1999) over centralized control and decision making, have a better capacity to respond effectively to ambiguity and unanticipated situations (Belasen, 2000). This is also inextricably related to the underlying mindset of an organization. As Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Ford (2005) note, the mindset of the relevant organizational actors can have a direct impact on the level of acceptance or denial towards unanticipated, and particularly, undesirable events (Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Ford, 2005). On one end of the continuum is an acceptance of reality, in which the relevant actors, such as supervisors or managers, are able to let go of past perceptions, experiences and comfortable attitudes, to address new realities that have surfaced. On the other end of the continuum is denial, in which the actors' mindsets are rooted in past experiences and perceptions, and do not accept that there are problems with existing ways, and that change is needed (Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Ford, 2005). Hence, the structure and underlying mindset of an organization can have direct implications on what ensues after resistance has surfaced.

Stebbins et al's (2006) study of a secrecy-based organization in the defense industry serves to show how organizational learning can be impeded by cultural factors within the organization. In the company, which has an internal culture that does not encourage learning and knowledge transfer beyond individual work units, Stebbins et al (2006) found that social distance, absence of dialogue between top and middle management, the professional and organizational culture of the company that rarely considers the needs of employees, and the secrecy culture that limits information flow, have all proven to be obstacles to collective reflection and learning. Considering the assumption that learning requires collective reflection (Boud, Cressey, & Docherty, 2006), resistance will likely fail to stimulate learning within an organizational culture such as this which does not support information transfer and knowledge sharing across

the organization. In another example, Campbell's (2006) study of learning in a Catholic church shows how learning can be impeded in dogmatic organizations with rigid rules and authoritative power structures. In such an organization, where beliefs, principles and rules are commonly accepted as authoritative and beyond question, inputs from the lower levels of an organization is normally unwelcomed. When learning occurs, it is driven by directives from above (Campbell, 2006). It was observed that in such a culture, the top leadership seeks to maintain control of the entire organization by means of protecting the integrity of organizational principles, leaving little space and flexibility for other organizational actors, such as supervisors and middle managers, to respond to the realities facing the organization at large. While the example of a Catholic Church is a somewhat extreme example, it serves to show how organizational culture and power relations can severely limit the functions of resistance. In all likelihood, resistance may be suppressed or disregarded. In other words, in such organizations where bottom-up changes are highly improbable, resistance will most likely fail to stimulate organizational learning.

Conclusion

This essay has presented an overview of the conceptualization of resistance and explored the dominant perspective on resistance in relation to organizational learning in current management wisdom. It has been contended that the negative connotation often prescribed to resistance is largely contributed by the prevalent assumption that views resistance as irrational behavior within the context of resistance to change. Drawing on Jost and Bauer's pain metaphor and Weick's proposition about moments of interruption, it has been argued that resistance could be reconceptualized in a more positive light. Rather than being seen as an obstacle to overcome, resistance can be seen as a functional resource: as a signal that serves to warn and direct attention to a problem.

While providing organizations with the opportunity to attend to and rectify a problem before the problem expands or deteriorates, resistance simultaneously serves to stimulate organizational learning by instigating a felt need for reflection and change. The pain metaphor, in particular, implies that when a warning signal emerges, the intuitive reaction is to manage and rectify the problem. Applying this to the organizational context, then, suggests that resistance will naturally lead to an awareness of the need to change. Yet, the relationship between resistance and learning is not a simple and straightforward one. Ultimately, whether or not resistance can function to stimulate learning is dependent upon many variables. The first problem pertains to the issue of recognition. Due to a range of possible reasons such as perceptions and cultural barriers, an intentional act of resistance may not necessarily be recognized as such by

its intended targets. If resistance is not acknowledged and recognized, its potential function in stimulating organizational learning is completely eliminated. Furthermore, additional factors, such as organizational structure and culture, may also act to limit the functions of resistance in stimulating organizational learning. Therefore, while resistance does have the potential to stimulate organizational learning, whether or not that translates to reality remains dependent on a wide range of factors surrounding the organization concerned.

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