Study of employees’ behavior during organizational change: effects of business theatre on Kübler-Ross model

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to study the employees’ behavior during organizational change and the effects of business theatre on the Kübler-Ross Model to boost the employees’ spirit so that the efficiency of an organization would increase.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors revisit the insights from previous work on the role of organizational change and its effects on employees’ behavior. Classic Kübler-Ross Model has been used in this study to analyze employees’ behavior during the change process.

Findings – This article shows how business theatre can act as a healer and help employees overcome emotional turmoil. Eventually, the implementation of business theatre may shorten the time taken by the employees when they go through shock-denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance-commitment phases of grief.

Originality/value – The paper provides new insights into the role of business theatre in organizational change management. It focuses on the interrelationship between both, with the help of the conceptual framework of the Kübler-Ross Model, which explains employees’ behavior during the organizational change.

Keywords
Organizational change, Change management, Kübler-Ross Model, Employee behavior, Business theatre

Imprint

1 Introduction

Organizational change is vital for attaining growth. However, it often leads to major restructuring inside an organization, resulting in changing lives of many employees. According to Wick ford, it steers mental distress in employees due to the change in routine processes, salary cuts, and undergoing demotion in work positions leading to dissatisfaction and dispute [1]. Therefore, it is vital to understand employees’ state of mind by using Kübler-Ross Model. It is important to keep employees’ morale up during the phase of organizational change by providing them fairness and supporting them with compassion, according to Wick ford.

This report aims to demonstrate the impact of business theatre as an alternative tool to boost the employees’ spirit, thereby increasing the organization’s efficiency. However, what became necessary in this review was to acknowledge the basic understanding of why change management occurs in an organization [2]. Also, it is imperative to understand the organizational change that the employee has to go through before answering the main question. It is important to discuss these questions before understanding how business theatre can help solve organizational change issues. The study mainly focuses on an employee’s level using the Kübler-Ross Model of grief on how business theatre would influence their acceptance level towards the organizational change faster [3].

The scope of this study includes Lewin’s Model of Change Management and how the Kübler-Ross Model is linked to it. However, the scope would not discuss the theories, such as Carnell, Senge, ADKAR explaining change as employees’ response to resistance, according to Carnall, Senge et al., Goyal & Patwardhan. Similarly, business theatre is of primary focus for this study, explaining how business theatre is related to a change in management.

Although much literature has discussed change management and its relation with the business theatre, there is a gap in understanding the relationship between business theatre and the Kübler-Ross Model of grief [4]. Therefore, this study tries to bridge the gap by focusing on the impact of business theatre on employees during the organizational change process using Kübler-Ross Model.
2 Literature review

2.1 Role of change management
Change can be considered a journey of an organization from the initial phase to the desired phase by solving the issues encountered during this development, according to Ahmad et al. However, it is difficult to manage the change in planning, monitoring, and control. Suppose steps or the processes in change are not considered carefully, or progress is not monitored consistently. In that case, change may lead to failure, which generally happens because of Gill’s lack of knowledge, competencies, time, and money [5]. The ability of an organization to realize how to position itself in the future and how to manage the required changes is of more importance in change management, as stated by Todnem By.

2.2 Reasons for organizational change
Organizational change plays a key role in improving the performance and business of the company. It mainly occurs because of changes in business strategies, technology, economic pressures, intricate business environment law and policy structure, and, most importantly, the organizational culture and values, as stated by Mosadeghrad. The major reasons for the organizational change include market change adaption, technical & digital advancement, and transformation [6]. Organizational change is also carried out to avoid internal disputes like bureaucracy, process improvements, organization expansion to reach a new market, and merger and acquisition. In order to remain in the competition, the organization has to undergo continuous changes. According to the recent findings, for every five years, two out of three organizations change, as Li, 2020.

Therefore, any company must have its employees dedicated to the change to maintain its effectiveness. Managers play a key role in preparing the employees for the upcoming change [7]. During the process, employees may encounter an emotional imbalance, as any change would build a sense of insecurity and loss. Therefore, it is most important to manage the employees through such emotional imbalances. Many of them struggle to adapt to the organizational change, as stated by Smirnova [8].

2.3 Lewin theory of change management
To explain this change in depth, Kurt Lewin’s Change Management Theory is considered in this discussion. This theory is one of the oldest yet robust and can be easily applied in the management field. It is particularly suitable for individuals or groups of employees when they go through organizational change. Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is appreciated for his work in social psychology and organization development. He is also known as the “Father of social change theories,” as stated by Kaminski.

Lewin proposed two approaches in change management; the first approach discusses the movement of the organizational change process from a fixed state to the next one, going through several pre-planned steps, by following Lewin’s action approach model, as stated by Lewin [9]. In contrast, the second approach discusses the three-step model, which describes three stages of the change, such as unfreezing-moving-refreezing, as stated by Lewin.

The unfreezing stage is carried out to overcome the employees’ resistance. In this, multiple activities such as exploring ideas, brainstorming, and team building activities at an organizational level are executed to impart knowledge of the change to employees [10]. The rate at which people move through the unfreezing stage depends upon the transparency of the change process and inclusion of every employee, as observed by Kaminski. The moving stage includes implementing new ways of working that are more efficient and liberating than the old methods. This stage is closely related to employees’ feelings, behavior, and thought processes. The moving stage convinces the employees that the new process is better than the old process, requiring restructuring the organizational activities. It is considered the most important stage in organizational change. It requires high investment costs and time for the implementation, as observed by Bamford & Forrester [11].

The refreezing stage deals with standardizing the operating process. It makes sure that the earlier processes are fully eliminated and the new processes are incorporated in day-to-day work by making it a status quo. For the acceptance of the new processes, rewards and managerial support is provided to the employees until the next change is incorporated in the organization, as observed by Kaminski, Bamford & Forrester [12].

2.4 Lewin’s force-field theory of change
Lewin explained resistance to change with a force-field theory, the analysis of driving forces, and restraining forces imparted by the employees; driving
forces encourage organizational change, whereas restraining forces oppose any change occurring in an organization [13]. He looked at organizational change as a dynamic balance of forces that occur due to internal and external influencing factors within the organization, as observed by Kuhn.

According to Lewin’s theory, having balance in the force field is more important to avoid tension and resistance to change in the organization, as observed by Endrejet et al., which can be achieved either by increasing the driving reduction resisting forces. Reduction in the restraining forces is usually preferred in the organization because boosting the internal or external driving forces would rather increase the aversion within the management [14]. Therefore, managers and leaders need to work critically on this situation when attempting to change, and therefore to do so, it is important to overcome the resistance caused by the group, to build more trust in the administration, and be empathetic towards personal loss experienced by the employees, as observed by Sutevski, n.d.

The threat of power is the main factor causing resistance to change at a group level and an individual level. A resistance from managers is experienced when their power is likely to get shifted to their subordinates. In other words, the hold of managers over their employees might get reduced. On the other hand, group resistance is observed within organizational change [15]. Some groups are likely to become powerful among the others. Also, group resistance is increased when managers of groups get a stronghold over their employees. Such sudden change in processes can put the employees in distress, as observed by Sutevski, n.d.

These all restraining forces are linked to employee’s psychology and how they react to it. Hence, it is essential to understand the psychological behavior of employees during change management. This behavior is further addressed with the help of the Kübler-Ross Model, Lunenburg

2.5 Kübler-Ross model of grief

According to Kübler-Ross Model, the human mind follows the change curve, as whenever a change occurs in an organization, the first response of an employee is always denial towards the change. The model depicts how an employee goes through five stages of a psychological behavior to accept the change. As observed by Savolainen, these five main stages are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.

Denial is the first main stage experienced by an employee, as researched by Sale et al. This stage is generally short-lived and may consume some time to digest the disturbing news or reality of change. Here, an employee tends to be more defensive throughout the stage that causes the employee’s efficiency. Anger is the second main stage of the Kübler-Ross Model, as researched by Corr et al. At this stage, the employee becomes restless and angry because of a sudden change in his routine processes. Therefore, (s) he tends to blame himself or another person more often [16]. The employee faces frustration and irritation in this phase. Then comes the third stage, i.e., bargaining, as researched by Trejbalová & Salisbury. Here, the employee starts giving himself false hopes, where (s) he believes by negotiating, (s) he does not have to go through the change. In this stage, a constant thought of “what if” comes to mind, as researched by Belyh.

In the depression phase, the employee feels scared and remorseful. There is very little motivation left in the group as well as at an individual level. An employee might think of it as a dead block and may feel low or demotivate, as researched by Flynn. Lastly, acceptance is the fifth stage, where an employee starts developing readiness towards the change in the organization. (S) he may not feel happy about the change, but the resigned attitude slowly develops acceptance. Throughout the process, an employee’s resistance to change is created in an organizational change process, as researched by Belyh.

3 Strategies to overcome the resistance to change

There are several ways to overcome the resistance to change in an organization. It is worth mentioning the top six methods that are mostly used in the organization, such as communication & education, participation & involvement, support & facilitation, manipulation & co-optation, negotiation & agreement, and explicit & implicit coercion, as studied by Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu.

3.1 Communication & education

Communication is one of the best ways to help employees to understand why the change is occurring. It can also help the employees to adapt to the change faster [17]. Educating people about the change in advance helps the organization overcome resistance to change, involving face-to-face discussions, group reports, and presentations, as studied by Kotter & Schlesinger.
3.2 Participation & involvement

It is often noticed that when employees' opinions or ideas are taken into consideration in the change process, the resistance from employees is likely to get reduced, and they will become more accepting of the change. (Value-Based Management.net, 2019)

3.3 Support & facilitation

The employees always seek emotional or material support from their managers during difficult times of organizational change. Suppose managerial support is provided at the right time. It will take fear and anxiety away from the employees' minds by making them more efficient and adapting to the change. (Value-Based Management.net, 2019)

3.4 Manipulation & co-optation

It is one of the common approaches in which managers try to influence the employees to accept the change. Sometimes an employee or a group of key employees are given their desired role in implementing change, as studied by Kotter & Schlesinger.

3.5 Negotiation & agreement

In negotiation & agreement, incentives are offered to active or potential resistors to deal with resistance, as studied by Kotter & Schlesinger, which is especially used when there is a major resistance inside an organization to the change, as studied by Darling & Taylor.

3.6 Explicit and implicit coercion

Coercion is generally the last choice of a manager in which change is prioritized over an employee's interest. It often leads to job loss, transfers to unwanted locations, and demotion of the employees, as studied by Van Vliet.

Another way to overcome the resistance to change, business theatre is an alternative that can act as a business tool. It can be used to reduce the conflicts among employees and increase transparency within the change process, thereby increasing the organization's efficiency.

3.7 Business theatre

Business theatre is a well-known tool that has been used by many organizations in the past few decades. It is used to describe organizational actions through the change process, as studied by Schreyögg. Business theatre is mainly used to spread awareness regarding the problems encountered during the change process among the employees. Thus, it is a new field with new challenges for drama actors, scriptwriters, and directors to learn a new language and beliefs to discuss the organizational problems, as studied by Meisiek.

Business theatre is an art-based play that can bring positive energy among employees by promoting a change in the organization. It is often known as “Organizational Theatre,” as studied by Badham et al. Many countries like Germany and France are using business theatre in organizational development. German researcher named, Schreyögg defined “Organizational Theatre” and explained the nature of business theatre by stating that professional actors plan a play with the funds and material provided by the organization, as recorded by Larsen. They construct a drama based on a problem faced by the organization, as recorded by Haghighi et al. The target audiences are mainly department members, and the organization pays to the performing team for providing the rendered service. In business theatre, employee participation is mostly low, as recorded by Johnston.

The main issue targeted by the business theatre is the problem faced by the employees in the organization. When a problem in the organization remains unsolved, or a manager fails to address it, it impacts employees’ mental state, as recorded by Fløvik et al. Professional scriptwriters consult employees’ employees to discuss these problems and set a play along with the actors. The play usually addresses the problem and its effects on the employees in a traditional way. It also displays earlier attempted solutions to solve the problem by the organization and then asks its audience to provide an effective response for the betterment of the change process, as recorded by Badham et al.

Schreyögg’s theory is discussed based on two parameters: Organizational specificity and professionalism. Organizational specificity consists of particular issues related to change management in an organization explained in the business theatre act. Then, these issues are further classified as conflicts at the individual level, group level, or organizational levels, as recorded by Kim et al. On the contrary, professionalism concerns the expertise of the stage actors. Here, trained actors perform the business theatre in an organization. Sometimes, employees in a company can also participate in the act. Organizational specificity and professionalism are further categorized as improvised theatre and stage-managed theatre. In improvisational theatre, a group of actors sets a play without any script.
It is a spontaneous activity, as recorded by Nisula & Kanto. During this activity, problematic issues in the corporate are spontaneously discussed with moderate employee participation in the play. In contrast, in stage-managed theatre, the message which needs to be delivered is already decided beforehand by the scriptwriter, as recorded by Meisiek.

Based on employee participation, business theatre can be termed into three categories, namely, employee theatre, improvised theatre, and business theatre. When there is high participation of employees in the play, it is termed as employee theatre. This theatre is played in a small group of 30 employees to yield better results. When the target group is large, it is often divided into subgroups. Doing so leads to gather different perspectives and solutions to the same problem. As participation from an employee level is extremely high, team-building exercises become easy to perform. Conversely, when there is low participation of employees in the play, it is termed business theatre. Particularly, in this theatre, professional actors are hired to set an organizational play. These actors then focus on the unspoken problem within an organization and create a stage play to discuss those openly in a friendly environment, as recorded by Meisiek.

Another type of theatre is improvised theatre, or often called “Improv.” In this theatre, improv. Games are played, which help to develop an outlook for the employees to think outside the box by coming up with new ideas. This technique helps them to cope up quickly with their stress and anxiety about the change. Apart from this, it also provides employees with an experience of spontaneity, collaboration, new idea generation, critical thinking, and refinement. It also helps employees look critically towards each change occurring at an individual and organizational level, as recorded by Nair & Kalpathi.

After understanding how a business theatre can help resolve employees’ concerns on the change process, it is important to look into how this tool would help an employee at an individual level to tackle all the challenges and cope with the organizational change.

4 Discussions

4.1 Effects of business theatre on employees’ behavior during organizational change

As mentioned earlier, there are five phases of human behavior during the organizational change in Kübler-Ross Model. This study further discusses how business theatre would act on each of the employee's phases during the change.

4.2 Denial

When a change occurs at an organization, the employee naturally tries to avoid the controversial situation by simply refusing its existence in the denial phase. Denial can be considered a defense mechanism that the employee uses to avoid anxiety and protect his ego. Denial works as a protective function in employee’s behavior. However, prolonged denial can cause ill health of an employee, as recorded by Telford et al. Therefore, to reduce this prolonged denial phase, business theatre can be used as an effective tool to overcome the issues, such as lowered efficiency and procrastination at work.

4.3 Anger

Anger makes a person defensive and tries to potentiate self-control, according to Biaggio. When a person feels hurt and his needs are not satisfied at his required level, he becomes extroverted. He experiences rage or fierce dislike about something, as stated by Myers. On the other hand, the business theatre would act as a healer to this mental phase of the employee; it will help the employee overcome emotions, such as sadness and fear of change happening in an organization. It increases the excitement by reducing the tension and impulsivity of the employee.

4.4 Bargain

A bargain is a phase where an employee is ready to do anything, not feel the pain of the loss, or be spared from changing. (S)he starts negotiating in his mind by remaining in the past. This stage can last for weeks or months depending on the employee’s mental state and how (s)he reacts to the situation, as observed by Axelrod. To tackle this stage, business theatre can act as a therapist. It will help the employee to communicate and share their feelings about the change with each other. The business theatre would also help employees regain the organization’s faith and make them believe the benefits of the change, leading to shortening the bargaining stage from months to weeks.

4.5 Depression

Depression is often experienced when unexpected, dramatic changes happen in one’s life or in the sur-
rounding, which reduces decisiveness and impacts a person’s memory. Depression can happen even in minor situations; as researched by Ekland-Olson et al., spontaneity is lost, and concentration weakens in the depression. To overcome this stage, business theatre can play an important role in boosting their self-esteem or build interpersonal relations within the organization.

4.6 Acceptance
An employee may not accept the change easily; however, (s)he learns to live with it eventually, which promotes acceptance as an adjustable and positive result in organizational change, in an evaluator study by Telford et al. This stage makes the employee believe that the change is good and it will promote organizational growth, in an evaluator study by Gleeson. The employees will be motivated towards accepting the new change and building new meaningful relations. However, this stage cannot be achieved directly until the employee goes through all the above stages, as mentioned in Kübler-Ross Model (Kübler-Ross Model after implementing business theatre, Savolainen, 2016).

This study has hypothesized five stages of the grief model after implementing the business theatre. It depicts that an employee’s grief cycle can be shortened and lower a degree of decline in morale. The rate at which an employee goes through shock-denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance-commitment phases may become fast with implementing business theatre, especially because business theatre discusses the unspoken problems of an organization during the change process. It gives these problems a voice and puts them in front of employees and their managers in the form of quick-witted play. These problems are discussed in an open environment, where the employee does not have to bear the blame for pointing out such issues, which is useful for the employees, as his reputation in front of higher authorities in the organization remains unharmed.

Time taken by each employee to go through the five mentioned stages in Kübler-Ross Model may get reduced, as business theatre allows him to communicate strongly with each other. Interestingly, when the employee relates his problem with a scenario shown in a play (s), he often gets connected. He feels that (s) he is not the only one mentally struggling with the change process. (S) he understands that rather everyone is going through the same phase, thereby attaining mental relief. Thus, business theatre helps employees believe in the change process. They may become ready to fight with the emotional imbalance and decide to work more efficiently.

5 Conclusion and recommendation
This article discusses Lewin’s contribution to organizational change management and his finding on force-field theory about how the employees impart the driving forces and restraining forces during organizational change. It further connects the thread with Classic Kübler-Ross Model to analyze employees’ behavior during the change process by emphasizing the five stages of grief. It put forwards new insights on the role of business theatre in organizational change management by asking how business theatre can act as a healer and help employees overcome the emotional turmoil they go through during organizational change.

Business theatre is an important managerial tool to solve organizational problems, including the issues faced daily and during change management. Employees are going through the change process experience a wide range of fluctuations in their emotions, making them less efficient during the process, which then acts as a resisting force to the organizational change. The study discusses how the time taken by an employee to go through shock-denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance-commitment phases gets reduced with the help of business theatre. Also, the organization should keep in mind to seek feedback from the employees. It will help them to understand the impact of business theatre activity on employees’ work life. The feedback from them will further help the organization check if the business theatre activity has been effective. It should also be noted that business theatre may not act similarly for every employee in the organization and yield different results.

This hypothesized model can be further validated by quantifying the employees’ performance after implementing business theatre activity on organizational change, which can also be examined by conducting a one-on-one interview of the employees in the organization to get their insights.

Statement on ethical issues
Research involving people and/or animals is in full compliance with current national and international ethical standards.
Conflict of interest
None declared.

Author contributions
The authors read the ICMJE criteria for authorship and approved the final manuscript.

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