

Choromides, Constantinos

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## **Leading change in Financial Service Organisations: An Exploration of Employees' Perceptions of Management of Change Using an Organisational Justice Framework**

Dr. Constantinos Choromides

*Senior Lecturer, Institute for University to Business Education,  
Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland, United Kingdom.*

*Email: [constantinos.choromides@gcu.ac.uk](mailto:constantinos.choromides@gcu.ac.uk)*

### **Abstract**

Change is accepted as a process determined among an organisation's senior management; therefore, employees would predominately resist the change process, making it necessary for change strategists to address the resistance prior to implementing the change programme. Since a strategic challenge in any major organisational change is the ability to manage different responses to change among employees, this article's novelty and practical contribution is in using the concept of organisational justice framework to explore and understand the awareness, perceptions and responses of the employees, irrespective of their level in the organisational hierarchy, around the change management approaches and processes; offering valuable insights into our knowledge on how employees' respond to change and the effect that their responses has on any change programme. Using data, from an in depth case study, from 6 senior managers, and 33 staff members selected through purposive sample, we identify numerous key challenges that need to be considered and resolved to enable financial services organisations to design successful change strategies.

Using a qualitative research design and moving away from the methodology employed in previous research where participants reported only on predetermined questions via structured questionnaires focusing on the positive or negative aspects of change, we employed an interview questionnaire that allowed participants to choose for themselves which characteristics of the change experience they will consider, thus exploring the employees' diverse perceptions of organisational change.

Key findings from this study suggest that organisational justice can act not only as an indicator for the effective execution of the change initiatives, but also as a framework for understanding employees' perceptions of management of change, and enable effective change strategy development in the organisational environment. Other important findings suggest that organisational justice can be used to forecast employee reactions and behaviours around the desired change and incorporate strategies and procedures that will successfully facilitate change process in the future. Finally, the study contributes to existing knowledge around organisational justice literature within the context of management of change.

**JEL Classification:** J5, M1, M5

**Keywords:** change management, change process, organisational justice, organisational change perceptions

## **1. Introduction**

Major organisational change can cause frustration, with employees losing the security of the known and the familiar in terms of identities associated with the professional networks in the workplace and the work status they once enjoyed, (Paulsen et al., 2005; Stadler and Hinterhuber, 2005). In most cases, change is accepted as a process determined among an organisation's senior management; therefore, non-management employees would predominately resist change, making it essential for change strategists to address the resistance prior to implementing the change programme (Cameron and Green, 2019).

Therefore, establishing positive employee beliefs and attitudes around the change programme is an important requirement for the successful delivery of any change programme (Armenakis et al., 2007; Konigswieser and Hillebrand, 2016). The focus of scholars in identifying how organisational change can be managed, was around the various processes which could produce employees to become resistant to change proposals. Building on the existing literature around resistance that highlight the fact that resistance to change has many features and characteristics to consider (Piderit, 2000; George and Jones, 2001), opponents of resistance studies advocate the notion of the subjective experiences of employees to change to establish what resistance to change involves (Harvey and Broyles 2010). Although organisations frequently initiate major change projects, our knowledge on the effect that experience with change management has on any change programme is limited (Green, 2007; Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Since a challenge in any major organisational change is the ability to manage different responses to change among employees (Strodbeck, 2016), an investigation into employees' perception of change programmes will attempt to explain whether employees are resisting the change itself, or whether they have identified possible negative outcomes of change or they didn't agree with the process of implementing the change (Hunt, 2015).

Previous studies have attempted to conceptualise the implications of several aspects of the organisational change process using theoretical perspectives coming from different disciplines and set the stage for future research, giving emphasis on the adoption of the change project by the employees (Carter et al., 2012), design of practices to involve and engage employees in the change process (Langer and Thorup, 2005; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006), and the impact of communication in enabling employees better understand the change, and enable them to be involved (Lies, 2012; Semple 2012).

A concern that organisations have is employees' understanding of organisational justice, given its impact in shaping attitudes and behaviours of employees. Previous research on organisational justice has concluded that fairness perceptions, including job satisfaction, trust, cooperative work behaviours, and organisational commitment, which are relevant to all employees irrespective of their levels in the organisational hierarchy, strongly affect the outcome of the change programme (Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Xu, 2016).

In this study we use an organisational justice framework to explore the perceptions of the employees around the change management approaches at a time of major organisational change for a financial services organisation and the role of leadership in these changes, given its impact in shaping attitudes and behaviours of all employees irrespective of their level in the organisational hierarchy. The main challenges for the organisation was to provide improved services delivered by a motivated workforce in the aftermath of the recent economic austerity, with senior management team implementing spending cuts as they were required to deliver more with less.

Organisational justice theory defines the relevant variables used to research and comprehend more thoroughly employees' resulting behaviour, attitude and feelings of trust during change (Greenberg, 1987). According to Folger and Cropanzano (1998), this framework consolidates the end results of organisational change with the approach and process used to deliver it, by categorising employees' perceptions, views and feelings regarding how they have been treated within an organisation.

The next section sets the theoretical background and expands on the context of employee concerns, perceptions and responses during organisational change and leadership and management during organisational change by reviewing literature. The insights from the literature informs the exploratory methodology applied to address the questions that this study sets out to answer. Subsequently, key findings from all participants around critical factors around employees' fairness perceptions and responses to the change and to the way the change was implemented will be outlined along with the change programmes' impact on employees' feelings. Finally, some practical implications drawn from the study will be presented.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Change Management**

Management of change is a topic frequently researched by management scholars (Hughes, 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Change, defined as the process of an organisation from one state of affairs to another (Berneth, 2004), with employees losing the security of the known, the sense of power and control they used to have, as well as the organisational networks they have developed over time (Jones et al., 2004). Since it is widely acknowledged that change is always induced by the management as a top-down process, non management staff would also almost always try to resist change, imposing a critical task for managers to overcome the resistance before they could action the change programme. From the management team's perspective, resistance to change, is recognised as a perceived behaviour of organisation's members who are not willingly accept an organisational change (Bouckennooghe, 2010; Sitlington and Marshall, 2011; Hunt, 2015).

Major change causes significant disturbance in many aspects in the organisational life, such as interpersonal and group relationships, employee status, reporting lines and the professional identities associated with group memberships (Terry and Jimmieson, 2003; Paulsen et al., 2005). Although change might be implemented for positive reasons, employees could adopt a negative disposition toward change and resist change efforts, because during change employees could feel pressure, stress and uncertainty (McHugh, 1997; Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999).

Trying to determine how change programmes can be effectively implemented and managed, previous research have studied the processes underlying employee resistance, and suggested that for the change intervention to be effective, organisations need to build positive employee perceptions, views and feelings (Armenakis et al., 1993; Eby et al., 2000). However, Nord and Jermier (1994) and Oreg (2006) suggested in order to get insights on what change resistance actually entails, we must explore employees' subjective experiences of change, since employees might not resist change itself, rather than resisting the implementation process of the change strategy or the potentially negative outcomes of change (Dent and Goldberg, 1999), especially when previous studies concluded that resistance has many aspects that should be considered (Piderit, 2000; George and Jones, 2001).

The ability to manage complex changes as well as to predict and manage individual needs of employees during organisational change are key management challenges (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991). Although employees are getting more familiar with organisational change due to their engagement with previous change projects, still there is no sufficient evidence about what is the influence of experience on employees' responses to large-scale organisational change. Although organisations frequently undertake large-scale change projects, our knowledge on how responses to change evolve over time and the role that change experience plays, is limited (Piderit, 2000), therefore we cannot suggest that employees with considerable change expertise will respond and behave similarly to those with little or no expertise with organisational change (Abrahamson, 2000), or whether previous experience in large-scale organisational change can also provide an area for learning, within which experiences are transferred.

Previous research on employees after large scale downsizing and organisational restructuring (Allen et al. 2001; Tourish et al., 2004; Carbery and Garavan, 2005; Lee and Corbett, 2006) studied how work attitudes change over time. They concluded that over time downsizing affects negatively the way employees respond and behave in the workplace but after longer period, attitudes start to return to the level before downsizing. Noer (1993) observed that employees who remain within an organisation after involuntary staff reduction, experienced negative feeling such as uncertainty, mistrust, insecurity, unfairness, and concluded that over time these negative feelings prevailed. Makawatsakul and Kleiner (2003) studying the impact that downsizing has on the spirit and confidence of employees who remain within an organisation after staff reduction, reported similar findings.

With regard to the role communication has during organisational change (Klein, 1996; Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999), researchers have studied closely on matters such as the plan and acceptance of change process (Jones et al., 2004), employees engagement in the change process (Langer and Thorup, 2005), and the difference between the role of communication to prepare an organisation for the forthcoming change and acceptance of change within the workplace (Elving, 2005). Critics of the aforementioned studies support that their conclusions have not based on empirical evidence; rather these studies have attempted to conceptualise various characteristics of the change processes by exploring theoretical propositions emerging from various disciplines, consider the hypothetical repercussions of these conceptualisations on organisational performance and provide recommendations for further research (Liu and Perrewe, 2005). Jones et al. (2004) and Elving (2005) in their research on organisational communication highlight the absence of empirical evidence into how the change process has been communicated and the degree that change agents believe that change was properly communicated to them.

The type of change in an organisation can be used to explain employees' perceptions of change, taking into consideration the specific circumstances and timing of change. In the case of an incremental change that happens over time and with democratic leadership in which employees are engaged in the change process, they could demonstrate positive views and position in relation to change (Dunphy and Stace, 1990; Gersick, 1994). In the case of a sudden radical change involving substantial changes to organisational structure (Gersick, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Hernandez et al., 2000), management team need to reconsider and redefine organisational values and corporate strategies (Ho et al., 1999; Ingersoll et al., 2000). Waddell et al. (2000) is of the opinion that radical change is typically driven by top management, and often call for directive leadership. Thus, in the absence of a employee engagement in radical change, negative attitudes about the change could emerge (Nielsen and Randall, 2012).

The organisation under investigation in this study went through a major planned change that involved a radical staff downsizing, selling off under-utilised and underperforming assets and subsidiaries, removing management layers, redesign of work processes and practices and modification of the organisational structure.

## **2.2 Organisational Justice Framework**

Literature suggests that organisational justice can be used either as an indicator for the effective planning and execution of the change strategy, or as a contingency framework to understand employees' fairness perceptions that have on organisations and the management of change (Colquitt et al., 2001; Folger and Skarlicki, 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007). This is because a major concern for every organisation is employee perception of organisational justice taking into consideration its role in shaping employees' opinion and behaviours. Employees' perception on fairness, trust and the management of change makes the issue even more important as they greatly affect the outcome of the change programme (Eberlin and Tatum, 2008; Battilana and Casciaro, 2012), and motivates the development of research questions that when addressed can contribute to a more detailed understanding of organisational justice.

Bromiley and Cummings (1995) asserted that organisational trust allude to the strong belief of an employee that another employee (or another group of employees) promise or written statement may be relied upon. Following this proposition, Dizgah et al. (2011) suggested that trust is the confidence than an employee has in an organisation or a person's honesty and trustworthiness. According to Cropanzano et al. (2001) a number of incidents can shape employees' perception of justice within an organisation. For example, an employee who feels that has been treated fairly by a manager but not by colleague is going to have different justice perceptions about each one of them. Previous studies adopting a multi-foci perspective of justice offer supportive evidence on these different perceptions and outcomes of organisational justice (Rupp and Cropanzano, 2002; Liao and Rupp, 2005; Frazier et al., 2010).

Kim and Leung (2007) reported a negative association between organisational justice dimensions and turnover intention. Kumar et al. (2009) and Ali (2010), found a positive association with commitment to one's organisation and job satisfaction, while Colquitt and Rodell (2011) and Bidarian and Jafari, (2012) revealed a positive association between organisational justice dimensions and trust. Getting insights on how employees understand organisational justice can better prepare management team to predict and manage work-related reactions to change, thus boosting employees' perception of trust and commitment towards the management team and the organisation (Lind and van den Bos, 2002; Colquitt et al., 2006).

Organisational trust provides several significant benefits for organisations (Six, 2007; Wilmot and Galford, 2007; Salamon and Robinson, 2008); as a competitive advantage is an important, key ingredient promoting organisational effectiveness (Six, 2007; Salamon and Robinson, 2008), and good business practices (Neves and Caetano, 2006; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011). Trust does not only reduce transaction costs, uncertainty and conflict at work, but it can also enable interactional behaviour (Rousseau et al., 1998), promote effective communication and improve team work between colleagues, as well as between managers and employees (Bromiley and Cummings, 1995; Hopkins and Weathington, 2006; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Krot and Lewicka, 2012).

Organisational trust literature suggests that trust affects employees' level of responsibility, thus having an impact on organisational performance (Salamon and Robinson, 2008). Jafri

(2010) and Saekoo (2011) concluded that organisations need to look after their employees and focus on building their trust in the organisation through positive communication messages that inspire employees, since organisational trust is a critical prerequisite for successful relationships at workplace and can enhance employees' motivation and commitment to their organisations. Saunders' (2011) study in respect to the way employees are treated during organisational change highlight the need for a critical consideration of factors affecting and determining employees' and organisational trust during change, mainly because when employees feel trusting at both a personal and organisational level, can demonstrate confidence in an organisation.

Although, trust is key theme in organisational justice research literature, still we do not have sufficient knowledge on the reasons behind employees' decision to trust or not an organisation (Searle et al., 2011). Literature suggests that perceptions of fairness are associated to trust in organisations and management teams (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Ambrose and Schminke, 2003). Employees' perceptions of organisational trust may facilitate the relationships between the working methods managers are employing to improve the effectiveness of work systems and procedural justice with trust. Evidence suggest that justice is a key indicator of trust in organisations, based on an interplay between managerial practices and organisational justice (Thornhill and Saunders, 2003; Farndale et al., 2010).

### **2.3 Employee concerns, perceptions and responses during organisational change**

Unavoidably, with any organisational change, positive features of the organisational culture might come to an end. It might not be easy for some employees to let go of the established organisational structure, as they disengaging from the established and widely accepted structures (Amiot et al., 2006). Up to this point, little is known about employees' anxieties about maintaining positive features of an organisation's culture at times of strategic change (Martin et al., 2005; Amiot et al., 2006). Recent studies have suggested that insecurity and anxiety about jobs, existing and new responsibilities, communication, interpersonal relationships, are equally important issues for employees (Dallas, 2015; van Dick et al., 2018).

Oreg (2006) examined how employees' awareness of the change process and perceptual expectancy on the outcomes of the process associated with the following characteristics of change resistance; what employees think and feel about the change, and what is their response to the change, and established that the expected change outcomes were linked with the first two characteristics of change resistance, while perceptions of the change were linked with the actions in response to the change. The evidence suggests how important is to study employees' perceptions of organisational change (Jones and Skarlicki, 2012). However, studies on responses to change rarely studies all three components. The focus of research has been on employees' attitudes towards change (Lines, 2004; Penava and Šehić, 2014) while the aim of other studies has been to establish and analyse the various feelings that employees can experience during change (Klarner et al., 2011; Talat 2017), and thoughts about change or subjective behaviours (Senior and Swailes, 2010; Kim et al., 2011). Scholars examining how employees behave under conditions of change focus mostly on resistance to change (Arcangel and Johnson, 2011; Hunt, 2015).

Oreg (2006) highlighted the need to study besides the negative, also the positive subjective experiences and perceptions of change, if we are to be aware of the change aspects that determine whether employees accept or resist change, thus enabling change strategists to follow a flexible approach and adapt their plans in a way that change process addresses the needs of employees. In this way, we can determine employees' multi-faceted perceptions of

organisational change. Therefore, examining all aspects of employees' perceptions of organisational change, is the first aim of this study.

Another limitation of researchers studying organisational change is that they haven't considered the perceptions to organisational change among employees at different hierarchical levels as well as members of the same group, and how employees responded to organisational change (Jones et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008). Change presents unique challenges for every level of hierarchy within the organisation, since different characteristics of the change process may be important to across senior management and staff members and assessed differently (Heimer and Cora, 2012; Mullins, 2016).

When employees consider change as threatening, like in the case of downsizing, they may find themselves losing the comfort of the familiar within the organisation and may interpret this loss as an indication of risk to their work security (Giessner et al., 2016; Harney et al., 2018) therefore these social identities may be more important than ever. In this study, the change involved organisational restructuring and staff downsizing following departmental mergers, and modification of the organisational culture during the last 5 years. We expect that job related issues will affect more non-management staff members sense of control, and given the perceived job uncertainty it's more likely to exhibit a higher anxiety and negative mindset towards change (Chung et al., 2012; Skipton et al., 2013). Therefore, level differences regarding the issues are expected to be significant.

Goltz (2003) found differences in the attitudes and perceptions about organisational change, due to the different experiences of the change process that indicates variances in control, influence and autonomy in decision making between managers and non-management staff members. Managers seemed to be more interested in the aspects of planning and implementation during the change process than did staff members, who might also demonstrate low acceptance of organisation change, higher levels of frustration within their role in the organisation, low levels of job security, commitment, job satisfaction and support from the management team (Ahmad, 2000; Worrall et al., 2004). Therefore, exploring how perceptions of both the negative and positive aspects of change differed across senior managers, and staff members, is the second aim of this study.

#### **2.4 Leadership and management during organisational change**

Senior management leadership is crucial, since leaders have the responsibility for creating as well as sharing the vision of the change, modelling the expected behaviour, building confidence in the change process, inspiring, motivating, engaging and supporting the employees and enhancing employees' loyalty to the organisation (Dallas, 2015; Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2018). In this context, the existence of leaders who take into consideration the culture of the organisation is a key factor driving the successful implementation of these changes (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2013; Arif et al., 2017; Al-Ali et al., 2017).

There is evidence in the literature on strategies that senior managers should implement to successfully lead organisations through change (Giussi et al., 2017), on how to empower the organisation to manage strategic change as well as on strategies that prevent, minimise, or control resistance to change (Self and Schraeder, 2009; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), as well as factors impeding or favouring change (Dobrovič and Timková, 2017; Arce and Araujo, 2017). Research has shown that one of the reason change programmes fails is the managers' failure to recognise what is required to manage the organisations through successful change (Buss and Kuyvenhofen, 2011). Pertinent barriers to the implementation of change are the rigid organisational culture, employee resistance, inertia, lack of resilience, as well as reluctance to adapt to emerging practices and organisational structures (Heide et al., 2002;



Sim and Rogers, 2009). Likewise, leaders' failure to understand organisational cultures, communicate to all stakeholders involved the purpose, context and process of change, motivate and engage employees are the main reasons why change initiatives fail (Rosenberg and Mosca, 2011; Paton et al., 2016).

Research suggests that many organisational change efforts are unsuccessful because of leaders' failure to communicate the value resulting from the necessary changes – not only for the organisation overall, but also for each of the employees (Aitken and Keller, 2009; Bouckennooghe, 2010). Employees may see changes as threatening, carriers of an unstable organisational future that may have a negative impact on them. Although some leaders don't recognise the significance of communication in implementing change, the unwillingness to accept change makes imperative for leaders to communicate not only the need for change but also all aspects of change, with a view to reduce employees' fear, uncertainty and resistance to change (Heimer and Cora, 2012; Hodges, 2016). To the extent that leaders don't communicate the need for change, they may discourage employees to accept it. If change is to be successfully managed, leaders should not only conceive the need for change, but also communicate the change and desired behaviours in a convincing way in order to get as much support and as many followers as possible (Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008; Lewis et al., 2010).

The same body of literature suggests that leaders should communicate to all shareholders the new policies, procedures and practices that the change is expected to bring and discuss the expected benefits, while it argues that it is crucial that leaders motivate employees to participate in the change programme by delegating responsibilities accordingly so as to encourage employees to identify with the need for change and accept it, thus contributing to the implementation of the change programme. Leaders must not only inspire and engage those who lag behind, but they should also try to understand why certain employees resist change, since resistance to change could reveal certain problems in the change strategy, which if revised could in turn lead to a successful change (Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008; Lewis et al., 2010).

Besides the change strategies suggested in the literature for successfully managing changes, researchers have also investigated the relation between different leadership styles enacted in different leadership behaviours and change success, suggesting that task-orientated leadership style has a negative association with change success whereas relation-orientated leadership style has a positive association with change success (Bass and Bass, 2009; Battilana et al., 2010). The latter indicates the importance for leaders to consider human relations when designing change strategies, beyond mere economic objectives (Schmid et al., 2006; Brand et al., 2016). For instance, in case that a leader's style is not informed by and does not match the culture of the organisation in question, an efficient task-orientated leadership style is not likely to allow the leader to successfully drive the organisation through the change (Denison, 2012; Cameron and Green, 2019). Thus, regardless of the competence a leader possesses, it is crucial that understands the particular elements of the organisational culture in order to drive successful changes (Beerel, 2009; Anderson and Anderson, 2010). If leaders do not adapt their change strategy to the organisational culture, employees are expected to show lack of commitment or resist change (Denison, 2012; Popa, 2018).

Although employees' commitment to change influence their behaviours in favour of the change, it is not always easy for organisations to motivate employees and secure their support to the change programme (Gilley et al., 2009; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), especially if the programme is around people which can create uncertainty (Croonen, 2010; Kim et al., 2013). Careful implementation to overcome fears is required where employees perceive change as threatening and it is likely to resist change (Eilam and Shamir, 2005; Austin, 2009). When

trust exist in the relationships throughout the organisation, employees feel less threatened by the change (Saunders and Thornhill, 2004; Farndale et al., 2010). Therefore, establishing trust as a key feature of employee – organisation relationships can lead to a sustainable change (Farndale et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2011).

Strong leadership is key in any transformational change even if the outcome of the change process remains unclear, creating a vision that stretches the organisation beyond the limits of its current capabilities, and following an implementation process that promotes a learning culture and the design of resources to support the change process (Seijts and Gandz, 2018; Satell, 2019). Literature also argues that leadership styles comprised of both task and change-orientation tendencies, characteristics found in transformational leaders (Bass and Riggio, 2006), exhibit positive relation to change success (Battilana et al., 2010; Alqatawenah, 2018). These findings suggest that leaders who are resilient to and aware of the need for change can design and communicate the need for change to their followers, and successfully drive changes (Herold et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2012).

It is essential to not disregard the extent to which the scale of a change affects not only the style of leadership, but also the impact of those styles on change success. When the change is small, change orientated leadership is thought to be the most answered leadership style, having a positive impact on change outcomes (Higgs and Rowland, 2005). However, as the change scale increases, leaders tend to adopt a more distributive leadership style, whereby tasks are allocated among different groups for effective change management (Al-Ali et al., 2017; Chatwani, 2018).

For change strategists, understanding the employees' perceptions of trust and attitude towards the way the change process is managed has significant implications (Fuchs, 2011; Bidarian and Jafari, 2012). Increasing our knowledge regarding how accounts of non-management employees' perspectives on the leadership and management differed during periods of strategic change (Heslin and Vandewalle, 2009; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011), by considering employees' perceptions of the systematic approach to deal with organisational change, is the third aim of the study.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

The process of strategic change in organisations is a widely studied theme in management research (Hughes, 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Organisational management initiatives over the past few years seeking changes of magnitude and restructuring have systematically failed due to the lack of endorsement from non-management staff who resisted the systemic approach to dealing with the organisational transformation (Bouckenooghe, 2010; Sitlington and Marshall, 2011). Since, employee commitment and engagement in the change management process strongly impact on the outcome of strategic change (Eberlin and Tatum, 2008; Battilana and Casciaro, 2012), employees' perspectives regarding trust, fairness, and the management of change make the topic even more important, and therefore we are compelled to address specific research questions which when resolved will contribute to better understand the concept within the context of strategic change.

The review of change literature has identified numerous relevant approaches for managing resistance to change and for the effective management of large-scale transformation within organisations: clearly identifiable benefits; constant communication; education; powerful change agents; strong leadership; employee engagement; negotiation and agreement; short term wins and ensuring that change is part of the organisation's culture, many of which are

also seen as important for an effective change agent (Harvey and Broyles 2010; Anderson, 2011; Duke, 2011).

As perceptions about these influencing variables to positive change are contextual – relate to the organisation and its wider context: ‘environment’ and ‘people’ (Harris, 1997) – then understanding these factors in-situ within the organisation. The literature review identified two key groups – management and staff – and the need for a collaborative approach between them (Bennett, Fadil and Greenwood, 1994; McHugh, 1997). So, it is imperative for this research to examine both the perspectives of management and well as the team members as successful change requires an alignment between these groupings. In addition, existing research haven’t considered the perceptions to organisational change among employees at same hierarchical levels, and how they responded to organisational change. Change presents unique challenges for every level of hierarchy within an organisation, since different characteristics of the change process may be important to senior management and staff members and assessed differently, thus enabling change strategists to follow a flexible approach and adapt their plans in a way that change process addresses the needs of employees.

In organisational theory studies, justice is considered to be more understandable in its relation to organisational justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). Existing evidence in the filed of organisational justice indicate a negatively correlation to turnover intention (Kim and Leung, 2007), but a positive association with trust (Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Bidarian and Jafari, 2012), organisational loyalty (Colquitt et al., 2001; Kumar et al., 2009), and job satisfaction (Ali, 2010). In addition, by uderstanding how employees think of organisational justice can help change strategists to perpare for and manage work-related behaviour, thus boosting feelings of trust towards senior management team and commitment to the organisation as a whole during strategic change (Lind and van den Bos, 2002; Colquitt et al., 2006).

Furthermore, literature has suggested that understanding the employees’ perceptions of organisational justice towards the way the change process is managed has significant implications since non-management employees’ perspectives on the leadership and management differed during periods of strategic change. In this way, we can determine employees’ multi-faceted perceptions of organisational change. As such, there is a wider motivation for this research and insight gained will prove useful.

Therefore, this research aims to examine how the organisational justice framework can be applied to study employees’ perceptions of trust in a financial services organisation based in Greece, at a time of strategic change. Using open-ended interviews, respondents were asked to felect on any negative or positive aspects of change experience they could discuss in addressing the following research questions:

1. How employees’ negative and positive perceptions of trust, fairness and management of change can be explored by adopting an organisational justice framework?
2. What issues employees consider to be the most important during organisational change?
3. How different are these issues across various hierarchical levels within the organisation?

Research questions 1 and 2 (considering staff) and 3 (considering management) will ensure than an appropriate sampling strategy for the project is chosen.

When considering the perceptions of staff, the identified factors will be used as a basis for questioning and analysis, particularly focused on the new teams formed. Further reading is still warranted to understand which factors influence effective communication, employee dedication, commitment and engagement, perceptions of leadership and perception of

autonomy. This deeper understanding will inform questions to be asked in primary data collection and analysis as well as for secondary data analysis.

The contribution of the findings of such research will be a deep appreciation of employees' perceptions of trust, fairness, and the management of change, and distinguish several important challenges to overcome to enable change strategists to develop compelling change strategies, further contributing to existing knowledge regarding change management within the organisational justice framework.

In the following section, we present the research methodology utilised to address the research questions. After presenting, analysing and discussing the results of the research, we propose a number of theoretical and practical implications that emerge from the findings of this research.

#### **4. Methodology**

To address the aims of this exploratory research, we used a qualitative case study research design, while multiple sources were used to collect primary data, such as in-depth individual interviews, maintenance of handwritten notes during the interviews and reflection of the data collected. The reason for selecting the particular research design, was to analyse and get a deep understanding of the evidence that could emerge from the interviews. Using an organisational justice framework, the aim was to gain insight and get a deep understanding around employees' perceptions of fairness, trust and the management of change (Mayer, et al., 2007; Noor, 2008), at a period of major organisational change (Fugate et al., 2010).

Staus and Corbin (1990) suggested that future research will need to use a more grounded approach, with respondents allowed to report on any aspect of the change experience they choose to. Following this line and moving away from the methodology employed in previous research where participants reported only on predetermined questions via structured questionnaires focusing on specific aspects of change (Jones et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2016), we employed two interview questionnaires (one for the management team, the other for non-management employees) including open-ended questions, to allow participants to choose for themselves which characteristics of the change experience they will consider, thus gaining a deep understanding on the diverse perceptions and behaviours of the employees to a large scale organisational change associated with downsizing and workforce redesign. Findings from this research will assist us in understanding the salient factors that drive employees' acceptance of, or resistance to change. As a result management team can tailor more successfully any intervention efforts, thus addressing more adequately the needs of the employees (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998).

Based on the research questions, research objectives were related to three parts: employees' aspects and perceptions of organisational change, their impact to change, and organisational implications for implementing change. We expected senior managers, to demonstrate a positive attitude towards changes and to report more positive aspects of the change. Non-management staff, who might be less involved in the planning of the change process, are expected to report negative attitudes towards change.

Thirty-nine in depth, semi structured interviews at various organisational levels in a Greek financial services organisation were conducted, which lasted approximately 60 minutes and conducted in the period between, July - December 2020, including 6 senior managers and 33 staff members. All participants were knowledgeable about the subject of financial service organisation management (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Handwritten notes were taken during interviews to record respondents' key insights (Stake, 1995). To maintain respondents'

anonymity and confidentiality, their names and job titles were not referred to and disclosed by the author in this study (Yin, 2009).

The reason for choosing a company from the service industry was that since the last decade, the companies in the sector have been going through major restructuring and substantial downsizing. One of the main challenges for the financial institutions in Greece was to deliver competitive services through a motivated workforce in an age of austerity. Strong leadership was important both in implementing cost management plans and also in leading the organisation as they were required to deliver improved services with less resources.

A convergent interviewing process was used, so that interviews followed a structured process and initially-unstructured content, with more specific questions asked at a later stage of the interview (Driedger et al., 2006). Questions were adjusted during the interviews as we are gaining new and deep understanding of the change process. A purposive heterogeneous sampling was used, selecting participants to capture a broad range of perspectives across management and non-management employees, ensuring employee representation from every department within the organisation, to record opposing views regarding the change process so to gain insights into a phenomenon by looking at it from all angles, thus minimise bias in the perceptions of change. The sampling strategy allows to establish a good working relationships with participants, based on trust, to study the research questions in depth. Although a small number of cases was used, it allowed us to associate closer with the participants, thus offering high validity to the research (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006).

In order to ascertain their experience in large scale organisational change, we asked the participants to indicate in which strategic change programmes had participated within the past 5 years, and the extent to which these changes had an impact on them. Based on the responses, we categorised the respondents into experienced and inexperienced change agents (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012). Employees that were involved in more than one large organisational change programmes were classified as experienced. We were also control for any past experiences participants may have from previous employment in other organisations. From data analysis, 11 participants were categorised as experienced change recipients and 28 participants were categorised as inexperienced change recipients.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated to English, while we used a post-defined coding to identify emergent themes and finding relations between them. After we completed transcribing the interviews, we categorised the data to facilitate the data analysis. Our analysis revealed 9 themes, assigned to two categories. Many of the themes, including communication, employee motivation and participation, stress and uncertainty, were in line with those reported in previous research, as key aspects during change (Ashford, 1988; Covin and Kilmann, 1990; Lewis, 2000). The first category was labelled emotional, and included 5 themes which referred to employees' feelings and responses to the change. The second category was labelled process and included 4 themes which related to the way the change was implemented.

Certainly there are limitations in our study that future research can address. Due to time constraints, we were only engaged with a relative small sample to conduct interviews, including only managers who were responsible for the change initiatives to meet organisational objectives by increasing employee adoption and acceptance, and staff members who were responsible for adopting and accepting the change initiative; excluding executives, who have the responsibility to identify the purpose and context for change and create a vision of the desired outcome. Consciously we focused only to one company from the financial service sector. Future research can explore perceptions of fairness and

management of change in different sectors and within different change contexts. In addition, due to the limited participation, we had to interview both old and new employees.

## 5. Results and Discussion

For change strategists, understanding the employees' perceptions of fairness, trust and attitude towards the way the change process is managed has significant implications (Fuchs, 2011; Bidarian and Jafari, 2012). In this section, the research findings are presented and discussed in order to understand employees' perceptions of fairness, trust and effective management of change. The results are confronted with previous studies to highlight new knowledge gained from this research and any differences with existing knowledge (Yin, 2009).

When the change project started, conflicts had emerged between the individuals associated with the change project and those championing the change required by the senior management team. The former, were very suspicious about senior management team's proposals which they thought they would remove not only many of the benefits that they were enjoying, but also the high level of service they had provided for consumers. Contrary to our expectations and evidence from the literature, senior managers attempted to enforce rather their vision, while employees were discouraged by managers who were determined to implement their plans (Covin and Kilmann, 1990; Lewis, 2000). Senior managers didn't establish the credentials of the change project as a restructuring project that it will guarantee the prosperity of the organisation and build communication channels and trust among stakeholders (Grice et al., 2006), thus giving the impression to the employees that they were forcing rather than facilitating change. Although the senior management teams organised numerous meetings with employees who were asked to suggest factors that were impeding change, ways to resolve these difficulties were never properly discussed or taken into consideration.

Failing to build a sense of unity, shared purpose and direction within the various stakeholders, it was difficult for the senior management team to engage stakeholders, clarifying the vision and aim of the change projects, and to include them in the process of planning the new strategies (Morrell et al., 2004). At the end, the process was about redefining boundaries, reshaping relationships, and helping people to reframe their role within the organisation. Contrary to our expectations, senior managers were more occupied with the planning aspects process of the change process, as opposed to the implementation process of the change that non-management staff did (Covin and Kilmann, 1990, King et al., 1991).

### 5.1 Emotional reaction to change process.

Three types of uncertainty have emerged from data analysis; job related, structural and strategic (Bordia et al., 2004). Data analysis indicate significant differences in the responses to change based on employees' level of experience with strategic change. Managers had a more positive attitude and feelings towards organisational change, describing the change programme as a fantastic opportunity for both employees, stakeholders and clients alike; empowering employees by offering new and challenging responsibilities and job roles, thus offering improved services to clients and value to shareholders. On the contrary, one of the staff members indicated,

*I am trying to understand what was the need and purpose of this change. The management team saw only the big picture, without paying the necessary attention to those little things that would deliver a successful change programme. I was here 10 years ago during another*

*large change processes. There is a powerful resistance and more anxiety today because very few have experience with such processes.*

Participants explained that they resisted change as an emotional response to fear of the unknown; they were afraid of change since the change programme is nothing similar to what they have experienced in the past, making the current process more difficult and challenging, thus feeling frustrated and anxious (Terry et al., 2001), thus having no control over what was happening (Bordia et al., 2004). One manager commented,

*Even the most loyal of my team members resisted change, and did the best they could to make sure that the project will fail. Although we had reassured them that training will be provided before they were assigned to new roles and tasks, I believe they were all concerned that they could lose their job.*

Respondents expressed their concern about the impact that the change process will have in the organisational values, indicating that they wish their organisations retained the core values (Virtanen, 2000), as this will remove unnecessary tensions and ease their worries that change brings when new core values were introduced (Amiot et al., 2006). As stated by a staff member,

*Many departments were reduced in size, and many aspects of our job had to go. Less experienced colleagues took most the routine. We were proud about our core values which were reflected in the service we provide to our clients. Going forward with the new structure we saw adverse comments coming from clients, so I felt uncomfortable moving to the new structure.*

The above statement highlights the need for change strategists to recognise the core organisational values and then determine the best course of action to maintain these values after the implementation of the change programme (Virtanen, 2000). These values are important for the organisation's culture (Kotter, 1996; Pless and Maak, 2004) and serve as an organisational coping resource, stimulating positive attitudes to organisational change (Eby et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2005).

Contrary to previous literature on organisational change (Terry and Jimmieson, 2003; Paulsen et al., 2005), managers mentioned that their attitudes towards their staff have not changed, as related to trust, and that the need for collaborative relationships in times of change could benefit the organisation, suggesting that they have advised their staff that passive behaviours and neglectful activities will not help the organisation to be successful in this change initiative, but will drive the organisation to failure. On the contrary, and in line with the literature (McHugh, 1997; Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999) employees reacted negatively toward change and resisted change efforts. As a staff member commented,

*Our attitude towards the organisation changed because we lost our faith in the organisation. Senior managers need to examine why we demonstrated a negative attitude, why we have lost confidence in them and decided not support them. We are less productive now, and our relationships with colleagues and managers has eroded. Our trust towards the organisation failed because senior managers didn't provide any kind of information during the change process. They failed to inspire participation in the process, reduce the pressure, stress and uncertainty that we face during the process and support us develop new skills that they would enable us to take active part in the change process.*

Respondents commented that their attitude towards their peers has been affected, and they were less committed to their organisation (Ahmad, 2000), providing insights into two emergent themes, covering teamwork and trust. Most of the employees were not willing to cooperate with their colleagues because of the changes that were taking place in the

organisation. Interviewees felt like there were silos between the management team and the employees, making collaboration impossible, and more complex for the organisation to deliver the change programme. Many interviewees recalled that managers were holding meetings only with the employees from their departments, without encouraging cross-departmental meetings. This interaction could help employees to understand better the change strategy, the challenges that colleagues in other department face, and adapt their behaviour to this change, helping the organisation to share a common vision for change and succeed (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). As one member of staff commented,

*We would be committed to the change programme, if managers were willing to listen to our concerns and needs. Colleagues with no skills required for this change initiative were promoted because they were loyal to the management team. I now have more responsibilities, and I am expected to perform tasks outside my role. It is difficult for me to trust my colleagues and to work in teams as effectively as I used to do before.*

Participants commented that if they were encouraged to share their opinion and ideas, this could lead to organisational support and loyalty on the part of employees towards managers, and adapt more easily to change, thus enhancing their productivity and performance (Salamon and Robinson, 2008; Battilana and Casciaro, 2012). Managers did not support employees to participate and contribute in the decision process (Sverke et al., 2008), listening to employees' views, voice and feelings on the change process (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998). Most of the employees became confused and frustrated due the structural changes in the organisation, and the management team did nothing to reassure them and provide the much needed stability and feeling of unity that was required. Participants added that if they had more freedom of expression, the decision making process was transparent (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998) and their suggestions were heard by the management, this could lead to fair outcomes for employees and organisational support for organisational change, with employees' behaviours adapted more easily to the circumstances and they could be more positive to the changes (Armstrong-Stassen, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). A member of staff stated,

*Managers stopped giving us any kind of information or asking for our opinion about the changes taking place, or asked us what we think about the organisation's decision; all decisions were taken directly by the organisation without our input, or even to be able to express our opinion or suggestions for this change. This is why a lot of employees were not willing to offer support to the organisation, refusing to cooperate even with their colleagues. This has negatively affected our behaviour in the workplace, like lower productivity and performance in our work.*

## **5.2 Process issues**

In agreement with the literature, participants commented on the negative aspects of change communication, reporting that managers had not offer them adequate information around the upcoming change (Luthan and Sommer, 1999; Lewis, 2000; Riedlinger et al., 2004). One staff member recalled,

*We didn't know what was expected of us until a few weeks before the project started. The management team have already decided what they were going to do and most of the information circulating round was confusing and misleading. It is not about whether we agree or not with everything that happened. We just needed more clarity and information. Unless we asked for information, no one would give us specific information.*

Participants believed that managers, who had a central role in the organisation during the strategic change, should have provided a strategy to communicate and disclose information



with employees, and for the change process to be successfully implemented, management must try to maintain an ongoing and purposeful dialogue with all employees and established channels of communication with employees and their managers (Saunders and Thornhill, 2004).

On the contrary, one manager commented that despite having in place a clear change communication strategy, many of his team members perceived that neither the type of communication nor the amount were adequate (Goodman and Truss, 2004),

*It is up to the employees to know everything that is going on. We have never hide any information. We share all kind of information the time. It makes no difference how many meetings we have, how many emails and announcements we send; people still don't turn up, and they don't necessarily read them, especially if they are not going to like what they are about to hear.*

As one of the participants asserted,

*Communication was important in our organisation during change, and management should have explained clearly and consistently to us what is already planned to happen, how it will happen and by when, and not just simply hide behind announcements and emails that leave no room for negotiations. Managers should have had engaged with employees, ensuring a trully two-way communication, in order to develop trust. The management team's leadership was not consistent with the vision they communicated to us.*

Participants discussed the negative aspects of change leadership, expressing different perceptions of the change leadership. Participants reported planning challenges, discussing issues around changing employees' job descriptions and assignments, as well as the challenges in delivering L&D programmes (Armstrong-Stassen, 1997; Ahmad, 2000). Additionally, the exhaustion of staff with regard to the process, pace and timing of the change was challenging. While management team aimed on improving the services from the change, and focused on staff's skill development and job enrichment (King et al., 1991; Silvester et al., 1999), employees seemed to be more concerned about the planning challenges related with the new business roles (Ashford, 1988; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). A member of staff indicated,

*Senior management were unsuccessful in the management of the change project because they were more concerned and involved in downsizing rather than being actively engaged in activities surrounding business change. Although productivity has initially increased after layoffs, the workload remained the same since fewer employees were left to do the work. After a few months, the remaining employees were experiencing an increased risk of 'burnout', they were uncertain about their future in the organisation and many colleagues have decided to leave.*

One manager commented,

*I feel like having to work with people that don't seem willing to embrace and accept the change. It seems that employees don't understand that when the organisation's environment is changing, its culture may not be appropriate. In times of change staff had to assume more responsibilities, unfortunately they didn't have the necessary experience and management competencies. It was very difficult to trained our staff to work in various post and functions, securing and managing a continuity in customer service.*

Employees commented that managers did not try as much as they should to understand why they have resisted change. The latter is especially true because resistance to change could

potentially reveal weaknesses in the change process, which if addressed could lead to successful change implementation. A member of staff suggested that,

*Understanding and feeling what we are experiencing during the change process, could ultimately inspire us to accept change and work towards delivering a more successful change. Overall, leaders did not realise the significant role that each employee had in the change process and assign duties and tasks accordingly so as to support employees to personally identify with the need for change.*

Employees believed that the managers failed to encourage wide involvement and engagement in the change process that would create a climate of cooperation and trust. Managers seemed to be more concerned about managing change rather than having a clean plan on how to manage change (Covin and Kilmann, 1990; King et al., 1991). Building trust within the organisation could have supported the change process, encouraging employees to trust each other, pursue shared goals and work together as a team (Kim et al., 2011).

Employees were afraid of losing their job (Armstrong-Strassen, 2005) since the management team decided to move ahead with their original plans although they failed to get their full consent. The management team didn't reveal all aspects of the change process, and although they reassured employees that predefined outcomes will not be imposed and they will be given the opportunity to create their own solutions, they did quite the opposite, therefore employees stopped trusting them.

From their perspective, staff members reported that the secret to successfully manage strategic changes, is understanding, and employees need to understand the purpose and context of change. Change strategists need to understand employees' reluctance to take part in the change process (Self and Schraeder, 2009). Employees resisted change either from a fear of the unknown or an expectation of loss (Jones et al., 2004; Austin, 2009). Whether they would resist change depended on how they would perceive the change in the organisation. As stated a member of staff,

*Since the enactment of the change, senior management have started to change our job descriptions and areas of responsibility without asking us or explain why we have been assigned to new roles. This had led to uncertainty, confusion and anxiety. The least we would expect is to have clear information of what is happening, and what are the plans for our future in the company. It was difficult to see anything positive coming out of this change simple because the management team failed to effectively communicate with us.*

Most of the participants commented that after the implementation of the change programme their attitudes towards their peers have changed, as related to the communication between them. Managers have noticed negative attitudes from their staff after change. They argued that employees had this negative feeling because of the insecurity they felt in the workplace and because of the fact that the organisation didn't provide to them a consistent communication (Lewis, 2000). One interviewee stated,

*I still do not regularly communicate with them as before the enactment of the change. I feel that we kept a distance between us, and in some situations some of my staff ignored me when I asked their help.*

Members of staff further elaborated on the communication issue, one of whom stated,

*My attitude changed towards my colleagues because there is no communication between us in the department. My colleagues adopted new attitudes and they hold a distance between each other. I tried to show them that we can work through this change together as a team, as*

*we were acting before the change, but it seems that that their attitude changed since they felt insecure about their job.*

Employees who have been exposed to change process before, were aware of the change implementation processes. This familiarity, if associated to positive experiences, helps to alleviate some of the ambiguity and frustration associated to change process, empowering non-management staff members to cope with the challenges of the change process. Accepting employees acknowledged the importance of previous positive change experiences, familiar procedures and practices, in order to develop change capabilities that allowed experienced change recipients to spend less time trying to realise what was happening and promptly engaged with the tasks of the change programme, focusing on operational tasks as usual. The experience provided the much need sense of familiarity to cope with the new situation in a number of ways. As one interviewee said,

*Having change experience helps because you can handle change easier, even if the changes are different. In the past, downsizing and restructuring have been managed in a responsible and professional manner by the management team. Accepting change has never been difficult. When repositioned we were given opportunities to develop new competences. This provided a great sense of commitment to the company, and make us trust our managers. Although the outcome of the change was unknown, the process was familiar.*

Results indicate that accepting employees didn't just focus on dealing with uncertainty by drawing on previous experiences to cope with the situation, but also find ways to assume responsibility and take control of the process (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998). Accepting employees agreed that change managers had a critical role in bringing about positive change process experiences, developing routines as well as processes which created predictability for employees. In addition, participants reported how significant structural aspects are, namely planning and managing the change process (Self and Schraeder, 2009; Buss and Kuyvenhofen, 2011). As stated by two managers,

*The employees who were more keen to accept change are those who have experience change in the past, and this has to do with skills and attitudes. If you have experienced this process before, you know what is expected of you, you know what to do, you are more conscious in making decisions for yourself. If you feel confident about yourself and your competencies, the new process is less demanding, less challenging to handle. What you have to do is to adjust to the situation at hand, keeping in mind that the two situations are not identical.*

*Organisational history on how you planned and managed change in the past is important. Employees judge on previous experience whether or not they will participate in the forthcoming change processes. We were used to dealing with rapid changes, making it much easier to respond decisively and quickly to make changes and deal with emerging conflicts and uncertainty. My team members were familiar with the process, procedures and tasks that have been initiated.*

Another group of employees although they behaved loyally, avoiding conflict in the department, they expressed negative feelings about change, distancing themselves from the changes and the organisation, appearing to be overly centered on themselves. Compliant employees contrary to the accepting employees, didn't concentrate on their professional development, but they preferred to focus on how changes would affect their current status in the organisation (Amiot et al., 2006). As stated by one interviewee,

*Once downsizing started, we didn't criticize everything or have a negative disposition. We tried to find out why changes are being made, although didn't get any information from senior management, and work as best as we could, avoiding direct confrontations with them.*

*We distanced ourselves from everything that was going on in the company. We only delivered what was expected of us in term of changes. We offered no feedback to the managers even for things we knew that are going to cause a problem in the operations.*

Several managers reported that is imperative to have autonomy in the change programmes. Half of the employees reported that they didn't know the extent to which their managers have autonomy within the change programmes developed by executives. Autonomy is important because if the programme is fixed and there's no room for changes the employees feel the change has been imposed and they have no influence on the change programme. If they feel they can influence the change programme, they feel like the change being something they want to do, and most importantly they could also see the positive outcomes of the change (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Many employees corroborated this view, commenting that they were willing to be part of the change programme, and have an influence in the change process, because it was their own decision rather than being forced to do so. As one interviewee said,

*We never wanted the programme to be forcefully imposed from above, feeling like we must implement the programme because senior managers demanded it. This had a negative impact in shaping our attitudes towards the change process.*

Remarkably managers assigned different meanings to the concept of autonomy; some acting autonomously, whilst others decided to follow the preconceived plans provided by the executives. One manager explained that has implemented a change programme, although he was not convinced about the positive outcomes of change, thus perceiving the concept of autonomy as the limited space the executives gave him to deliver the programme in the way he wants.

*I had to action a change plan where I couldn't see the benefits of the change either to my department or for the organisation, feeling that the implementation plan was almost mandated and not appropriate for the resourcing of my department. At the end, I had to compromise on everything during the change process.*

Another manager explained that will never implement a change programme which doesn't have his approval.

*I don't implement any aspect of a change programme which will not fully benefit my department. Senior management has given me the autonomy to implement only those aspects of change programme suitable to the resourcing of my department.*

The two quotes demonstrate that both managers give different meaning to the concept of autonomy. The first manager tried to execute the full change programme based on how he constructed meanings. The second manager only implemented specific aspects of the programme. This evidence suggests that the way managers interpret the concept of autonomy will define their position and approach towards the change programme.

Respondents reported that for employees to endorse the change programme and engage in the change process, it is critical that they feel engaged with the programme. This is a significant finding since employees reported that they can operate in a way that it will look like the implementation plan is executed, but in reality nothing has changed. Without engaging employees to the change programme it is more likely this will happen. One interviewee stated,

*I have lost faith in the change process, so I decided to continue with the original procedures. If I was involved in the process, I would make sure that the necessary measures and procedures to deliver the plan and support the changes have been undertaken, making them*

*operational within my department. To successfully execute the change programme, we should have involved and engaged everyone in the process, using a top down approach, ensuring that everyone is working in the same direction.*

Although different meanings to ‘engagement’ have been assigned by the participants, two aspects emerged during the interviews, namely acceptance and ownership. In order to accept a change, many of the respondents argued that they needed to see the benefits for change, not only for the organisation, but for themselves. As one interviewee said,

*Besides understanding the context of the change, why it is developed, what are the objectives and the value for the company, I needed to understand what are the benefits for me. Everyone involved in the change process need to see what’s in for them. Otherwise, it would be difficult to implement the programme.*

Regarding the issue of the autonomy, all employees agreed it is important to be willingly contribute and have the opportunity to influence the change programme. This perception among employees is associated to the concept of ownership. Several staff members reported they were looking forward to assume ownership of the change programme, since they wanted this to be their change programme, and not something they have to do because the management team asked them to.

*We would have committed and engaged to the change programme by taking ownership of the change aspects relevant to our department, if we were given the opportunity, feeling a part of it, rather than feeling that we were forced to do it by the senior management.*

A few managers agreed that they should have implemented the change programme in partnership with the employees, suggesting that their role in the change process should have been mostly supporting, while determining the implementation strategy independently of their teams, was not appropriate. Implementing change into the organisation was challenging since most of their staff were too often resisting the changes, as they wanted a certain degree of influence and involvement around how changes in the programme will be implemented. They failed to understand how important communication is during change implementation, seeing changes as a necessary aspect of the business strategy to be implemented irrespective of employee engagement and commitment (Aiken and Keller, 2009). They reported that dealing with resistance and overcoming resistance, were the most critical tasks (Michel et al., 2010; Raineri, 2011).

*You need to manage employees’ expectations, convince them to take part in the process and take responsibility for their actions. When I begin to talk about the change, employees confronted me with questions: Why we need to change? What is the context and aim of the change? How we will be involved in the change? Will we have a say in the process? I approached each one of my staff, explained why the change programme was important for us, why they have to follow it, what are the personal benefits for them if they take part in the change process.*

## **6. Conclusions and practical implications**

This study represents an attempt not only to further establish organisational justice as a critical indicator of employee beliefs, behaviours and responses during organisational change (Choi, 2011; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Saunders, 2011), but also to examine employees’ experience of organisational change based on their feelings, behaviours and opinions towards change, and how perceptions of fairness and management of change are different across different hierarchical levels within an organisation (Covin and Kilmann, 1990).

Our findings emphasise how critical is for management team to take into consideration the needs of employees irrespective of their level in the organisational hierarchy, during major organisational change. To start with, change strategists need to appreciate that their perceptions on change might be different from those of change recipients and change managers. Evidence suggest that senior managers seem to be more concerned about broader organisational issues, while non management staff seem to focus more on intra-organisation and departmental issues. Therefore, management team can develop tailor-made change interventions, addressing the needs of employees within different hierarchical levels within the organisation.

The themes presented in this study, provide change strategists with the ability to explore and understand important aspects and characteristics of employees' perceptions of strategic organisational change, focusing on two broad groups of themes, namely attitudinal and emotional issues, and change process issues. We have recorded differences in terms of comments across participants regarding the lack of consultation around change planning, the effect of management support and leadership actions during change programme implementation, employee motivation, engage, commitment and communication, and finally different views in understanding the purpose of change.

The results indicate that change strategists need to appreciate the different needs that employees might have. The evidence suggest that the management team was more focused on dealing with the broader organisational issues, and with intra-organisation issues, while staff members were concentrated on operational issues. Therefore, change strategists can design and develop strategic plans to address the needs of employees across different hierarchical levels who have different responsibilities, while take into consideration the intergroup nature of change. The starting point in every change programme needs to be the understanding of how management team's perceptions of change are considerable different from staff members, and the informational component of the change management strategy should acknowledge and highlight the anxieties and concerns of employees at different levels (Covin and Kilmann, 1990; Lewis, 2000).

Participants acknowledged the negative outcomes of the change programme, while they commented on their negative behaviours and feelings regarding change. Although there were differences in the importance managers and staff members placed on the two themes, which can be attributed to the context of the different roles employees at different organisational levels have during change (Goltz and Hietapelto, 2002), there was a strong indication of a consistent pattern of differences when discussing the different aspects of the change.

Participants talked about the communication and participation problems they encountered during the organisational change (Burnes, 1992; Ringer, 1998). These two aspects of change are important for employees, since they were confronted with the challenges associated to the planning of the change process and they were living with a lack of job security, as they are uncertain about their new roles within the organisation (Clarke & Higgs, 2018; Nielsen & Randall, 2019). Therefore, change strategists need to strongly consider staff consultation and involvement, and communicate a clear message concerning job-related decisions (Self and Schraeder, 2009; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

Change agent need to inspire and support positive feelings for the purpose to implement the change management process. Employees engage with the change process, having a more positive attitude towards change when they feel that their involvement and contribution make an impact on decisions, and when they can access information about the process of change that have an impact on them (Thornhill and Saunders, 2003; Gilstrap and Collins, 2012). Previous research on employees' participation in the change process has revealed a positive

impact on perceptions and acceptance of change (e.g. Bordia et al., 2004). Our findings have confirmed mostly negative attitudes in this change incident, due to the limited level of employee support and commitment in the change process.

Moreover, change agents should have an agenda with realistic and pragmatic objectives and be transparent and consistent about job-related decisions in order for employees to know what to expect and provide professional development opportunities to support employees who experience uncertainty and anxiety due to job-related changes (King et al., 1991; Silvester et al., 1999). Further evidence suggested that employees are willing to commit if they believe that the decisions made by management are fair, and when employees feel committed, this will reinforce a supportive environment for the acceptance of change (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Klendauer and Deller, 2009). Other evidence indicated that once employees start to believe they are not being treated fair within the workplace, they have a lower productivity and performance in their work, and they are predisposed to distrust both management and colleagues (Folger and Skarlicki, 2001; Saunders and Thornhill, 2004, 2006; Croonen, 2010).

Key findings from this study suggest that organisational justice can not only indicate whether or not the change initiatives has been effectively implemented (Fuchs, 2001; Thornhill and Saunders, 2003; Colquitt et al., 2005; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011), but also as a framework for understanding employees' perceptions, and the management of change (Bidarian and Jafari, 2012; Jones and Skarlicki, 2012), and enable effective action in the organisational environment (Ambrose and Schminke, 2003; Neves and Caetano, 2006; Ali, 2010). Other important findings suggest that justice perceptions by non-managerial employees towards management are shaped by forming close personal relations which are based on understanding, trust and fairness (Saunders and Thornhill, 2003; O'Neil et al., 2011), and when management understands how the change in organisations can be successfully implemented (Croonen, 2010; Saunders and Thornhill, 2003; Saunders and Thornhill, 2006) this will help them to forecast employee reactions and behaviours so as to deliver the desired change and incorporate strategies and procedures that will successfully facilitate change process and change sustainability in the future (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Negative employee reactions to organisational change imperatives have the potential for highly negative impact, significantly interfering with the intended gains of change (Fugate et al., 2010). As such, it is essential that organisations implementing change better understand potentially negative responses by employees to the process in the interest of effectively managing the outcomes.

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