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Resistance and Conflict in Systemic Change Management: A Qualitative Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

Organisational change processes are frequently described by organisations as accompanied by resistance and conflict. Traditional change management literature often treats these phenomena as objective obstacles to implementation. In contrast, systemic and constructivist approaches emphasise that such phenomena are not objective realities but rather interpretations constructed through communication and perception. This study explores how systemic change facilitators perceive and address resistance and conflict during organisational transformation processes. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with systemic change practitioners and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings suggest that resistance and conflict are constructed and interpreted by practitioners not as problems to eliminate but as meaningful signals within organisational communication phenomena. The systemic stance plays a central role in enabling constructive engagement with these perceived dynamics. Rather than attempting to control behaviour, systemic change facilitators focus on understanding context, carefully generating hypotheses, and facilitating dialogue within the organisation. The results highlight the relevance of systemic thinking in organisational change and underline the value of qualitative constructivist research for understanding complex social phenomena in organisations. The study contributes to a growing body of research that reframes resistance and conflict as constructs rather than observations or occurring measurable phenomena.

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1. Introduction

In a globalised and rapidly changing environment, organisations are constantly required to adapt their structures, processes, and strategies. Change initiatives such as restructuring, digital transformation, or organisational redesign have therefore become central elements of modern organisational life (Bickerich & Michel, 2016) ^[2]. Despite the availability of numerous change management models, empirical studies repeatedly show that a significant proportion of organisational change initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes (Tiffert, 2020) ^[16]. One explanation frequently cited in management literature is the presence of “employee resistance” to change (van Dijk & van Dick, 2009) ^[17].

However, systemic organisational theory challenges the assumption that resistance represents an objective barrier to change. Instead, systemic approaches emphasise that organisations consist primarily of communication processes and inter-personal dynamics (Kaiser-Nolden, 2010) ^[7]. Within this perspective, what is labelled as resistance or conflict can be understood as interpretations constructed by observers within the organisational system.

The present study adopts a systemic and constructivist perspective to examine how systemic change facilitators deal with resistance and conflict as constructs in change processes. Rather than measuring resistance as a variable with a quantitative stance, the study explores how practitioners construct meaning around such situations and how these constructions influence their professional practice.

The research question guiding this study is therefore:

How do systemic change facilitators construct and address resistance and conflict in organisational change processes?

By focusing on practitioners' experiences and interpretations, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of change processes as complex social interactions rather than technical implementation tasks.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Systemic thinking and constructivism

Systemic approaches to organisational change are rooted in social constructivism and systems theory. A key assumption of constructivism is that reality is not objectively given but constructed by observers through perception, interpretation, and communication. Paul Watzlawick famously argued that there is no objective reality independent of observers; instead, individuals construct their own versions of reality based on their experiences and interpretations (Watzlawick, 1988) ^[18]. In systemic thinking, this principle has significant implications for organisational analysis. Organisations are not simply collections of individuals but networks of communication processes. From this perspective, organisational phenomena emerge from interactions rather than from fixed structures (Luhmann, 1987) ^[8].

This understanding shifts the role of consultants or change facilitators. Rather than diagnosing objective problems, systemic practitioners recognise that any observation is itself a construction. Consequently, interventions are not based on absolute truths but on hypotheses that are continuously tested and revised in interaction with the organisational system (Schlippe & Schweizer, 2009) ^[13].

2.2. The systemic stance

A central concept in systemic practice is the systemic stance referring to a perspective characterised by appreciation and a non-judgemental orientation towards organisational actors (Radatz, 2010) ^[11].

In systemic counselling and organisational development, the facilitator is not considered an expert who provides solutions. Instead, the practitioner acts as a process facilitator who supports the system in developing its own solutions. This perspective is closely related to the concept of the "not-knowing stance", which assumes that the people within a system are experts in their own context (Foerster & Bröcker, 2002) ^[4].

The systemic attitude therefore emphasises:

- respect for different perspectives,
- openness to multiple interpretations,
- a focus on resources rather than deficits.

Within change processes, this stance influences how perceived resistance and conflict are interpreted.

2.3. Systemic understanding of resistance and conflict

Traditional change management literature often portrays resistance as a negative reaction to organisational change that

needs to be managed or overcome (Bickerich & Michel, 2016) ^[2]. However, systemic approaches question this assumption.

From a systemic perspective, resistance is not an inherent characteristic of individuals but a description used by observers. When employees question change initiatives or express concerns, these reactions may be labelled as resistance. Yet these behaviours can also be understood as meaningful contributions that express alternative perspectives within the organization (Radatz, 2009).

Similarly, conflicts are not fixed entities but processes emerging from communication patterns. According to systemic theory, conflicts arise when different interpretations of reality collide and are repeatedly reproduced in interaction (Simon, 2018) ^[14].

Therefore, resistance and conflict can be interpreted as signals that reveal underlying assumptions, interests, or organisational dynamics. Rather than eliminating them, systemic change facilitators aim to explore these signals and use them as opportunities for reflection and learning (Barthelmeß, 2016) ^[1].

2.4. Organisations as communication systems

Systems theory, particularly the work of Niklas Luhmann, describes organisations as autopoietic communication systems (Luhmann, 1987) ^[8] suggesting that organisations reproduce themselves through communication rather than through individual actions alone.

In systems, change cannot be directly imposed from outside. External interventions can only create irritations that the system may or may not respond to. The way in which an organisation reacts depends on its internal communication structures and decision premises (Simon, 2019).

This understanding highlights why change processes, with a systemic perspective, are regarded as unpredictable. Instead of linear implementation processes, organisational change involves ongoing negotiation, sense-making and systematic reflection among organisational members.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist epistemology. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena because it focuses on understanding meanings, interpretations, and experiences within their specific contexts (Döring, 2016) ^[3].

Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, qualitative research seeks to reconstruct patterns of meaning that shape human behaviour. (Reichert, 2014) ^[12]. In this sense, scientific knowledge can also be understood as a reconstruction of social constructions created by actors within their everyday worlds.

The study therefore explores how systemic change facilitators interpret and respond to situations they perceive as resistance or conflict.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured expert interviews with systemic change practitioners. Expert interviews were chosen because they allow researchers to access specialised knowledge and professional experiences (Helfferich, 2014) ^[5].

Participants were selected based on two criteria:

- At least two years of professional experience in change management.
- Formal training in systemic consulting or systemic change management.

The final sample consisted of four practitioners, including both internal and external change facilitators.

The interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 35–40 minutes each. A semi-structured interview guide ensured that all relevant topics were addressed while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences (Helfferich, 2014) ^[5].

3.3. Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2014) ^[9]. This method allows researchers to systematically analyse textual material while remaining sensitive to contextual meaning.

The analysis followed an inductive category development process. Instead of applying predefined categories, categories were developed directly from the interview data.

The analytical procedure included:

- Transcribing the interviews,
- Paraphrasing relevant statements,
- Generalising the content,
- Developing thematic categories.

Through this process, the analysis identified six main categories that reflect the practitioners' constructions of resistance and conflict.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed several recurring patterns in how systemic change facilitators interpret and address situations described as resistance or conflict.

4.1. Resistance as meaningful feedback

A central finding of the study is that practitioners rarely interpret resistance as a problem that needs to be eliminated. Instead, perceived resistance is often viewed as valuable feedback about the change process.

Participants emphasised that resistance may indicate concerns, alternative ideas, or overlooked aspects of the change initiative. From this perspective, resistance provides important information about how organisational members interpret the proposed change.

This interpretation reflects the systemic assumption that different actors construct different realities within the same organisational context (Schlippe & Schweitzer 2009; Watzlawick, 1988) ^[13, 18].

4.2. Conflict as a communication process

Similarly, conflicts were not understood as dysfunctional events but as communication processes. Practitioners described conflicts as situations in which different perspectives collide and become visible.

Rather than attempting to resolve conflicts quickly, systemic practitioners often aim to explore the underlying interpretations and expectations that shape the conflict.

This approach is consistent with systemic theory, which views conflicts as relational phenomena rather than individual problems (Simon, 2018).

4.3. Importance of a systemic stance

Another key finding concerns the importance of the systemic stance. Participants emphasised that appreciation, openness, and non-judging or categorising curiosity are essential when working with organisational teams.

Creating a safe and respectful environment allows organisational members to express concerns and explore alternative perspectives. This atmosphere of trust is particularly important in situations where tensions or disagreements emerge.

The findings therefore support existing systemic literature that highlights the central role of the consultant's attitude in successful interventions (Radatz, 2010) ^[11].

4.4. Context analysis and hypothesis building

Systemic practitioners described the importance of analysing organisational context before intervening. Rather than relying on quick diagnoses, they emphasised the need to observe communication patterns, organisational culture, and relational dynamics.

Based on these observations, practitioners develop hypotheses about the underlying dynamics within the organisation. These hypotheses are not considered definitive explanations but working assumptions that guide further exploration.

4.5. Facilitation rather than control

Finally, the results highlight a fundamental difference between systemic and traditional change management approaches. While classical approaches often focus on planning and controlling change processes, systemic practitioners see their role primarily as facilitating dialogue within the organisation.

Instead of imposing solutions, they aim to create spaces where organisational members can reflect on their perspectives and develop new possibilities together.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how systemic change facilitators construct and address resistance and conflict in organisational change processes. The findings suggest that these phenomena are not constructed and treated as objective obstacles but as meaningful signals within organisational communication.

The systemic perspective emphasises that resistance and conflict are observer-dependent constructions that arise from different interpretations of reality within the organisation (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2009) ^[13]. By adopting a systemic stance characterised by appreciation and curiosity, practitioners can transform these dynamics into opportunities for reflection and learning.

The study also demonstrates the value of qualitative constructivist research for exploring complex organisational phenomena. By focusing on practitioners' experiences and interpretations, qualitative methods provide insights that cannot easily be captured through quantitative measurement. The study focuses exclusively on systemic practitioners. Future research could therefore expand the data and include perspectives from organisational members who experience change processes directly. Further research might also explore how systemic-constructivist approaches compare with other change management frameworks in practice.

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