The role of resistance
in organisational change programmes

Vicky Sinclair presents a critical examination of theory and empirical evidence

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Resistance to change is the expression, within the whole organisation field, of a powerful and complex energy which can be both destructive and creative and which plays a crucial part in constantly evolving corporations. Metaphors, combined with psychoanalytical theory, could be an effective way to understand the conscious and unconscious reasons why resistance occurs, from all angles, and how its transformation can contribute to the change process.

This article is constructed on the basis that organisations, like the people who form them and everything in existence in our universe, are complex nonlinear adaptive systems[1-3] combined with field theory notions. The amplitude of this definition may suggest a discursive post-modern approach. I will take this stance while exploring the subject matter through the concept of metaphors. I will, however, combine this view with psychoanalytical theory, within an interpretive paradigm, in an attempt to look at both conscious and unconscious resistance. This paper starts to explore whether this multidimensional perspective could be useful in understanding the part that resistance plays in change programmes and the deeper meaning of resistance to change in organisations. It also questions whether further research combining the concepts of metaphors explored from a practitioner or academic point of view[1,4,5] in conjunction with a psychoanalytical perspective (eg Lacan, Jung, Freud), could contribute to a more holistic view.

Most literature in the field of resistance to change in organisations is focused on observation, definition and resolution of mainly negative responses to change. Recent academic papers take the discursive route and set out to illuminate ways of understanding the targets, practice and consequences of resistance[6]. Others offer empirical quantitative analysis of dispositional resistance[7] or attempt to map resistance to change[8]. All add to a better understanding of resistance to change and contribute to a multidimensional vision, but few address the core question of why resistance occurs in the first place. It is important to distinguish between the symptoms of resistance to change and the causes behind them.

I disagree with Dent et al[2,3] when they say that the belief in intrinsic resistance to change is a fundamental flaw. I believe that most change faces resistance, due to factors inherent in human nature[9] and that it is through a deeper understanding of these factors that a shift in perception could occur, in order to unleash the creative energy behind resistance and highlight the part it plays in change processes.

As Eisenhardt[10] mentions, the paradox of coexisting tensions creates an edge of chaos and the resulting ambivalence allows a pluralistic vision to emerge. In fact, resistance to change could be renamed 'reaction to change', in an effort to remain neutral and in order to include positive as well as negative impacts. In this instance, it is interesting to point out that insightful and well-intentioned debates, criticism or disagreement, do not necessarily equate to negative resistance but rather may result in better understanding as well as additional options and solutions[11]. Political mechanisms within organisations as well as, for example, governments, often function on this basis, which contributes to democratic decisions. Fleming[12] emphasises the epistemological importance of metaphors for visualising political activity.

Intentionally or not, people commonly make sense of the world through metaphors. Their use
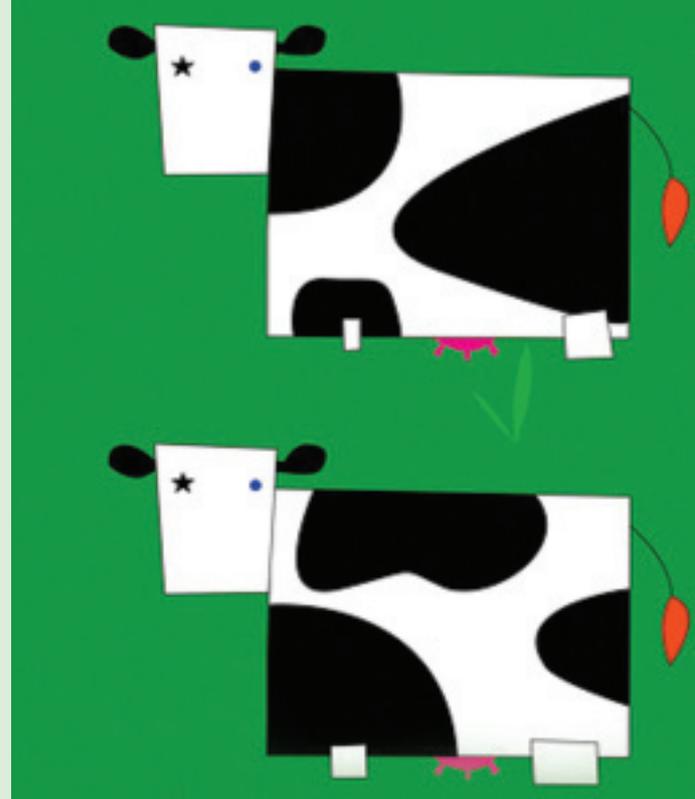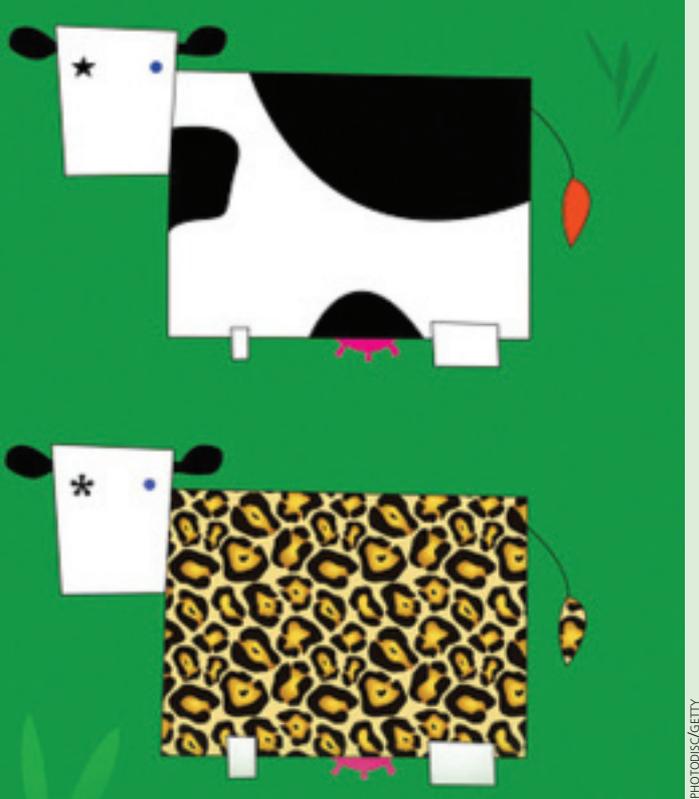
can be seen within all paradigms. From a cognitive point of view, the main ideas behind the use of metaphors are: to render vague and abstract ideas concrete, to transmit a large amount of information holistically and principally to trigger a perceptual shift[4]. More than just communicative or rhetorical tools, metaphors can be used creatively and can help to gain profound new insights and conceptual advances that were previously inconceivable[5]. Metaphors have already been explored as a way to identify resistance to change and unearth emotions associated with change. Palmer et al[13] highlighted the ontological and epistemological conflicts within organisation theory, in relation to metaphors, and they attempt to re-conceptualise their use in the field of organisational change. More recently, Cornelissen et al[5] produced an empirical paper aimed at identifying the heuristics that have been used by organisational researchers in developing and selecting metaphors.

I suggest that psychoanalytical theory, being by nature highly symbolic, could provide a solid basis for the use of metaphors, while respecting the infinite variety of the concept. It seems difficult to reach a higher level of success in organisational change programmes without understanding the profound meaning of reaction to change and how unconscious internal conflicts are being reenacted within the organisation. In a review paper, Gabriel and Carr[14] expose how psychoanalysis has been productively applied to organisational studies. Since the work undertaken by the Tavistock Institute, psychoanalysis has triggered an increased interest among academics.

Through this lens, it seems clear that people at all levels of organisational life certainly resist change because they use familiar existing arrangements

to help protect themselves against the anxieties stimulated by membership in group life[9].

An in-depth analysis of resistance to organisational change through psychoanalytical theory and a comprehensive exploration of working environment metaphors would go beyond the scope of this article. To give some examples, however, it is possible to say that in psychoanalysis, the compulsive act has a metaphorical meaning with respect to something previously repressed, against which the subject continues to defend him or herself[15]. Resistance can be seen as a result of this compulsion. In a recent call for paper, Contu et al[16] expose Lacan's suggestion that conscious constructs are based on an imaginary and a symbolic order in which the subject can know itself and fulfil its desires. Such order is constantly disrupted and the constant struggle is to face up to that 'lack' and the failures of our imaginary and symbolic constructions. Metaphors could help a better symbolic construction and this could have a positive impact on resistance in organisations. Lacan says that there is a fundamental 'lack' (*manque*) in all human beings, which creates impulsive desires to compensate as well as the need for '*jouissance*'. Resistance could occur when the objects of *jouissance* used as compensation, are in danger due to an external or situational change. Zell[17] uses the metaphor of death and dying and explores the psychoanalytical concept of loss and bereavement as explained by Kübler-Ross[18] to understand resistance to change within the organisation. Based on a 10-year longitudinal study, Carr[19] gives empirical evidence of the benefit of Jungian analysis for the organisation, mainly through the mirroring stage metaphor. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and archetype metaphors would deserve further investigation with regard to its potential application to reaction to change at the organisational level. Metaphorical analogies related to theatre are quite widespread in organisational behaviour. Based on Kleinian and Lacanian theories, Vidaillet[20] uses Shakespeare's Othello to explore how workplace envy can cause organisational dysfunctions, which resistance could be a part of.

In a recent comprehensive study, Stavrakakis[21] explains that psychoanalysis is usually conceived as limited to managing individual suffering and to theorising individual identity. As a result, psychoanalysis is often excluded from or marginalised within discussions of the field of organised social and political experience. Stavrakakis[21] confirms that it is a misunderstanding, as Freud and Lacan have devoted considerable energy in highlighting the inextricable dialectic between individual and group life.

However, I believe that it is important not to view an individual humanistic approach as reductionist, and rehabilitate the importance of the emotional and psychological process without pathologising it. Arnaud[22] makes an interesting attempt to combine prescriptive or traditional coaching with a psychoanalytical approach. In fact, psychoanalytically inspired coaching is not prescriptive. It offers a very different methodology from the classic strategic approach to resistance, by giving to the resistant agent the power of understanding and shifting the resistance themselves. It is an intimate and empowering process that not only relies on external sources of learning but in this instance, goes far beyond traditional organisational development techniques. Ideally, the newly acquired agency could allow everyone within the organisation to become a competent change agent and to establish their relationships with other employees at all levels in a more authentic manner rather than on an imaginary stage defined by unconscious patterns. It is important, however, to remain within the boundaries of the counselling or organisational development consultancy, without engaging in a psychotherapy which may not be desirable for either the employees or the company, particularly as psychoanalysis is a very specific theory requiring years of training and few practitioners are familiar with its complexity. Rotenberg[23] argues that executive coaching and psychotherapy are highly distinct paradigms, though their methodologies overlap.

No single theory provides a comprehensive account of how people understand all kinds of metaphorical language[5] and I question whether such a theory would be beneficial, as it would risk putting counterproductive limits on the concept of metaphors. However, handling such complex and powerful tools without solid foundations can lead to confusion, error and misunderstanding or even oversimplification. Provided that further research be undertaken, the use of metaphors set within psychoanalytical theory and aptly adapted to its application within the organisation, could promote creativity and deeper understanding without losing ground. I believe that this combined knowledge could help the dynamics and suppleness of organisational action and as a result, reduce irrational resistance to change and make productive use of reactions towards change. ∎

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