

The Dutch Police Restructure: The Role of Identity and Leadership

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RESEARCH FOCUS

The Dutch police are currently undergoing a restructure aimed at nationalisation. In particular, this major structural change will see the number of police forces in the Netherlands reduced from 25 to 10. The goals of the National Police are divided into a number of sub-goals. On an abstract level the goals of this change are to improve internal processes, increase cooperation between Dutch police forces, reduce bureaucracies, improve police performance and trust in the police and to respond to austerity measures. More specifically, this change covers goals such as an increase in “hands-on” leadership, greater clarity regarding police services, better preventative police techniques and other investments into the development of professional expertise. Organisational cultural aspects are also important; the resilience of police officers should be strengthened and the organisational culture should be moved from a strong focus on accountability to a stronger trust-based atmosphere.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research demonstrates that workplace change can be costly to individuals and organisations, disrupting work processes and procedures and threatening core values, expectations and norms. In particular, change threatens workers’ perceptions of consistency, often leading to resistance and distrust amongst employees. In the Dutch targeted study we focus on two factors that have been shown to be critical to change effectiveness, namely:

- a) The relationship between change and identity perceptions and identification (*and*)
- b) The role of leadership.

Change can threaten existing norms and values (identity threat) or offer an opportunity to move towards a desired future identity (identity opportunity). In the Dutch study, we focus on the impact of change on officers’ perceptions of identity threat and opportunity. We also investigate the facilitators of positive identity perceptions, including the impact of leadership, team climate (e.g., organisational support and team trust) and change communication on the acceptance of change.

A second focus of our study concerns the role of leaders in managing change outcomes. Leaders are primary change agents, playing a pivotal role in the implementation of organisational change. In particular, leaders act as important facilitators and communicators during periods of change. The social identity approach identifies four leadership characteristics that are vital to change effectiveness.

First, leaders must embody the organisation’s identity, in terms of being representative of ‘who we are as an organisation’. Second leaders need to be agents of continuity, emphasising that in spite of the change, the core values of the organisation will not be challenged. Third, leaders need to espouse positive visions of the change, as an avenue for development and growth. Finally, leaders need to be role-models, taking the lead in change processes not only verbally, but also behaviourally.

In the current study, we investigate these factors, in particular examining the barriers and facilitators of positive change. We summarise our theoretical model in the following Figure.

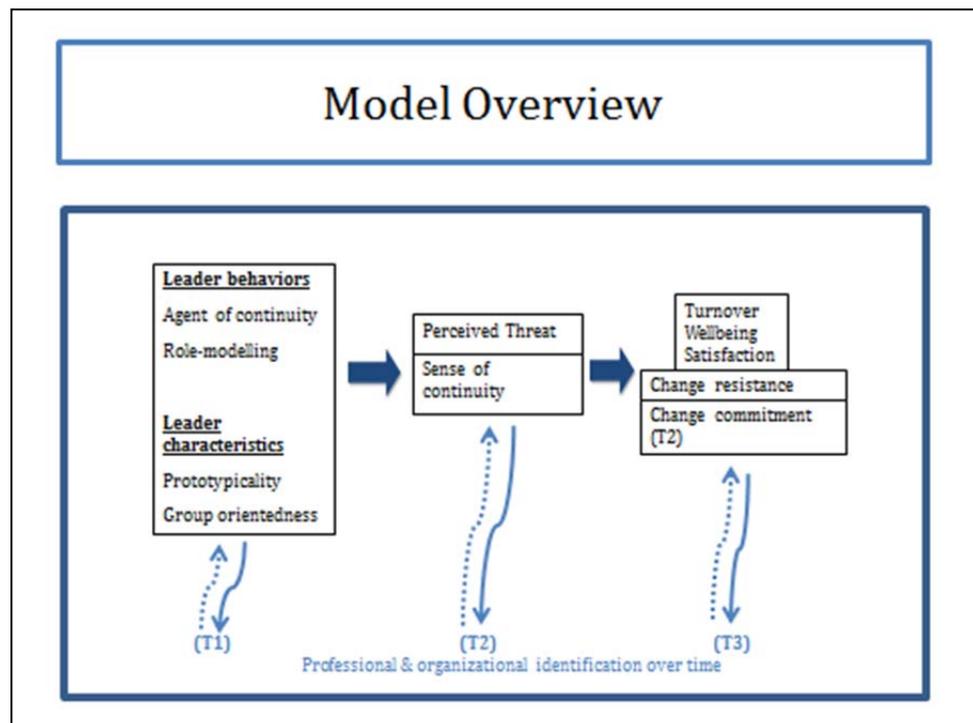


Figure: Overview of concepts measured in the longitudinal survey

DESIGN

This change project has been many years in the planning, and is expected to be implemented in two phases: January 2013 to January 2015 (phase 1) and January 2015 to January 2017 (phase 2). Our Dutch targeted study examines the first part of this process, in particular focusing on the role of leadership and identity in facilitating this change.

We take a quantitative approach, collecting survey data from five regional police forces within the Netherlands. Data is collected in an online survey of officers of all ranks and functions. The first stage of data collection was completed in December 2012 and the second stage is due to commence in June of this year. As we are interested in examining the causal relationships between variables (that is in determining the facilitators of change over time) we will collect data at three (optionally four) time points.

Importantly, research suggests that change-related costs are often evident in the early stages of implementation, while the benefits of change only become clear once the change has been fully embedded.

Thus a longitudinal study design is beneficial in allowing us to examine change determinants and outcomes from the beginning of the change process to the culmination of the restructure.

THE EXPECTED IMPLICATIONS

We expect our findings to provide a number of interesting implications and insights for police leaders. In particular we aim to:

- Identify the key antecedents of change, including the barriers and facilitators of change success.
- Develop a deeper understanding of the role of leadership and management in supporting positive change.
- Provide systematic research based evidence to enable the effective planning and delivery of future change projects within the police.