

## Antecedents of employee attitudes toward change: The case centralisation in a UK police force

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### RESEARCH FOCUS

Under the current financial austerity measures, the police in England and Wales are being asked to reduce costs by 20% by 2015 and this has led to extensive activity to cut staff and introduce a massive programme of changes. One major direction for change has involved UK police forces centralising services and functions as a means of streamlining activities. The case study conducted in the UK therefore focuses on the centralisation of an intelligence service within one of the major UK police forces. We have adopted a qualitative approach to identify the common themes underlying the transition from the viewpoint of the police and civilian staff affected by the changes. Extant literature suggests that employees' attitudes toward organisational change are important to the success or failure of change efforts. With this in mind, the main construct of interest in this study was elected to be the attitude of affected the civilian staff and police officers towards the centralisation. In particular we investigated the effect of various factors, including leadership, communications of change-related information, team identity and occupational group differences.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The importance of *leadership* in the implementation and management of organisational change cannot be overstated, and many researchers have generally agreed that a successful organisational change requires leaders to recognise and communicate a need for change, create a shared vision and common direction, support the change, and motivate followers to identify with the vision and to work towards the organisational goals. Most research, however, focuses on the role of senior leadership, we therefore set out to explicitly investigate the role of the leaders at the line manager level in shaping the attitudes of staff toward the centralisation efforts.

*Communication* has been identified as another vital part of successful implementation of organisational changes. Organisational change, by its very nature of moving from what is familiar to the unfamiliar, results in uncertainty among employees and past studies have reported that communication of change-related information reduces employee uncertainty, increases control and influences employees' attitudes toward organisational change. The second aim of the study was therefore to investigate to what extent does communication of change-related information influence employees' attitudes toward organisational change, and how.

Considering that the centralisation programme in the case organisation involved extensive changes in team membership, leadership and structure,

and having in mind the importance of effective team working in the police context, the third objective of the study was to investigate the effect of team changes to attitudes toward change, from the perspective of *team identity*. Organisational changes could pose a significant threat to an individual's social identity, as it may involve the loss of one's social identity with previous organisational or group attributes, and the need to form a new identity. It is therefore important to build an understanding of how anticipated changes to individuals' team identity influence their attitudes toward organisational change, in order to manage change in a way that minimises adverse impacts due to organisational transitions.

In the UK police context, police officers and civilian staff have different roles and responsibilities, as well as different employment terms, including different pay and pension schemes. Given these differences, it is possible for different subcultures and norms to emerge, which research suggests might result in differing attitudes toward organisational changes. As far as we are aware, this is the first study that is exploring the differences between police officers and civilian staff attitudes toward organisational change, which could be useful in understanding how to manage the changes for both occupational groups if meaningful differences between them are found to exist. Additionally, there is a general lack of attention to understanding the differences between civilian staff and police officers in the UK; hence, the present study will also contribute to the wider police research in the UK. We therefore investigated whether there are differences in attitudes toward organisational change between members of different *occupational groups*, and on which aspects.

## DESIGN

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 members of staff (5 officers and 5 civilians) at the central headquarters of the police force in small and private meeting rooms during working hours. The interviews took between 60 to 90 minutes depending on how much each participant wished to share. The interview guide included questions about the main themes of the present study which were generated by the researchers based on the previous literature and input from the police force. A list of potential prompts and probes was produced to be used as needed in order to assure consistency and at the same time allow for in-depth examination of particular emerging issues. The main interview questions after the opening questions regarding the participants' jobs covered: the nature of the changes being experienced by the participant; communications about the change; relationships with their direct supervisor; their feelings about the change; and the impact on their team.

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' informed consent for subsequent transcription to facilitate the analysis process, with the exception of one interview in which the participant was not comfortable being recorded, so hand-written notes were taken during the interview and used as the basis for analysis instead. The interview transcriptions were

analysed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research revealed various aspects of the investigated constructs that had a direct impact on employees' attitudes towards the change. While all four constructs were found to play a role, line manager leadership appeared to have the least effect on attitudes, which could be due to the limited involvement of line managers in the change process in our case. We found that the most pronounced antecedent of attitudes toward change was communication in our case study context. Apart from the theoretically-driven constructs in our study, trust in the change agent emerged in our analysis as one of the key factors influencing attitudes to specific changes. Overall, the following recommendations have been drawn from our study findings:

### *Leadership*

- Allow employees to have stable leadership during periods of reviews and changes.
- Get supervisors and managers 'on board' early on in the review and get their support for the changes so that they may influence their direct-reports positively.

### *Communications*

- Have multiple modes of communications to cater for differing preferences and to reach a wider audience.
- Communicate regularly to keep members of the force updated, but do not overload them with information that is not relevant to them.
- Ensure the accuracy of the content and professional presentation.
- Ensure that information given is consistent.
- Avoid communication leaks and disseminating information that has yet to be confirmed by higher decision boards.

### *Team Identity*

- In the context of a restructuring or centralisation of teams, portray the changes as additions to employees' existing teams rather than disestablishment of their teams and recreating new teams.

### *Police officer-civilian staff differences*

- Given the differences in the two groups' norms and attitudes, more attention could be given to communicating the changes and addressing the concerns of the civilian staff since they are less used to alterations in their work and roles.
- Communicate changes to employees once the outcomes of the reviews are less tentative in order to reduce the period of uncertainty.

### *Trust in Change Agents*

- Involve consultants in reviews and planned changes. This is not only to safeguard employees' perceptions and trust in the implementation teams, but also to utilise the skills and expertise of consultants in making changes to organisations. Alternately, ensure police leaders are well trained in change management processes.