Organisational change and employee burnout: The moderating effects of support and job control

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Abstract

As organisations experience rapid change, employee health and well-being has emerged as an important issue. Although organisational change can result in psychological and physical stress among employees (Hylton, 2004), providing positive organisational resources, such as support and job control, may help reduce employee burnout (e.g., Dubois et al., 2014; Leiter and Maslach, 2009; Puleo, 2011). Therefore, using a sample of Canadian health-care staff (N = 202) who were involved in a large-scale organisational change, we investigated: (a) whether perceptions of organisational change stressors were associated with burnout (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy), (b) the extent to which supervisor support and job control were directly related to burnout, and (c) whether support and control moderated the relationship between change stressors and burnout. Job control was directly related to all of the burnout components, and support was related to exhaustion and cynicism. Supervisor support buffered the negative relationship between change stressors and exhaustion and between change stressors and cynicism. Job control moderated the negative relationship between change stressors and professional efficacy.

1. Introduction

Organisational change has become a significant part of work life, with changes being required not only on an organisational level, but also on a personal employee level (Anderson, 2013). Organisational changes, such as restructurings and mergers, can result in higher levels of job stressors and demands, such as psychological uncertainty about how the change will affect their position (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006), role ambiguity (i.e., unclear expectations; Smollan, 2015), and increased workload (Puleo, 2011), which have the potential to increase employees’ level of burnout (e.g., Dubois et al., 2014). Organisational change has been associated with lower employee health and well-being, in terms of lower self-rated health (e.g., Hasson et al., 2006) and higher usage of stress-related medications (e.g., Dahl, 2011).

Even though organisational change may be unavoidable, negative employee outcomes from change are preventable. Positive work environments that are supportive and provide autonomy may be associated with more positive employee outcomes, and they also may buffer negative outcomes resulting from change.
job resource that is associated with higher well-being and may mitigate the negative effects of job demands on well-being. No previous research has examined the moderating effects of support and control on the relationship between organisational change stressors and burnout.

Therefore, the goals of this study are to examine the impact of organisational change on employee burnout, and to examine whether a positive work environment (involving high supervisory support and job control) may be associated with more positive outcomes and help to mitigate the negative effects of change in the workplace.

1.1. Burnout and organisational change

It has been well established in the literature that stressors in the workplace can lead to burnout (e.g., Khamisa et al., 2015; Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Burnout is a response to a prolonged exposure to stressors, and is a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion (i.e., being depleted of your emotional resources), cynicism (i.e., having a negative, cynical attitude about your job), and reduced professional efficacy (i.e., evaluating your work accomplishments negatively; Maslach and Leiter, 2008; Scaufeli et al., 1996). Burnout tends to be associated with organisational stressors, such as high workload (Leiter and Maslach, 2009; Puleo, 2011), inadequate resources (Puleo, 2011), increased time pressure (Rabatin et al., 2015), role ambiguity or role conflict (Elman and Dowd, 1997; Kilfedder et al., 2001), staff conflicts (Puleo, 2011), and lower levels of autonomy or loss of job control (Leiter and Maslach, 2009). Many of these stressors are introduced, or exacerbated, as a result of organisational change (e.g., Puleo, 2011).

Consequently, it is not surprising that organisational change can have a negative impact on employee psychological well-being (Bourbonnais et al., 2005; Greenglass et al., 2002; Terry and Jimmieson, 2003). For example, frequent changes within an organisation are associated with employee psychological uncertainty about how the change will affect their lives (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). A study of private-sector employees in Denmark found that employees working in organisations with a high level of change tend to be prescribed more stress-related medications than employees working in organisations with low levels of change, even after accounting for organisation performance and individual characteristics of the employees (Dahl, 2011). This difference in stress-related prescriptions was present two years after the period of change (Dahl, 2011). In a study of hospital nurses facing organisational change, negative appraisals of changes were related to lower job satisfaction and higher absenteeism due to illness (Verhaeghe et al., 2006). Hospital employees going through an organisational re-engineering experienced a significant increase in depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and job insecurity (Woodward et al., 1999).

Although organisational change may be inevitable, “there are more and less effective ways to manage change” (Anderson, 2013, p. 4). That is, managing change may make the process less stressful for employees, or at least alleviate some of the negative outcomes of the change process. Two of the key organisational resources that are associated with higher employee well-being are providing social support and job control to employees.

1.2. Supervisor support

Supervisors have the ability to influence the health of employees, such that supportive treatment is associated with employee health (Kuoppala et al., 2008), and less work overload (Brotheridge and Lee, 2005) and work stress (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2006). Edwards et al. (2006) found that community mental health nurses who had supportive clinical supervisors reported lower levels of depersonalization (i.e., less negative attitudes towards patients). Similarly, supportive management was found to be associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and negative work attitudes in a sample of mental health nurses (Hannigan et al., 2000).

Supervisor support may be even more important during times of organisational change, such that the organisational change process may be more successful by developing supportive work relationships (Vakola and Nikolau, 2005). High supervisor support is related to more favourable evaluations of organisational change (Hetty van Emmerik et al., 2009), and in general, favourable evaluations of change tend to be related to less stress and greater work enjoyment (Pahkin et al., 2014).

In a study examining the effects of worksite relocation on retail employees, perceived social support from managers was associated with lower psychological stress (Moyle and Parkes, 1999). In a study of employees at a UK public utility plant, low levels of support from managers and colleagues were associated with higher levels of role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity during organisational change (Swanson and Power, 2001). Leiter and Harvie (1998) found that supportive supervision among nurses during change was associated with higher morale, feelings of job security, and quality of patient care, and they argued that these factors were indicators of higher acceptance of change. A qualitative study of sources of stress throughout organisational change found that supervisor support is especially influential during periods of change: Employees who reported high supervisor support indicated that the support helped them through the change, whereas employees who reported low supervisor support indicated that the lack of support contributed to their stress (Smollan, 2015). Compared to employees without supportive leaders, employees who had supportive leaders reported less psychological uncertainty during organisational change (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). Supervisor support tends to be associated with lower emotional exhaustion (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2002) and improved psychological well-being (Martin et al., 2005) during times of change.

In addition to the support one receives at work, the degree of control over one’s work (i.e., job control) has been associated with positive psychological health, work-related attitudes and behaviours.

1.3. Job control

Job control and autonomy can be conceptualized as a job resource, such that job control can help employees deal effectively with their job demands and reduce negative outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Karasek, 1979). Job control and autonomy have been consistently associated with lower anxiety and depression (e.g., Sanne et al., 2005), stress (Thompson and Prottas, 2006), and burnout (Dubois et al., 2014; Kushnir and Melamed, 1991; Lasalvia et al., 2009), and with higher job satisfaction (Day and Jeirge, 2002; Mansell et al., 2006) and better worker health (Bond and Bunce, 2003; Dyweer and Ganster, 1991). In a study of physicians, low control over work was associated with higher levels of stress (Linzer et al., 2002).

Similar to supervisory support, job control and autonomy may be important in times of organisational change, because change often can signify a significant loss of perceived control. For example, not only is having low job control associated with less favourable evaluations of organisational change (Hetty van Emmerik et al., 2009), but having low control over work decisions (i.e., low decision latitude) tends to be related to higher psychological distress during the organisational change (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2010). Organisational change has been associated with more sick-
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