BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE CASE OF A SELECTED COUNTY GOVERNMENT IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Literature indicates that organizations going through change encounter many challenges and barriers which prevent them from achieving the desired results. In addition, majority of organizations seeking change fails to reach this goal. Studies done in developed nations indicate that the main obstacle to achieving the desired change can stem from both the internal organizational environment and the external organizational environment. In addition, some authors point out that very little research pertaining to barriers to organizational change has been conducted in governmental organizations. Kenya implemented a new Constitution in 2013 which demanded that some functions be devolved from The National Government to the newly formed County Governments. This study sought to find out whether the selected County Government is experiencing any challenges as a result of this change brought about by the new Constitution. In addition, this study sought to explain the kind of barriers to organizational change that This County encountered. This study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. Through interviews with the departmental managers at the County, this study established that indeed the selected County was grappling with the challenge of change. The study highlights the barriers to effective change in a thematic way and puts forward possible remedies to the mentioned barriers.

Key Words: barriers to effective organizational change, County Government in Kenya

Introduction

Change is the movement from present state towards a future state (George and Jones, 2001). The changes in an organizational life range from routine operational improvement to major, radical transformational changes. Example of the later include: business mergers and acquisitions, cultural changes, management information system implementation and restructuring of organizational units (Smith, 2002). Empirical evidence by scholars suggest that organizational change is an extremely difficult reality during implementation, as over 70 percent of organizational change effort fail (Burke, 2011).
Business and professional publications report that over 40% of organizational changes encompass several categories which make the process of organizational change management both complex and complicated. According to various studies, organizational change attempts frequently fail which makes them events with potentially strong negative consequences for individual as well as businesses. Although the rates of failure vary by type of change, it stays relatively high, especially with large scale changes (Smith, 2002).

A planned organizational change means disrupting the current state of operations and putting the organizational future at stake because the outcome is often different to the original plan and intentionally increasing employee stress levels (Jian, 2011). Factors which affect change management may be classified into two categories namely: external influences and internal influences. These studies have provided insights on the impacts of external and internal factors like organizations age, size, and inertia/ momentum on organizations effectiveness in responding to environmental external and internal changes (Oreg et al, 2011).

**Problem Statement**

Studies have shown that many organizations found change to be a real challenge. Change process in each organization is unique in each situation, due to differences in nature of each organization, nature of the business, work culture, values, management and leadership style, and behavior and attitude of the employees. Further, the risk of failure is greater as people are generally resistant to changes (Carr, 2000).

Many see change as a threat because the outcome is less certain than leaving things as they are (Liu et al, 2005). One would anticipate that pro-active, open minded managers would embrace change willingly (Nora, 2013). Equally, one would anticipate employees to do all that they could to preserve the status quo in order to protect their turf, social position, and livelihood (Coetzee and Karei, 2007). Although the organizational change process has been examined in a variety of contexts, there seems to be a constant lack of ultimate answers on how to manage the change successfully in different cultural settings (Michalak, 2010). Further, Coetzee and Karei (2007) argue that very little empirical research on barriers to change has been conducted internationally specifically in government organizations.

Kenya implemented a new Constitution in 2013 which devolved many functions from the National Government to the newly formed County Governments. It is imperative to examine whether the newly formed County Governments are experiencing any barriers to change and further, the kind of barriers to effective organizational change.
Research Methodology

The research drew upon the case of one County Government in Kenya after devolution was implemented in the year 2013 taking some functions from the National Government to be managed by the County Governments. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. The target population was 33 departmental heads of the selected County. 30 heads of departments ranging from County Executive Committee Members, County Chief Officers and County Principle Officers were interviewed. Each participant was interviewed on the main barriers to effective change in his or her department, and the underlying reasons. The question was entirely open, and no suggestion was offered. The answers were then analyzed in a thematic way as proposed by (Coetzee and Karel, 2007).

Literature Review

No business can escape the need for change as it evolves in the context of a rapidly changing environment. Organizations can either instigate change or submit to change but to be able to stay in business they will have to change in one way or another (Pendlebury et al, 1998). Tsouka and Chia (2002) further argue that any change program is continuously modified and adapted by organizational actors. This way there is support for considering change as a continuously on-going process. Change programs open up for, and trigger, on-going changes all of which are not anticipated.

When in the process of implementing change, three factors should be put into consideration. These factors are technological, organizational, and personal perspective. Although people are the most important factor in making change, however, they are the major challenge in handling change processing an organization as it involves values, preferences, and attitudes towards a particular activity. Attitudes for instance are difficult to change as people are generally more comfortable with what they have learned or knew due to stereotyping, fear, or the need to maintain tradition (Liz et al, 2008, Coetzee et al 2011).

Resistant to change does not wait for change management to be implemented before it shows itself. The moment there are indicators for change on the organization horizon, resistance to change will show itself in one or many ways (Kretiner et al, 2004; Agocs 1997; Kotter et al, 2008). The problem pertaining to change management is that barriers to change are evident in all changing environments, with various levels of understandings and acceptance about the issue of resistance to change. People understand, react to and view change in the workplace in different ways, some thrive on it, and see it as a challenge, while others view it with suspicion and fear (Rashid et al, 2003).

Resistance to organization change may result from one or a combination of factors such as substantive change in job, reduction in economic security, psychological threats, disruptive of
social arrangement, and lowering of status. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the attitude towards change by individual may differ. Some are more resistant to change while others are more receptive to change (Liz et al, 2008).

Employee acceptance to organizational change increases with organizational commitment, a harmonious industrial relations climate, education, job satisfaction, and job security. The employee acceptance decreases with union membership, role conflict, tenure and environmental opportunity (Pasche and Santos, 2010). People at different levels in the organization treat change differently. Change efforts to redefine jobs and replace highly skilled and experienced workers with less skilled and fewer people increase the likelihood of managerial resistance. Three is a misconception that managers do not resist change and that resistance only comes from operative employees. Resistance of middle and first line managers is often identified as a major implementation barrier (Young, 2000).

Integration of theory and practice led to an understanding that barriers to change could be classified into four possible categories. Those categories may include: project related barriers, people related barriers, organizational related barriers, and environmental related barriers (Coetzee and Karel, 2007). Bruce et al (2002) suggest that the obstacles to effective organizational change can be categorized into two classes namely the external influences and who should be blamed when change initiatives fails. Rashid et al (2003) provides insights on the impact of internal and external factors like organizational age, size, and (inertia/external) changes.

**Research Findings**

The interview data was analyzed into the following themes as suggested by (Coetzee and Karen, 2007):

**Project Related Barriers**

Many respondents stated that there were challenges incurred during planning phase of the devolution structures. Many of the Transitional Authority staff who were the intermediary between the County Government and the National Government were unable to steer the planning phase successfully. Major planning challenges were especially encountered during the preparation of the first County Government budget in the financial year 2013/2014. The budget which was the main planning tool was unrealistically drawn and hence imposing a major challenge during that financial year as some departments experienced a deficit while some departments were enjoying huge excesses and allocations. This anomaly especially negatively impacted on the County in the third and fourth quarter of the financial year. This finding are similar to that of Van de Ven and Sun (2011) who in their study of breakdown in implementation
models of organizational change argue that without adequate planning in the change process organizations fail to reach the desired goal.

Development projects failed to kick off timely because of the challenges related to the planning phase. The County Government realized that they had failed to plan adequately on the technical capacity required to carry out a particular project successfully. Similarly, the County departments had failed to properly forecast on the skills needed to supervise the contracted work effectively and efficiently. Respondents also cited that the National Government failed in the planning of the devolution because it could not channel the allocated amounts of funds to the County Government in time hence slowing down the momentum in the budget implementation process. Because the National Government did not release funds timely, this resulted in delay of the change process consequently posing a threat on the operational ability of the County Government. During project implementation phase, challenges related to planning were evident as some projects stalled due to completion of funds allocated to them or due to inadequate competencies to successfully complete the project.

People related barriers

Maintaining Status Quo

Devolution meant devolving people from their previous duties both from the National Government and the Local Authorities to new /related function in the County Governments. Some of the officers did not want to let go their previous jobs and positions because of the prestigious status associated with those jobs. Majority of the senior staff from Local Authorities and National Government viewed this change suspiciously terming it as a threat to their current status quo. Former Town Clerks of Local Authorities and former heads of treasuries of Local Authorities were the most cited examples of staff of the County Government who felt that their status was undermined and threatened. This results support those results of (Erkama 2010; Thomas 2011; Vaara and Tienari, 2011) who state that employees who feel threatened by an aspect of change tend to resist change.

Resistance by Various Staff in Various Organizational ladder

Resistance by the county staff to change was particularly noted during the implementation of a new finance and management system called Integrated Financial Management System (IFMIS). There was notable lack of goodwill to the new system among staff from the National Government who for a long time were used to a manual accounting system. Similarly, staff devolved from the Local Authorities resisted this new system because for a long time they were used to their own accounting and management system called Local Authorities Integrated Financial Operation Management System (LAIFOMIS). The former Local Authorities staff and staff from the National Government saw the new system as a disruption, and a challenge. As a
result, IFMIS is still not 100% operational and implementation of this system is still ongoing. This finding is similar to that of Agocs (1997) whose study established that resistance to change by organizational employees is one of the major barriers to change.

**Change Was Viewed with Uncertainty**

Some County staff thought that the change brought about by devolution will lead to job loss. Some staff who had proper job titles and job descriptions in both the National Government and Local Authorities found themselves in the payroll of the County Government without proper titles and job descriptions. These employees highly resisted the change and were on the frontline on spreading fear among the rest of the County Government staff. This spread of rumors of job cuts countered the positive momentum that the county was gaining. This finding is similar to that of Coupland et al (2005) who established that a lot of the time change is viewed with uncertainty by the organizational employees.

**Leadership/ Management Related Challenges**

This study established that it is not only junior and subordinate staff that resisted change. Resistance to change was noted even among County departmental managers. Resistance and indifference of some departmental managers on certain policies meant confusion to the junior staffs who were the followers to these departmental managers. This finding is similar to that of Coetzee et al (2011) who established that not only is resistance to change noted in the subordinate employees but resistance to change is also experienced among some members of management. This study established that sometimes the management failed to communicate efficiently and timely leading to delayed action by the implementers. This meant a challenge and threat to the process of change as services were not rendered satisfactorily to the county citizen. This study also established that some senior managers who are political appointees of the Governor and Members of the County Assembly (MCA’s) lacked capacity, expertise, leadership skills and experience to steer their departments off the ground. It was established that there was a notable lack of commitment by some staff to the devolved function. This staff exhibited sluggishness and lack of morale in their day to day duties in the County.

**Organizational Related Barriers**

**Lack of Proper Clarity and Directions**

Initially, the flow of information confused the staff of the County Government. At one particular point the National Government through the Ministry of Devolution would communicate a particular agenda to be implemented and at the same time the County Government management would communicate something in the contrary. This conflicting communication left the staff of the County Government unable to decide whether to follow the agenda of the National Government or to follow the agenda of the County Government. This finding is synonymous
with that of Lewisland (1998) who states that there should be clear communication and direction on the impending change if the desired goal is to be achieved.

This study established that sometimes information touching on important issues on the staff of the County Government was obtained through hearsays. Information obtained through hearsays was acted upon doubtfully and hence slowed down service delivery and project implementation in the county. Further, the study established that there was lack of proper direction during interpretation of the new Constitution which brought about the change. Some functions which were meant to be discharged by the County Governments were held on by the National Government and thus causing misallocation of funds during the planning phase. Case cited was County roads. Respondents state that up to now it is not crystal clear who is responsible for which road at the County level.

**Skills Related Barriers**

The County Government lacked the required skills and competences to efficiently discharge some departmental functions. A case in point in the department of roads and public works which for a long time relied on borrowed competences from the National Government Roads Agencies. This reliance of key personnel from another independent government agency caused inefficiency and slowed down work in this department. This finding is similar to that of Francis (2007) who states that training for change is one of the prerequisite for successful change management. During budget making process the staff lacked the necessary skills in budget making process hence The County submitted an unrealistic budget to the relevant authorities who declined to finance this budget until it was amended. This slowed down the rate of change implementation in the county.

**Environmental Related Barriers**

Political interference slowed down recruitment of qualified personnel into the county government. Political pressure sometime meant foregoing a job candidate with the best skills to pick the candidate with the least skills who is being fronted by a certain politician. This finding is similar to that of (Coetzee eta al 2007, and Oreg et al 2011) who state that barriers to organizational change do not only emanate from the internal organizational environment but from also the external organization environment. Political interference during the tendering process meant that the award of tenders was interfered with and was not done efficiently and timely hence slowing down the rates of change.

Newly enacted National Government policies affected the County Government. For example, the newly enacted County department budget ceiling slowed down the rate of change as the County Government moved to court to challenge this. Consequently, Counties were only allowed access to only 50% of their current expenditure budgets until a verdict of the case pending in court was reached.
The weather patterns/weather conditions impacted negatively on agricultural and roads projects being implemented. Heavy rains meant that the roadwork projects had to be halted until when the weather was more conducive for road construction by the County roads department. Inadequate rainfall in some seasons meant the department of agriculture could not carry out its pioneer model projects.

**Conclusion**

From the study, it was clear that the County was grappling with several challenges related to change management. These challenges include: Improper planning, resistance to change by the County staff, uncertainty avoidance, inefficiencies in leadership, lack of proper flow of information, National Government interventions and political interference. This study established that, though devolution was implemented in March 2013, some of these challenges are still facing the County to date.

**Recommendations**

1. Proper planning should be given top most priority by both the National Government and the County Government before change of any kind is considered.
2. Resistance to change can be dealt with through proper and timely communication on the change process. Advantages of the change process should be highlighted and the County staff should be convinced to own the change process before any further implementation of the change process is considered. In addition, staff should continuously be reassured of their jobs and their continuing mandate amidst the change process. This will reduce the suspicion and uncertainty that the County staff has been viewing the change process.
3. The County management should ensure that it communicates in unison with the National Government. Communication should be timely, clear, and should flow in both directions. i.e top down and down up.
4. The County Public Service Board should fast track recruitment of the relevant qualified personnel in order to bridge the gap in human resources deficiency.
5. The National Government should ensure that it sets time on how it will be releasing funds to the County Government. In addition, these funds should be released timely.
6. Politicians should be discouraged from interfering with day to day running of the County Government.
References


