THE ROLE OF SELF-REGULATED STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: AN EXPLORATORY DISPOSITIONAL MODEL

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations are dynamic fields of complexity challenged by ever-present demands of balancing both change and continuity (Burke, 2000; Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron, 2001). Various changes - revolutionary, episodic, radical, incremental and situated (Burke, 2002; Leanna & Barry, 2000; Orlikowski, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999) simultaneously emerge, flow, wander, evolve and disappear over time. Each presents unique implementation challenges that often require substantial improvisation (Orlikowski, 1996; Orlikowski & Hoffman, 1999). Although the capacity to negotiate, manage, adapt and support change is an essential characteristic of executive leadership in such action fields (Sturdy & Gray, 2003; Wanberg & Banas, 2000), the record of change success is startlingly low (Kotter, 1995; Beer and Nohria, 2000; Sturdy & Gray, 2003). Surveys of European firms, for example, show only 20% reporting "substantial success" with change and another 63% claiming only temporary success (*Economist,* 2000). Those that did best at change were described as having top management that was more involved in change projects, more proactive in communicating change, and unwilling to turn change leadership over to external consultants; successful firms were also described as having "change expertise more embedded as a functional capability" (*Economist*, 2000: 61).

A central theme of this paper is that successful organizational change requires that executives accept the full responsibilities of strategic leadership, defined by Hitt and Ireland (1999: 44) as: "a person's ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others *to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization*." The emphasis added in this definition is a reminder that true strategic leadership of organizational change involves activating agendas that infuse organizations not just with change visions, but also with sustained capacity for change implementation. In respect to building such

organizational capacity, calls for further research in two areas merit particular consideration: the need to better understand change leadership in a context of complexity (Pettigrew, et al, 2001), and the need to examine it as a collective and multi-level organizational competency (Denis, Lamothe & Langley, 2001).

This paper proposes a dispositional model of strategic leadership in organizational change that is informed by the accumulating literature on regulatory focus theory (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, 1997, 1998 & 2000; Taylor-Bianco, Bianco & Thomas, 2004). The guiding premise is that for an organization's membership to be fully motivated in support of ongoing change goals, everyone must experience positive self-regulation in the change environment. The strategic leadership responsibility, therefore, must include positive self-regulated change behavior and the creation of an internal environment that fully supports positive self-regulated change behavior by others. Specifically, the paper reviews research findings on regulatory focus, presents an exploratory model of self-regulation in strategic leadership, and describes research and practical implications. The dispositional model suggests that strategic leadership of organizational change embraces positive self-regulation, and infuses the organization's internal change environment with representation of self-regulatory styles that allow others to do the same. With its focus on this critical role of self-regulation in change leadership, the dispositional model is consistent with the authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) theme of this conference.

BACKGROUND

The concept of self-regulation comprises the cognitive, emotional, motivational and temperamental processes that are active when an individual works toward achieving a goal, such as advancing the success of a change effort (Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1999). Further, as suggested by

Luthans and Avolio, authentic leadership relies on *"self-regulated positive behavior* on the part of both leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (2003: 5, emphasis added). To us, positive organizational self-regulation occurs when leaders can effectively satisfy their short and long-term goals through approaches that fit with their regulatory focus and that of their surroundings. The first step in this process is self-awareness. While the change leadership literature is beginning to recognize the impact of leader self-awareness (Burke, 2002; Quinn, 2000; Weick & Quinn, 1999), it lacks substantial attention to the role of positive self-regulation. Our interest in this oversight was prompted by ongoing work with public sector agencies undergoing significant changes, and among whose managers the following statement is a common concern: "We are so often changing things that we never get a chance to consolidate what we have accomplished". This suggests to us a perceived inability of these managers to recognize and use positive self-regulation to their advantage in the day-to-day flow of events made complex by the presence of changes. It also is a reminder that even as organizations pursue change, members must experience a sufficient sense of continuity to sustain their motivation to continually work in support of change implementation. Thus, it is important that agendas for strategic leadership of organizational change provide for self-regulation by everyone involved at any time in change processes.

Self-regulation is the process that deals with how people strive to maintain and pursue their goals in light of their individual preferences (Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998; Mischel, Cantor & Feldman, 1996). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), specifically distinguishes between promotion and prevention as two success driven goal-pursuit strategies of self-regulation. In the promotion system, individuals are focused upon achieving accomplishments and aspirations. Goal-directed behavior governed by a promotion focus is guided by *eagerness* in the desire to

maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing the negative ones. In the prevention system, individuals are focused upon achieving security and safety. Goal-directed behavior governed by a prevention focus is guided by *vigilance* and the desire to maximize the *absence* of negative outcomes and minimizing the presence of negative outcomes. Most individuals possess relatively stable orientations toward either a prevention approach or a promotion approach (or, in same cases, a combination) (Higgins, et. al, 2001), therefore, the membership of any organization will likely include substantial presence of each regulatory orientation.

Preliminary research suggests that individuals use differing self-regulatory processes to cope with organizational change and that these styles have different relative advantages (Taylor-Bianco, Bianco & Thomas, 2004). According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; 1998) executives disposed toward a promotion orientation will be concerned with accomplishments and aspirations, and can be expected to display eagerness in the strategic leadership of organizational change. Such executives fit our standard impressions of change leaders who are idealistic, risk-taking and go-getting individuals eager to effect change. Alternatively, executives disposed toward a prevention orientation will be concerned with safety and responsibilities, and can be expected to display a more conservative vigilance in strategic leadership. Although less prominent than our stereotypic and heroically embellished views of change leaders, such dispositions are also positive in persistently supporting goal pursuit by providing for continuity and stability in change situations (Burke, 2002). Accordingly, we posit that both promotion focus and prevention focus are important to strategic leadership of organizational change in the conditions of complexity assumed in this paper.

In addition to its role in one's dispositional tendency toward a regulatory strategy, self-regulation has important implications when viewed contextually or interactionally. It can and

should also be examined as it occurs at the interface of one's dispositional regulatory focus with the contextual demands and requirements of organizational life. Indeed, an important issue in strategic self-regulation at all levels of organizational change (see Nadler & Tushman, 1977; Sastry, 1977) is "fit." Individuals experience a *regulatory fit* when they strategically pursue a goal in a manner that sustains their regulatory orientation; this fit increases motivation and may enhance performance (Higgins, 2000; Bianco, Higgins & Klem, 2003).

There is evidence that people will be more inclined toward strategies that have higher regulatory fit (e.g., Higgins & Crowe, 1997). For example, individuals should use promotion-focused strategies when those strategies service contextually-created promotion-oriented goals. This effect has been demonstrated with a regulatory fit between an individuals' promotion or prevention focus and their use of an eager or vigilant goal pursuit strategy (e.g. Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Adyuk & Taylor, 2001). One's regulatory focus influences strategic engagement in a task, where task engagement is better when the external situation fits, rather than does not fit, the individuals' regulatory focus for pursuit of that task (Higgins, 2000).

In respect to the importance of regulatory fit, we expect that persons with a promotion regulatory orientation will take pride in and be motivated in situations where this approach is well represented by eagerness in strategic leadership and the internal change environment; those with a prevention regulatory orientation will be proud and motivated in situations with representation for vigilance in strategic leadership and the internal change environment. Thus, successful organizational change is most likely to be sustainable when strategic leadership invigorates pursuit of change goals by fully valuing and enabling both eagerness and vigilance as goal pursuit strategies by the organization's members. In essence, the strategic leadership of the enterprise must provide for regulatory fit among the membership that ultimately implements

changes. Because of this, we believe it is important to consider the very notion of strategic leadership of organizational change as more of a collective responsibility (Denis, et al., 2001), based in the composition and energies of a change leadership team (Burke, 2002; Kotter, 1995), than a singular one.

MODEL AND PROPOSITIONS

The proposed dispositional model of strategic leadership of organizational change begins with the assumption that positive self-regulation by leaders and organization members are essential to successful and sustainable change. It recognizes that self-regulation through a promotion focus or a prevention focus can each be positive sources of essential motivation to pursue change goals. Thus, the model contains two major components. First, it requires that executives engaged in the strategic leadership of organizational change experience regulatory fit. Second, it requires that these executives act in ways that all organization members also experience regulatory fit. In particular, this leadership responsibility includes bringing representation for promotion eagerness and prevention vigilance to the internal change environment.

Ultimately, the dispositional model suggests that strategic leadership of organizations operating under change complexity: (1) may best activated by collective or team-based leadership that represents both promotion regulatory focus and prevention regulatory focus, and (2) must ensure that representation for both promotion regulatory focus and prevention regulatory focus cascades down and throughout the organization to encompass all members. What follows is a brief proposition inventory that highlights the major elements of this exploratory model. The propositions are grouped by major research domains: (1) strategic leadership regulatory fit, (2) the organizational cascade of regulatory fit, and (3) regulatory fit

and collective/team leadership. The propositions can be framed in respect to Figure 1 – showing the relationship between regulatory fit and motivation to pursue change goals, and Figure 2 – depicting the cascade of regulatory fit that creates organizational change capacity.

Strategic Leadership Regulatory Fit

This first set of propositions concerns the action inclinations of strategic leaders with differing regulatory foci and how these foci interact with the external change environment. While individual leaders will each possess a relatively stable orientation toward prevention or promotion regulatory focus (Higgins, et. al, 2001), both promotion and prevention are important in the complex setting of organizations dealing with a variety of environmental challenges and in which multiple changes of varying types and timelines are simultaneous. Sastry (1997), warned that a major reason for change failure a strategic orientation that does not match the requirements of the external environment. Our model posits how different strategic orientations will fare given different change challenges posed by the external environment.

> *Proposition 1*. Strategic leadership with a promotion orientation will display a action focus on eagerness and speed of action; strategic leadership with a prevention orientation will display a action focus on vigilance and persistence of action.
>
> *Proposition 2a.* In an external environment of rapid and unpredictable change, strategic leadership with a promotion orientation will experience a regulatory fit resulting in high motivation to pursue change goals; strategic leadership with a prevention orientation will not experience regulatory fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.
>
> *Proposition 2b.* In an external environment of stability or predictable situated change, strategic leadership with a prevention orientation will experience regulatory fit resulting in higher motivation to pursue change goals; strategic leadership with a promotion orientation will not experience a fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.

A classic change leadership dilemma is to make decisions quickly and risk inaccuracy, or to make them deliberately and with greater care. In this respect, Förster, Higgins and Bianco

(2003) found that promotion focused individuals tended to perform more quickly but with less accuracy, whereas prevention focused individuals performed slower but with higher accuracy. Further, as individuals move closer to the goal of completing the task, speed increases and accuracy decreases for participants with a promotion focus, whereas speed decreases and accuracy increases for participants with a prevention focus. One can imagine a very risky and rapidly changing situation in the high-tech industry where delays would be costly and the leader must act quickly, even if it is at the expense of accuracy. In such cases a promotion orientation would emphasize the necessary speed. But, as Simon (1996) suggests, constant discontinuous change contributes to latent errors in an organization. When an organization is concerned with such errors of omission, a strategic prevention leadership orientation can help the leader and others "remain vigilant and mindfully engaged" (Weick & Roberts, 1993; cited in Ramanujam, 2003: 610). Förster, Higgins & Bianco (2003) in particular, provide the empirical literature to support the hypotheses above.

Organizational Cascade of Regulatory Fit

Fit is an important issues at all levels of organizational change (see Nadler & Tushman, 1977; Sastry, 1977). It increases motivation and potentially enhances performance (see Higgins, 2000; Bianco, Higgins & Klem, 2003); and persons will be more inclined toward strategies that have higher regulatory fit (Higgins & Crowe, 1997). The next set of propositions describes regulatory fit between leaders and middle managers.

> *Proposition 3a.* Perception of top management action focus on eagerness results in regulatory fit and higher motivation to pursue change goals by middle managers with promotion regulatory orientation; middle managers with prevention regulatory orientation will not experience regulatory fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.

> *Proposition 3b.* Perception of top management action focus on vigilance results in regulatory fit and higher motivation to pursue change goals by middle managers

with prevention regulatory orientation; middle managers with promotion regulatory orientation will not experience regulatory fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.

Top management dealings with change affect mid-level managers (see Damanpour, 1991). The logic of the cascade effect portrayed in Figure 2 indicates that managers' concepts of and interactions with change will cascade level-by-level to affect the experiences of lower-level organizational members (see Taylor-Bianco, Bianco & Thomas, 2004), as suggested in these propositions.

Proposition 4a. Perception of middle management action focus on eagerness results in regulatory fit and higher motivation to pursue change goals by lower-level members with promotion regulatory orientation; lower-level members with prevention regulatory orientation will not experience regulatory fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.

Proposition 4b. Perception of middle management action focus on vigilance results in regulatory fit and higher motivation to pursue change goals by lower-level members with prevention regulatory orientation; lower-level members with promotion regulatory orientation will not experience regulatory fit, resulting in lower motivation to pursue change goals.

Burke (2002) warns that while leaders need to set change goals, they may need to rely on their managers and others to determine the means to them. Conger (1999) goes further in suggesting that if the goal is not stated in a way that *fits* the frame of those called to implement the project, these middle managers and others may undermine rather than support the change initiative. Further, the discord of our public sector managers likely reflects some difficulties in maintaining goal pursuit in their respective change settings. Self-regulation will influence not only the change goals set, but also the styles and strategies used to pursue them (see Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Importantly, current research notes that latent errors from a lack of vigilance (prevention orientation) are often experienced in organizations focusing on (promotion type) rapid or discontinuous change (see Ramanujam, 2003). In this respect, we posit that the strategic

leadership must provide for representation of both promotion orientation and prevention orientation in order to all the full membership to continually experience regulatory fit and maintain motivation to pursue change goals in situations of complexity. This, furthermore, suggests the importance of reconsidering the strategic leadership of organizational change as a collective or team versus singular responsibility.

Strategic Change Leadership as a Collective/Team Responsibility

Luthans and Avolio's (2003: emphasis added) construct of authentic leadership requires reliance of the positive psychological predispositions of *both* leaders and associates. Burke (2002) defines the change leadership team as including senior management and the key managers reflected as heading the various boxes on the organizational chart; Kotter (1995) promotes the importance of the guiding coalition. Whatever one chooses to call it, we believe that a change leadership team should include promotion-focused individuals with eagerness strategies, as well as a prevention focused individuals with vigilance strategies Because contextual events, such as change, may pose different regulatory demands, it is essential that leaders be able to align their dispositional regulatory strategies to meet these situational challenges. Our final proposition reflects this reasoning.

> *Proposition 5*. In change contexts of organizational complexity, perceived representation of both promotion orientation and prevention orientation in the regulatory focus and tactical means of the strategic leadership team will result in higher motivation of organization members to pursue change goals.

With the appropriate combination of promotion and prevention focused strategic leadership on the executive change team, the leadership can perceive the environmental situation and respond with strategic eagerness and / or strategic vigilance. For example, a prevention-oriented organizational change, such as developing a new product so as to avoid the current one becoming obsolete, will activate individuals' prevention systems. However, if a leadership team

consists exclusively of promotion-focused individuals, a mismatch, or misfit occurs, and performance may well suffer. Consider the importance of equfinalty of an organization and the recognition that "for any given change goal, there will likely be multiple paths to the goal (Burke, 2002: 112)." When a heterogeneous team exists, both quick *and* accurate decisions can be made, (Forster, Higgins & Bianco, 2000), and stability can be chosen over change (or vise versa), (Liberman et. al, 1999). This will result in a better regulatory fit between the leadership team and its organizational members and will increase members' motivation to support the change effort; whereas a leadership team with only one capacity can only respond to one type of environmental challenge.

IMPLICATIONS

Luthans and Avolio (2003: 5) assertion that authentic leadership relies on "self-regulated positive behavior" brings to center stage the need for leaders to develop an awareness of their self-regulation orientation and strategies. Our specific interest here has been with the significance of leaders' regulatory foci, their strategic inclinations, and the resulting implications for the strategic leadership of organizational change. As noted by Burke (2002: 294), there is much still to learn about organizational change in respect to the "behavioral complexities that leaders face, interpersonal, informational, and decisional," and the relationship of leaders and followers in the change process. The dispositional model proposed here explores the role of self-regulation in strategic leadership, with emphasis on the importance of positive self-regulation by leaders and among organization members as an essential building block for sustained capacity for change implementation. The model directs leaders' attention toward the importance of understanding strategies of self-regulation and the ways they inform decision making, embody

goal directed behavior, and represent to others opportunities to experience regulatory fit and motivation to pursue change goals.

Through the perspective highlighted in this paper we hope to plant the seed of inquiry for leaders to actively seek understanding of their self-regulation and its relationships with the interpersonal and environmental challenges they face. While there are various means to attaining this goal, the message is clear: those who aspire to authenticity in strategic leadership must realize positive self-regulation and help others to do the same. The process of gaining this authenticity begins with understanding one's strategic self-regulation and the circumstances under which it fits or does not fit situational demands. Until personal dispositions are understood in relation to environmental challenges, leaders cannot expect long-term success with organizational change. Without an organizational cascade of regulatory fit, it will be very difficult for them to create sustainable capacities for change implementation by embedding change expertise as a functional capability (*Economist*, 2000).

Leanna and Barry (2000: 753) have called for organizational research to explore and capture the complexity of the idea that "some level of tension between stability and change is a part of organizational life." Through further development of our dispositional model we hope to pursue this environmental complexity. Additionally, we hope to further explore the idea that positive self-regulation may involve a combination of promotion and prevention self-regulation. It is possible that leaders, who are high on promotion and low on prevention, or a leadership team with these characteristics, may be best able to deal with rapid change while still promoting stability.

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Figure 1

REGULATORY FIT AND MOTIVATION TO PURSUE CHANGE GOALS

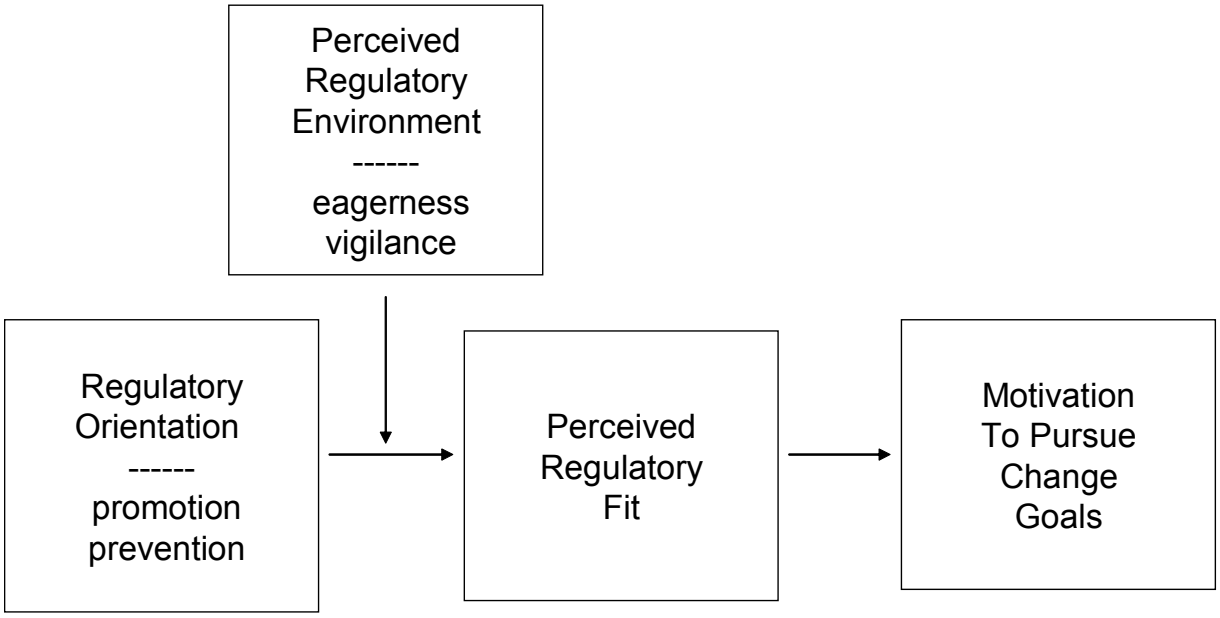
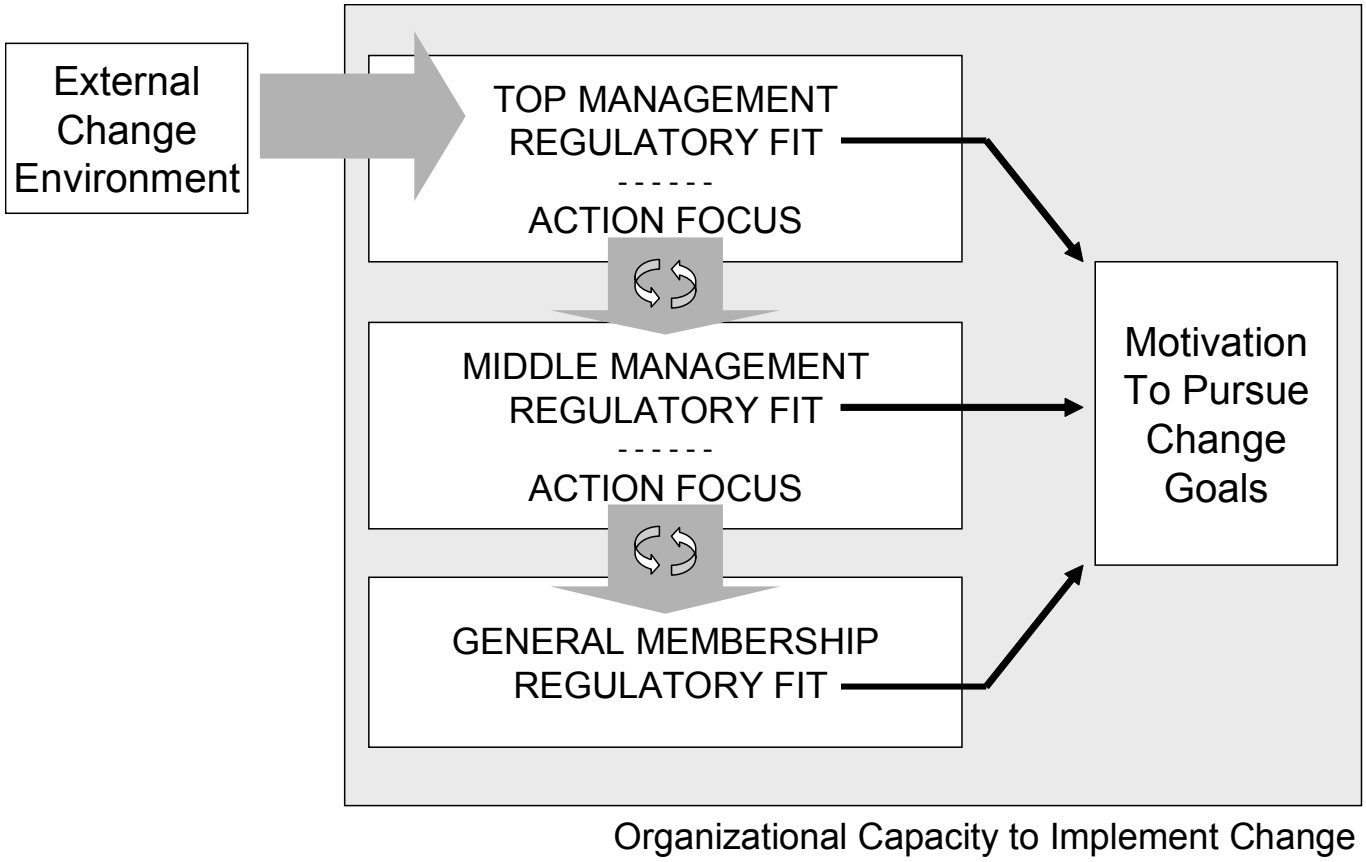


Figure 2

CASCADE OF REGULATORY FIT AND MOTIVATION TO PURSUE CHANGE GOALS:

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION