

# Readiness As A Microfoundational Approach To Knowledge Management

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## ABSTRACT:

Over the years, many theories have noted that the core factor that acts as a barrier to successful knowledge management (KM) initiatives is attributable, in part, to the individual's lack of readiness to change. However, a significant gap in the literature is the lack of empirical and conceptual support to the idea that KM is inherently a change effort affecting issues of how to enact change in individuals. More recent work, have highlighted that one of the reasons for this gap in the knowledge literature, is that majority of studies as a whole are usually pre-occupied with macro-level constructs stemming from forces at the organisational level. We argue that readiness-for change is an important step towards understanding the micro processes of individual actions and interactions, because research in this area examines how change occurs from the individual's perspective. Based on the literature, we present a model to help us explore the micro processes of organisational KM initiatives. Within this model, we build on previous work of Foss (2007) explanation of microfoundations and fuse it with insights of Armenakis and Harris (2002) theory of readiness for individual change. A discussion is presented demonstrating future directions towards a microfoundational approach to KM.

Keywords: *Readiness-for change, Knowledge management, Microfoundations, Organisational change.*

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## 1. Introduction

The literature on knowledge management (KM) has grown rapidly in the past decade since the management of knowledge 'has become a critical issue for competitive dynamics, international strategy, the building of resources, and the boundaries of firms' (Foss et al., 2010). It has attracted much recent attention on account of the levels of academic and industry studies created. It is not surprising, therefore, that greater attention is being paid to the subject of knowledge as to find: 'what it is, how it differs from the related concepts of information and data, and how to begin to create, transfer, and use it more effectively' (Davenport et al., 1996).

However, as with any such new field KM is characterised by existing gaps, untested assumptions and propositions (Foss et al. 2010). Currently, the most significant gap in the literature is the lack of empirical and conceptual support to the idea that KM is inherently a change effort, affecting issues of how to enact change in individuals and to

the organisation. This is surprising, considering that researchers and managers, alike, agree that high failures of change to most KM or knowledge sharing practices is said to be associated with the organisations lack of understanding of how to manage readiness-for change.

Theory and research on readiness-for change focuses on the initial change preparation, capturing the knowledge, which resides within individuals, and beginning the moving process (Armenakis et al., 2002). Beer (1980, p. 80: cited in Backer, 1995) highlighted that the failures to assess and deal with readiness ‘can lead to abortive organisation development efforts’. Interestingly, the bulk of published work that focuses on the factors that enable and/or hinder individual’s readiness have a long history in organisational change (e.g. Armenakis et al., 1993; Lewin, 1947) but is seldom, if ever discussed in KM research (Patel, et al., 2010b). More generally, while few studies in the past have attempted to generate theory and propositions regarding the relationship between the management of knowledge and organisational change, several findings of the literature report that there is yet a lack of direct evidence to exploring the phenomena and relationship between both these important fields (Holt, et al., 2007; Patel, et al., 2010a; Patel, et al., 2010b). More recent work, have highlighted that one of the reasons for this gap in the knowledge literature, is that majority of studies as a whole are usually pre-occupied with macro-level constructs stemming from forces at the organisational level. But such explanations have paid insufficient attention to microfoundations of various individual-level factors in knowledge related activities (Abell et al., 2008; Felin & Spender, 2009). The sheer presence, of macro-level pressures does not ensure that new initiatives will be embraced (Bercovitz & Feldman 2008). In these explanations, ‘routines and organisational capabilities are mainly taken to be properties of organisations rather than of individual persons’ (Vromen, 2010).

In agreement with Foss et al., (2010), we contend that if the majority of studies are concerned with outcomes at the macro-level, it will remain difficult to seek ways to assess and predict how the micro-level functions in terms of individual and interactional processes. The notion of readiness-for change is particularly well suited for this purpose, as an important step towards understanding the micro processes because research in this area examines how change occurs from the individual’s perspective (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). The study proceeds on the basis that because of the interplay that exists between the readiness of individuals and the implementation of new KM initiatives, paying attention to either the individual level issues or KM issues alone, is not sufficient. The study presented in this paper is part of a broad research project. As such, the research questions for this paper are:

- ❖ How do insights on microfoundations enrich our understanding of individual level readiness-for change when undertaking KM initiatives?
- ❖ What other insights or theories from organisational change might help us further understand the development of KM initiatives, specifically when dealing with different individual level factors?

In this paper, we cover current and early theoretical foundations in the KM and change literature to explore the different theories and assumptions made about organisational

change issues in the KM field. We then present our model that combines the contributions of organisational change and KM initiatives. The purpose of this model is to illustrate how the individuals and their actions are involved in the emergence and deployment of KM initiatives. The paper then concludes with some discussions and suggestions to help guide future work.

## **2. Readiness For Change**

In spite of the important insights and the benefits that KM offers, several of the mainstream KM literatures have acknowledged that even in the most developed and mature KM projects, many of these organisational change initiatives are often insufficient or incomplete (Davenport et al. 1996; Bhatt 2001). Rus and Lindvall (2002) agree that many organisations that fail do not establish their goals and strategy prior to implementing KM initiatives and do not carry out a good KM deployment methodology or process. Moreover, the reasons identified for KM failure is wide-ranging including organisational, technical, methodological and cultural issues (Ajmal & Koskinen, 2008). Storey and Barnet (2000) contend that insufficient attention has been paid to why so many KM initiatives fail, and the learning points have not been sufficiently explored. Arguably, these factors make it not only difficult to ensure that the aims of KM efforts are being met, but achieving consensus around the meaning and intent can also pose a strategic problem for integrating KM initiatives in an organisation.

Schien (1979 cited in Backer 1995) claims 'the reason why so many initiatives run into resistance or outright failure is often directly traceable to not providing for an effective unfreezing process before attempting to change'. The perspectives guiding research in this field recognise that such initiatives or any innovation will have to be mediated through a readiness-for change process (Armenakis et al., 1993). Readiness-for change is a ubiquitous term, which describes the initial stages of the organisational change life cycle. There has been a wealth of studies written about all aspects of readiness-for change (Armenakis & Harris 2002; Prochaska et al. 2001; George & Jones, 2001). The origin of readiness lies in Lewin's (1947) concept of unfreezing (moving and freezing) behaviour. Lewin's component of readiness describes the process of change in the existing 'mind-set of individuals' that can lead members to become ready to participate in the change process. The factors that affect readiness, was defined by Kotter (1995) as a means of creating a sense of urgency so that individuals are ready to change. With no sense of urgency, Kotter insist that change will not occur. However, drawing on the individual level perspective Armenakis et al. (1993) and Armenakis and Bodeian (1999), defined readiness as peoples beliefs, attitudes and intentions concerning the extent to which changes are needed and which can lead to the member's support for or resistance to the change initiative.

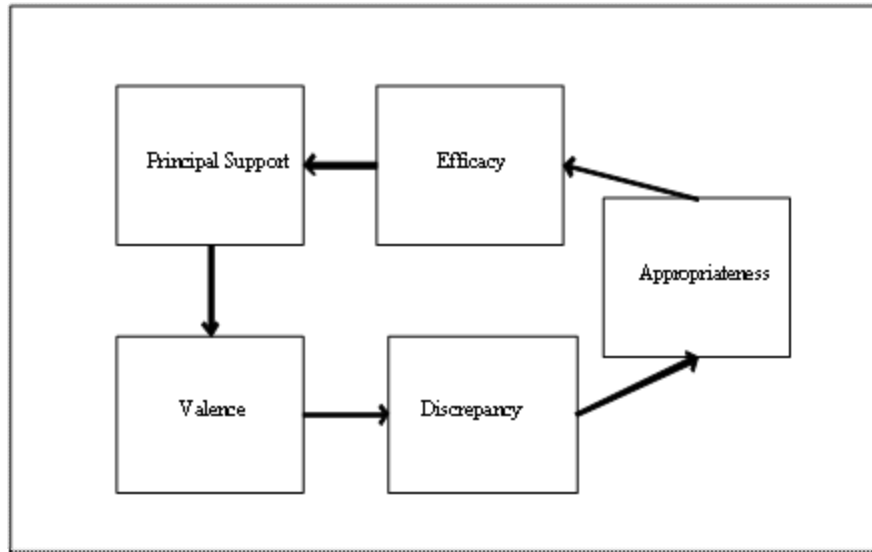
The field of readiness-for change is relevant to KM, because readiness or unreadiness is primarily determined and shaped by social and cultural assumptions (Patel et al., 2010a; Patel, et al., 2010b). In many cases, the explanation of the factors that constrain or prevent a person to create, share, and use knowledge is the individual's readiness to change (Holt et al., 2007). Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that the scope and nature of KM, represents by and large, a human activity (Thomas et al. 2001; De Long

&Fahey 2000; Cabrera & Cabrera 2002). Thomas et al., (2001) contended that KM is bound up with human cognition, and it is produced, used, and disseminated in a manner that is inextricably intertwined with the social environment. Accordingly, Alwis and Hartmann (2008), argues that individual factors are the readiness of every individual person to share knowledge. Keith et al. (2006), explain that workgroup interactions can affect an organisations flow of knowledge and as a result its readiness for KM. Similarly, previous studies attempting to understand the socio-psychological aspects of change, have also provided empirical evidence, suggesting that an individual's intention to use and share knowledge leads more people to change their approach (Bock et al. 2005; Lin & Lee, 2004).

Armenakis and Harris (2002) suggested a change process requires resources and commitment to see it through to institutionalisation. Accordingly, Lee and Kim (2001) point out that the goal of managing any organisational KM strategically will create a shift from readiness' to changing KM, making change known, and integrating the change both internally and externally. If not, strategies to change run the risk of being ineffective, because they may fail to understand the total breadth and dynamic that comes with assessing a KM initiative. Moreover, Keith et al., (2006) observed that such knowledge would be more valuable to practitioners, if an organisation knows itself "unready" to share and manage knowledge in order to make more actionable decisions.

It is acknowledged that the failure of not dealing with readiness can result in different forms of barriers, mostly resistance, adoption and willingness, or lack thereof for supporting change (Armenakis, 1993). In this regard, an individual's readiness represents an important indicator of how amenable an organisation is to knowledge-based opportunities. Until recently, issues about readiness-for change in KM have not received the adequate attention it deserves (Patel et al. 2010a; Patel et al. 2010b; Holt et al., 2007). Recognising this absence, Holt et al., (2007) suggested that if one were to develop an appreciation of readiness-for change, it would seem appropriate to identify the attributes of the individual, that are all facets recommended in the KM literature. From their investigation, they argue that readiness, would only occur when the individual attitudes are such that they are receptive to a forthcoming KM effort.

The role of readiness in change related outcomes could be further explained using Armenakis and Harris (2002), change message framework as depicted in figure 1. Specifically, their conceptual principal of the theory proposes that readiness comprises five message components to create readiness-for change: discrepancy (a deviation in acceptable performance) principal support, (the belief that leaders must support the change effort) efficacy (increasing confidence of individual ability to successfully implement the change), appropriateness (whether or not the action taken to change is a correct one), and personal valence (employees ask, what is in it for me? and what are the positive and negative outcomes?).



**Figure 1: Change Message Framework (Modified From Armenakis and Harris, 2002)**

As shown in figure 1, each component or behaviour overlaps, and each influence or determines the others and determines organisational members' readiness-for change. In general, Armenakis and Harris (2002) adopted a micro-level perspective, in that each change component seeks to understand the individual levels experience, or the micro dimensions of change. In essence, the model represents the variations in individual level behaviour that affect individuals reactions towards change and the change outcome.

### **3. Micro-Foundations**

The consensus among many authors is that most challenges in KM lie at the individual or micro-level. But even with the mounting pressure from theorists to go beyond traditional abstractions of knowledge, little theory currently exists to describe the dynamic interplay which exists at the individual level (Felin & Spender, 2009). The main cause of this challenge is absent in the understanding of the roots or origins of the underlying individual (inter) actions This is because primary emphasis is usually given to collectives (macro) as largely determining individual level behaviours, but little or no explanations of the origins (micro) of these observed collective behaviours (Foss 2009; Felin and Spender, 2009). Accordingly, an understanding of the level of individuals and their interactions may give way to fresh insights in organisational level phenomena (Foss et al. 2010).

A significant body of change research has conceptualised readiness-for change adopting a micro-level perspective (e.g., George & Jones, 2001; Armenakis et al., 1993; Judge & Thorese, 1999, Prochaska et al. 2001; Eby et al., 2000). However, George and Jones (2001) found that, after a while, the explanation of the factors that constrain or prevent change has transformed from a micro to a more macro-level of analysis. For example, George and Jones (2001), argues that inertia and inability to change are often regarded as macro-level phenomena. Warren et al., (1999) explains

that there is a practical and theoretical disregard to confuse individual change with modification in organisational level variables.

More recently, the emerging focus on microfoundations have been addressed in studies that suggest knowledge can be influenced and to a certain extent, directed through making use of more formal interventions (Foss et al. 2010; Foss & Mahoney, 2010; Felin & Spender, 2009). More specifically, these scholars have argued that for formal interventions to take place, change must lie at the individual level (Fellin & Foss, 2006). These authors assert that formal designs and interventions (sanctioned by a mixture of organisational structures, planning, and managerial styles) can be used for influencing knowledge initiatives in organisations with the purpose of exercising a degree of “directedness” among people (Foss, 1999).

Theoretically, the emphasis on formal designs and interventions for KM initiatives is consistent with the view of organisational change and especially readiness-for change. This is because organisational structures and planning, ‘is about change’, and more importantly people who make up the organisation have to become more actively involved and ready for behaviour to change. Also, earlier writers who have acknowledged these concerns note the significance of understanding the impact on the analysis of formal interventions (Grant 1996). But many have argued that these theoretical ideas are rarely applied to conceptualise the link between organisation and knowledge by means of formal interventions for ensuring that individuals engage in behaviours oriented toward KM initiatives (Okhuysen & Eisenhardt 2002; Grandori 2001).

#### **4. Identifying The Relevant Literature**

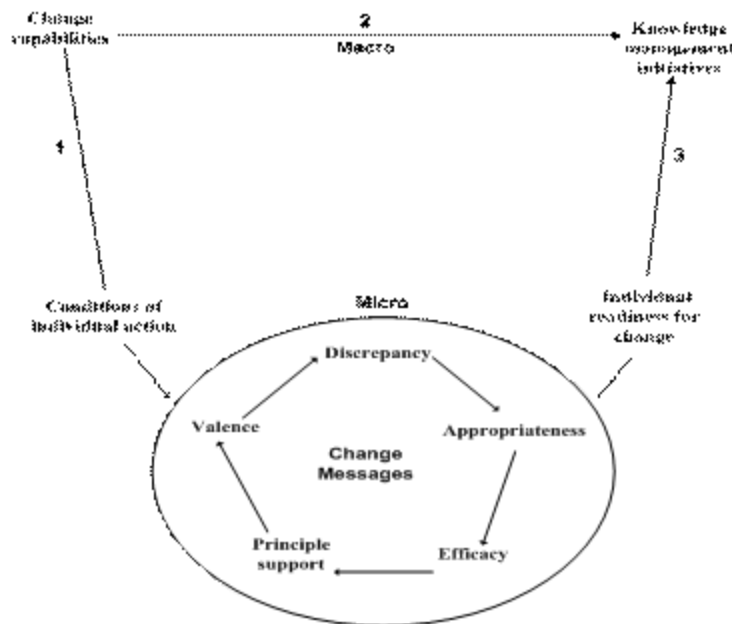
This research study carried out a literature survey (see Patel et al., 2010b) and targeted only scholarly published journals through online electronic databases published between 1994 and 2009. The search was limited to the KM research (e.g. knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, knowledge exchange). After filtering the various topics, the search resulted in 105 journals. The review process was to examine if the publications conceptually and/or empirically consider discussing issues of organisational change.

Despite of the term used to denote organisational change very few KM theories exhibited concepts of organisational change. The most general problem, in essence, is a lack of KM research that drew upon existing change models and theories (e.g. Armenakis et al. 1993, Judge & Thoresen, 1999) and little on the broader aspects of the nature of organisational change. Instead, it was observed that the literature often use the term change ‘loosely’, and relied on readers commonsense to rationalise the terms that they use, such as ‘behavioural change,’ (Scarbrough & Swan, 2001), ‘inability to change people,’ (Leidner et al. 2006), and ‘knowledge change’, (Argote et al., 2000). Some authors described change, as a behavioural and cognitive approach in terms of the individual intentions, beliefs or ability to adopt certain behaviours e.g. (Bock et al. 2005; Lin & Lee 2004), while some use the term to describe firm-level capabilities as indicators of managing the organisations resources e.g. (Zack, 1999). In addition, the findings also confirm what previous authors (Foss et al., 2010; Foss & Mahoney 2010;

Felin, & Spender 2009) report in the literature, that KM research is characterised by a lack of micro-level explanations and more preoccupied with outcomes at the macro-level. The next section using the KM and organisational change literature we illustrate the proposed theoretical model.

#### 4.1. Integrating Themes That Influence Knowledge Readiness

Our proposed model in figure 2 embodies fundamental assumptions about human readiness-for change and KM initiatives. The interplay between the micro-level components and KM, defines the readiness-for change constraints that may emerge during an organisational KM initiative. The purpose is to use this model as the basis for enquiry into KM readiness-for change and to illustrate how the individual level and their actions are involved in the emergence and deployment of KM initiatives. To this end, the paper builds on the five message components of Armenakis and Harris (2002) and fuse them with Foss's (2007) insights on micro-level foundations. The model serves to highlight micro and macro-levels (arrows 1-3) and how they influence factors that support or impede organisational knowledge related initiatives.



**Figure 2: Microfoundational Approach To Knowledge Related Initiatives**

**(Modified From Foss, 2007; Armenakis and Harris, 2002)**

While both levels are constantly overlapping, the model makes a distinction between the micro-level and the macro-level. The micro-level (Arrows 1 and 3) is that of individuals, whilst the macro-level (Arrow 2) represents organisational level constructs. In this diagram the change capability refers to the organisations effectiveness to implement and maintain change. For example, an organisations capability to perform change may be characterised by its level or ability to produce

new technologies, methods or new organisational policies. Such change can therefore influence other peoples actions (Arrow 2), that can influence their perceptions, ideas and beliefs about change. Furthermore, the actions of individuals (Arrow 1) also influences peoples readiness (Arrow 3) who are required to undergo change. For example, the way in which knowledge of readiness is acquired and processed in the organisation can equally affect issues, such as people's interpretation of change which can influence their readiness behaviour (Patel et al., 2010a). This can determine the speed and pace for change to happen. These causal effects, i.e. the interactions and actions of individuals that are ultimately held by the individual, could eventually impact on the organisational level outcomes at the macro-level (Patel et al., 2010a). That is, the readiness of individuals (the roots or origins) can directly effect the way in which KM initiative is being utilised and deployed.

Furthermore, the model shown in figure 2 illustrates the different types of individual components (inside the circle) of readiness: discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support, and valence (adapted by Armenakis & Harris, 2002). Our contention is that these components exhibit important micro-level mechanisms or behaviours of readiness that can be used to predict and explain the impact of KM initiatives. While the model illustrated is cyclical, for explanatory purposes it is beneficial to start at *Discrepancy* where change readiness stems from how an organisation conveys a change message. Researchers have observed that people's initial interpretation of change can influence their understanding of it (Rousseau & Tojoriwala 1999; Kotter, 1995). These interpretations can exert a mediating effect on other individual's readiness. More important, the reactions and relations between organisational culture, subculture and their commitment to change can reflect the circumstance of individual level readiness (De Long & Fahey, 2000)

*Appropriateness* conveys that socialising change on individuals can be used to communicate the appropriateness of the suggested change. For that reason, at this stage it may be useful to consider the conditions and environments that facilitate a process of socialising the appropriateness of change readiness in order to engage in dialogue and to form a common language, which can diminish the barriers (Nonaka et al., 2000) among multiple individuals with different backgrounds. Furthermore, in the organisational change literature, it is observed that 'short-term results' can help people to understand the appropriateness of a change message more clearly (Kotter 1995). *Efficacy* illustrates how individuals are more willing to adopt a change initiative if they consider their personal contributions will be valuable to others (Bock et al., 2005; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002). It reveals the key role that individuals play in the change process and the sources of resistance, such as outcome expectancy, self-efficacy and inertia can often delay the cycle of change (George & Jones, 2001). The notion of trust and organisational incentives can however motivate readiness and may lead to organisational members to support a change (Staples & Webster, 2008). In the course of change, 'key people' (such as organisational managers, leaders) may not be inclined to participate in a change initiative. This issue is highlighted in *Principal Support* which illustrate how key people to a certain degree can dictate the actions, behaviours and attitudes of other organisational member's decision to participate in a change initiative and hence, influence their own/others readiness.



*Knowledge Valence* illuminates the perceived benefits of change. Individuals assess the potential impact of the change, in terms of how it will benefit them. For example, despite the large investments in knowledge management systems, such change may not be adequate on their own, because individuals may not be ready to take part or share what they know with other co-members due to insufficient knowledge of the perceived benefits of doing so (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002). It is often argued that the benefits of such change initiatives should be internalised through action and practice, to become a part of the individual's tacit knowledge base, in the form of 'technical know-how' (Nonaka et al., 2000). Change experts argue that individual members must be informed about the benefits of change and provided the opportunities to experience the advantages themselves, if not this can delay the implementation of the change initiative (Kotter 1995; Prochaska et al., 2001; Armenakis et al., 1993).

## **5. Conclusion**

In many cases, the explanation of the factors that constrains a person to create, share, and use knowledge is their readiness to change. Typically, the inability to change people's beliefs, attitudes, and intentions restrains all other aspects to managing change. Currently, a significant gap in the literature is the lack of empirical and conceptual support to the idea that KM is inherently a change effort affecting issues of how to enact readiness-for change in individuals. In general, most KM research fail to make the connection between KM and organisational change. The few studies that have explored the relationship have done so without drawing upon existing models or theories of organisational change. In this paper, we argued that one important reason for this gap, is that change and the inability to change in the knowledge literature are often viewed as macro-level phenomena, and what constitutes as a change facilitator is perceived in terms of the role of organisational level factors (e.g. information technology, social networks). The main cause of this challenge is absent in the knowledge of the roots or origins (microfoundations) of the underlying individual where change always begins.

However, the paper reinforces the argument that while the understanding of organisational level factors holds an important role in the KM domain, such macro-level theories and assumptions can be enriched by drawing more on micro-level explanations. We argue that readiness-for change is an important step towards understanding the micro processes of individual actions and interactions because research in this area examines how change occurs from the individual's perspective. More work is needed to explore these benefits of organisational change on KM in order to determine more the 'individual-level' characteristics for change readiness.

Our theoretical model both integrates and builds on existing KM and organisational change theories. It provides valuable guidance to KM practitioners and academicians in identifying a set of essential readiness-for change actions necessary to individual's and organisations. Our model embodies fundamental assumptions about readiness-for change, specifically dealing with different micro-level activities. We argue that such micro-level activities can help us to explore how individuals create, share, and use knowledge in organisations that are needed for successful change. It is therefore, our contention that in order to understand such KM issues, research must start at the

origins (the micro-level) where the individual level and actions are a direct cause of organisational level outcomes. Inherently, “without individuals there is no collective” (Fellin & Foss, 2005).

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