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EXAMINING EMPLOYEE BUY-IN FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL

Ratana SOM

Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Raksmey CHAN

Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract:

Regardless of the prevalence of change, getting employees on board is hard to achieve. While the investigation of leadership and change readiness has been done continuously, the examination of staff involvement in change and working culture, particularly of the non-western world, has been less appreciated. This article addresses this gap by analysing the connection between employee buy-in, trust, relationship, and task-oriented culture. The main data was gathered from 214 respondents. They are employees at a higher education institution in Cambodia and have experienced a technology-driven change recently. The structural equation model reveals significant relationships between trust and working relationship as well as task-oriented culture, highlighting the pivotal role of these cultural attributes in fostering trust and facilitating buy-in for change. The findings contribute to Social Exchange Theory by showcasing the reciprocal exchange between the employee relationship and support in organizational changes and portray a missing trust among Cambodian employees. Recommendations were drawn from the findings for the betterment of change practices by the managers and practitioners.

Key words: *Organizational culture, trust, employee buy-in, relationship, change management*

1. Introduction

It has been a few decades since the book *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter was published, yet the era of planned change has still gained its ground in the field of management (Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Kotter, 1996). Despite many new developments, particularly technology, and the industrial revolution, the need for change management skills has never been irrelevant. What is more important is the necessity of leadership to deal with the transition of work happening every single day (Caldwell, 2003). Kotter along with other leading experts contend that resistance to change is always one of the main issues at work regardless of the nature of those organizations (Alas & Sharifi, 2002; Kunze et al., 2013; Lunenburg, 2010; Menon & Prabu, 2016). The traditional view on change, such as from Lewin (1947), mentions that such resistance exists due to ignorance referring to the misunderstanding of the need to be changed. Only those few who actually can

perceive that something is not right that requires the change to take place. However, the question of how we could deal with such ignorance and get people involved in change lies a big question for debate.

Change management is the process of helping employees' transition to new ways of working. It involves understanding the need for change, communicating the change effectively, and providing support to employees during the transition (Alam et al., 2021; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). One of the most important aspects of change management is getting people involved. When employees are involved in the change process, they are more likely to understand and accept the changes and make unobtrusive transitions.

Getting employee buy-in for change is not a new area for investigation, yet the situation is becoming intriguing recently due to the wide adoption of new technology at work, mainly at an unexpectable pace after the world pandemic and the experience of working from home (Hamingson, 2023). Such changes have made a big impact on the work routine requiring all employees to adapt to the new environment, while some of the elder staff find it quite difficult to get used to it (Som et al., 2022). In addition, the areas of cultivating employees' trust in a turbulent change management in a non-western culture are still underexplored (Chughtai et al., 2015; Yue et al., 2019). Hence, it is necessary to shed light on this area, particularly in an emerging economy like Cambodia.

This research article aims to explain factors influencing employee buy-in. It examines from a cultural perspective, mainly their relationship and task-oriented culture how it links to their trust in the management team and buy-in for organization change. The literature of this paper touched upon the relevance of trust and culture in change management, and a particular case of Cambodia. The data was analysed quantitatively to establish a change management model. And the results of this study would contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding change and employee buy-in, particularly the technology-driven change at the higher education institution. This would be a piece of key information for all leaders and managers to understand and perceive the hidden bullets for making change succeed seamlessly.

This paper begins with an introduction of the background and research objectives, followed by a review of the relevant theories and literature. Then, the methodological tools are presented. The findings are divided into three parts which are the description of the data, measurement of the model, and structural model assessment. The discussion part illustrates how the findings imply and are relevant to previous literature, and proceeded by the research limitation and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Trust in change management

Establishing trust and achieving buy-in during organizational change are intertwined processes and crucial for success, although this has been underestimated by many (Hubbard, 2023). Organizational trust reflects employees' reliance on the organization's integrity and competence (Yue et al., 2019). Prior studies prove that a lack of trust results in negative attitudes, resistance, and decreased legitimacy (Ertürk, 2008; Menon & Prabu, 2016; Morgan & Zeffane, 2003; Saruhan, 2013). On the same ground,

Hubbard (2023) emphasizes trust and buy-in, noting their role in mitigating challenges. Neglecting buy-in leads to decreased performance, commitment, satisfaction, and heightened turnover. In essence, trust's integration into change support is paramount, underpinning collaboration, engagement, and overall success. If trust is not strongly anchored, making the change would have an erosive effect on the relationship and doom to failure.

Hubbard (2023) defines buy-in within organizational change as a reciprocal agreement between leaders and stakeholders, entailing collaborative navigation of change initiatives and embedding trust among change agents and decision-makers. To secure employee buy-in, Applequist et al. (2017) advocate for effective communication, ongoing engagement strategies, and identifying change initiative leaders. This resonates with Kotter and Schlesinger's (2008) assertion that open communication, and change participation foster mutual understanding and minimizes resistance. Meanwhile, leaders' support plays an indispensable role to build trust and engaging employees in this sense (Alam et al., 2021).

According to Exchange Network Theory, as argued by Emerson (1976), trust tends to prioritize in times of uncertainty. When individuals face a risky environment, it pushes for a sense of cohesion among them, linking their perceptions and trustworthiness to navigate these challenges. This assertion is reinforced by Cook (2015), who synthesizes many empirical findings highlighting the critical role of trust in situations characterized by risk and uncertainty. It was reinforced by an empirical study informing that trusted employer-employee relationships can not only encounter contentious issues but also promote business outcomes (Ansah et al., 2018). Hina and Siddiqui's (2023) along with Ertürk's (2008) study is another proof of this premise as the latter indicates the mediating role of organizational trust in linking managerial communication and employee participation to openness to change. This similar relationship is also shown in Saruhan's (2013) work in which employees' trust in the organization is found negatively associated with change resistance. Overall, when confronted with changes, individuals will instinctively seek dependability and trusted people from their established relationships.

Trust in Cambodia's culture

It is worth mentioning about working culture in a non-western context, particularly Cambodia which has been through a traumatized past of genocide regime from 1975-1979. The experience from the killing field has marked a dark spot in elder Cambodians whose trust cannot be built easily, mainly in the public sector which is full of power competition and uncertainties (Jacobsen & Stuart-Fox, 2013; Rotha & Vannarith, 2008; Zucker, 2011). No matter how good the relationship between the employees and employers is, it is still ambiguous for them to buy-in to their initiative completely. Common change theorists have argued that people tend to buy-out if they are ignorant about those changes but it could be another case in this studied context. During Khmer Rouge's atrocity, people were favored to spy on their surroundings and report noncompliance acts or lack of loyalty to the regime known as "Angka". If the reports were made, the reported person would be arrested and punished and even got killed. Even though almost forty

years have passed, Cambodians, especially the elderly, remained scared of being treated dishonestly. Many of them seek to heal this through Buddhism and the practice of mindfulness (Agger, 2015). This has led to dishonesty being a significant part of how things work in organizations today (Jacobsen & Stuart-Fox, 2013), noted as a power distance of patron-client society by Rothan and Vannarith (2008). Changing this will take time and effort to help everyone involved understand and move on from their bitter past.

Relationship culture and change

Understanding the relationship and culture that employees build at work could be explained by Social Exchange Theory (SET) rooted in the 1920s which is a foundation concept explaining interpersonal relationship behavior. The theory was further developed as Exchange Theory by Homans and Peter Blau suggesting that individuals assess the value of making that relationship by comparing the reward they would receive namely companionship, and support with the cost, sacrifices and drawbacks of their investment (Cook, 2015). Thus, once employees perceived the benefits of building a relationship within an organizational culture, they would give their best to work while also seeking support and power from the organization in exchange (Brenyah & Obuobisa-Darko, 2017; Cherry, 2023; Emerson, 1976). This poses the question of whether working relationships outweigh the buy-in for uncertain change in the public organization.

Working culture has been strongly embedded within workers, especially those in a high-culture context where strong bond plays a crucial role in work accomplishment (Meyer, 2014). Alas and Vadi (2006) divide working culture into relationship-based and task-related which can normally be found in the former Soviet Union states such as Estonia. Recently, Olson (2023) suggest managers create a change acceptance culture before introducing a change project. Such a culture could be built by informal influencers, particularly middle managers who hold power from within with organization rank. Besides building a free table stake for employees, the author stresses about the indispensable role of trust and relationships at work which take months to build but can break in a second. As shown in the findings, Alas and Vadi (2002) reported that generally old employees would uphold relationship-oriented culture by supporting the initiative from colleagues in their trusting generation while it is not true for the younger generation who orients towards task accomplishment as part of the change.

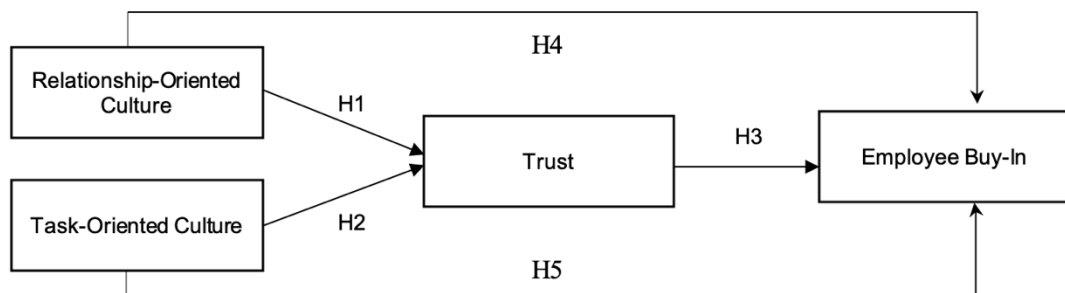


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Hypothesis 1: Relationship-oriented Culture has a positive relationship with Trust.

Hypothesis 2: Task-oriented Culture has a positive relationship with Trust.

Hypothesis 3: Organizational Trust has a positive relationship with Employee Buy-in.

Hypothesis 4: Relationship-oriented Culture has a positive relationship with Employee Buy-in.

Hypothesis 5: Task-oriented Culture has a positive relationship with Employee Buy-in.

3. Methodology

Informed by positivism, this explanatory study employed a quantitative approach for data collection. Purposeful sampling was applied as the intention of the study was to understand the practice of change and the buy-in of the staff at one public institution in Cambodia. The questionnaires on a 5-point Likert scale were conducted online by sending to all employees requesting their consent to participate in the study that related to their experience and support in an organizational change initiative. The total number of responses from the participants was 214. Recently, that institution has just experienced a change in their daily work by the new adoption role of technology-assisted work which has been troublesome for many staff. Once the process of data collection was done, the data was cleaned and analyzed through SmartPLS 3.0 for the PLS-SEM application.

Instrument-wise, the measurement of buy-in for change was measured by two items proposed by the author. Trust in management is evaluated using a seven-item scale developed by Robinson and Rousseau (1994) which was derived from the earlier work on the bases of trust in business relations proposed by Gabarro and Athos in 1976. Moreover, the two working cultures in organization-Relationship, Task-oriented-were measured based on the eight-item scale developed by Vadi et al. (2002).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1. Participants' background information

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	163	76.2	76.2	76.2
	Female	51	23.8	23.8	100
Tenure	Below 3 years	147	68.7	68.7	68.7
	3 Years or above	66	30.8	30.8	99.5
Age	Below 30	75	35	35	35
	31-40	100	46.7	46.7	81.8
	41-50	27	12.6	12.6	94.4

Above 50 12 5.6 5.6 100

Note: n=214

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Excess Kurtosis	Skewness
Employee Buy-In	3.234	0.683	-0.229	-0.513
Relationship Culture	3.156	0.679	0.046	-0.421
Task Culture	3.027	0.759	-0.236	-0.513
Trust	3.435	0.529	0.755	-0.738

Note: n=214

Table 2 presents how kurtosis and skewness for the normality test are reported in empirical studies. To meet the assumption that the data has a normal distribution, the values of kurtosis and skewness should range between +3 to -3. In this study, the value of Kurtosis for all constructs ranges from -0.236 to 0.755, while the value of skewness for all constructs ranges from -0.738 to 0.538. As a result, the data of this example has a normal distribution.

Measurement model

The initial model fit indices were tested, namely SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, NFI and χ^2 which revealed the value lower than the threshold (e.g. SRMR < 0.08 and NFI > 0.90) suggested by Hair et al. (2021) and Ringle et al. (2022). Hence, some items with low standardized loading were removed to enhance the value of model fit. As a result, the indices of model fit have improved and the model indicated the score of χ^2 was 266.964, SRMR=0.078, d_ULS=0.557, d_G=0.204, NFI=0.77, and RMSEA=0.214.

Table 3. Construct reliability test

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Employee Buy-in	
CB1 I support my organizational (change) initiative.	0.709
CB2 I know what I will do in this organization change initiative.	
Relationship Culture	
RC1 My coworkers and I know one another.	0.813
RC2 Accepted communication standards exist.	
RC5 In tough situations, there is a strong feeling of togetherness.	
RC7 All important matters are discussed with each other.	
Task	0.739

Culture

TC1	I am proud of my organization.
TC2	I am rewarded for my good work.
TC3	I have a big freedom of activity.
TC6	Differences between subordinates and superiors are not accentuated.

Trust

TR2	My management team is open and upfront with me.	
TR3	I believe the management team has high integrity.	0.914
TR4	In general, I believe my management team's motives and intentions are good.	

Table 4. Factor loading

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Employee Buy-in	CB1	0.817	0.868	0.767
	CB2	0.931		
Relationship Culture	RC1	0.811	0.877	0.641
	RC2	0.809		
	RC5	0.812		
	RC7	0.77		
Task Culture	TC1	0.764	0.834	0.557
	TC2	0.743		
	TC3	0.764		
	TC6	0.713		
Trust	TR2	0.912	0.946	0.853
	TR3	0.943		
	TR4	0.915		

In measurement of the model, three prerequisite tests have to be met, which are (1) internal consistency reliability, (2) convergent validity, and (3) discriminant validity (Aburumman et al., 2022). The internal consistency reliability includes two main tests namely Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR). CA estimates the reliability based on the inter-correlations of the observed constructs, while the CR presents the degree to which the set of items consistently indicates the latent construct. Table 3 and 4 illustrate the results of internal consistency reliability of CA and CR in which the score is ranged from 0.709 and 0.914 and between 0.834 and 0.946 respectively, meeting the general acceptance of value between 0.70 and 0.95. Moreover, AVE score of each construct meets the threshold of 0.7 indicating the fulfillment of reliability and validity test.

Generally, values less than 0.85 for the HTMT criterion are values widely accepted. In our example, all constructs achieved within the threshold ranging between 0.246 and 0.528 for discriminative validity based on the HTMT criterion.

Table 5. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

	Employee Buy-in	Relationship Culture	Task Culture	Trust
Employee Buy-in				
Relationship Culture	0.45			
Task Culture	0.293	0.538		
Trust	0.246	0.356	0.391	

Structural model assessment

Following the assessment of the measurement model, the proceeding step is the evaluation of the structural path for the evaluation of path coefficients. Firstly, we check the inner VIF values to assess the multicollinearity issues which reveals that the height Inner VIF value is 1.281 which meets the suggested value, three or below, by Hair et al. (2020). Another structural equation model criterion namely the coefficient of deamination (R^2), the effect size level (f^2) and the predictive relevance (Q^2) also meet the threshold. Generally, values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are considered substantial, moderate, and weak for R^2 (Hair et al., 2021). In our example, the “Trust” and “Employee Buy-in” achieved a value of 0.146 (weak) and 0.143 (weak) for R^2 respectively. In addition, values more than zero are meaningful for Q^2 . In our example, the Trust achieved a value of 0.114 and the Employee Buy-in achieved a value of 0.095 indicating meaningful for Q^2 . Regarding effect sizes (f^2), values of 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02 are considered large, medium, and small for f^2 (Cohen, 1988).

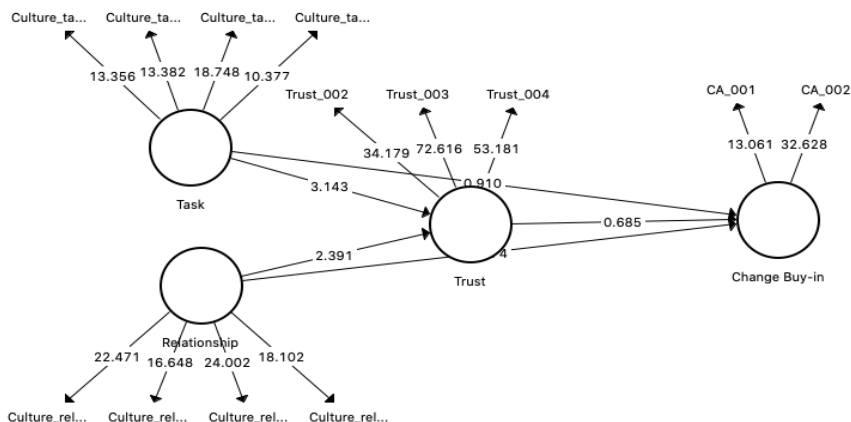


Figure 2. Structural model

Table 6. Structural model assessment

Hypotheses	Beta	T value	p value	f ²	Decision
1 RC -> TR	0.202	2.467	0.014	0.039	Accepted
2 TC -> TR	0.251	2.832	0.005	0.061	Accepted
3 TR -> CB	0.066	0.730	0.466	0.004	Not Accepted
4 RC -> CB	0.309	4.483	0.00	0.088	Accepted
5 TC -> CB	0.08	0.942	0.347	0.006	Not Accepted

The findings of the structural model revealed significant relationships among a few studied variables. Firstly, the association between "Relationship-oriented Culture" and "Trust" was found to be positively significant ($\beta = 0.202$, $p < 0.014$), indicating that a higher level of relationship-related cultural understanding positively influences the degree of trust among individuals within the organization. The same is also true between "Task-oriented Culture" and "Trust" in which the relation is found significant ($\beta = 0.251$, $p < 0.005$). In addition, the investigation also confirmed a strong and significant positive link between "Relationship-oriented Culture" and "Employee Buy-in" ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < 0.00$). This implies that higher levels of relationship established among organizational members contribute to greater buy-in and openness towards organizational changes. However, the interaction between "Trust" and "Employee Buy-in" ($\beta = 0.066$, $p = 0.466$) and between "Task-oriented Culture" and "Employee Buy-in" did not demonstrate significant effects ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.347$). Hence, these findings underscore the critical role of relationship and task-oriented culture towards trust and their role in contributing to the overall buy-in of organizational change initiatives.

5. Discussions

The results inform that working cultures have influenced trust-building among employees in the organization. While trust is a key component for making employee involve in change, it is even necessary to start by building good culture strengthening relationships and accomplishing more tasks. The more tasks that the organization achieved and the close bond between employees and employers built, means the high chance of succeeding in change (Ansah et al., 2018). This finding is congruent with previous studies that suggest fostering strong relationships, open communication, and collaboration to boost change openness and create a conducive environment for change (Applequist et al., 2017; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Yue et al., 2019). Likewise, it also supports the premise of Alas and Vadi (2002) in which relationship and task-oriented culture are found to play a key role in making old and young Estonian to conform the change initiative. This is well reflected in what Saruhan (2013) found on the negative relationship between employees' trust and change resistance. Overall, this

insight can guide practitioners and scholars in placing greater emphasis on fostering relationship-oriented cultural attributes when designing change initiatives.

While there is insufficient statistical proof of the relationship between Trust and Employee Buy-in, which is quite similar to a preceding study (Hina & Siddiqui, 2023), it implies a very unique culture in Cambodia's working context. When a myriad of works, mainly those in the Western world reveals the relationship between organizational trust and change openness or involvement (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003; Saruhan, 2013; Yue et al., 2019), one has to reflect the historical context of Cambodia. From the history of hardship and betrayal during the Khmer Rouge as well as the revolutions, the word "Change" and "Trust" remains a big doubt among the public (Zucker, 2011), and are rarely put on a discussion agenda. People prefer staying in a status quo and being risk-avoidance. Hence, there is no doubt that is why the relationship between the construct of trust and employee buy-in is hard to prove. This finding serves as another evidence of the psychology of Cambodian employees explaining a situation when they encounter something uncertain. Even though they know a person very well, still it is hard to be convinced to change. This aligns with Rotha and Vannarith's (2008) notion of patron-client society, and Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox (2013) assertion that trust is hard to gain outside the family bond, especially in the public sector which is full of power competition.

In addition, this empirical finding has contributed to the principles of Social Exchange Theory in the form of employee relations in the organization. The positive relationship between a relationship-oriented culture and employee buy-in can be seen as their investment. When employees perceive such a culture and benefits, they are more likely to support and embrace organizational changes. This aligns with the notion of reciprocity in social exchange, where positive actions are met with positive responses (Cook, 2015; Emerson, 1976).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the relationships between organizational culture, trust, and employee buy-in within the specific context of a Cambodian public institution after undergoing technology-driven changes. The findings have emphasized the significant link between relationship and task-oriented cultures as driving forces to organizational trust and successful change adoption. From this, the study also reflects the unique culture of Cambodian employees' regarding trust building, which is hard to earn because of their tragic history. Additionally, by revealing the reciprocal connection between relationship cultural attributes and employee buy-in for change, the study enriches the understanding of Social Exchange Theory to another extent. These insights offer valuable guidance for both practitioners and scholars aiming to propose change initiatives by prioritizing relationship cultures, which ultimately contribute to the successful implementation of any change initiatives.

Although a great effort has been put into this study, the limitations still exist. The sample of the present study is confined to one public organization only which excludes the perception of employees from other organizations and sectors. This in turn

might limit the generalizability of the findings. Further study can expand the investigation to other institutions and sectors which may have different change initiatives and results. The following work can also reconceptualize the framework by considering other constructs that are related to employee buy-in. Lastly, replication of this work to other non-western cultures could also be an area of interest.

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