



Us and Them – First-line Management and Change Resistance¹

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ABSTRACT

Change agents are vital in enacting organizational change, yet we know little about the specific challenges first-line managers face in this role. This study draws on written responses from managers in Norwegian public welfare organizations to describe the trials of being a change agent. The responses reveal that issues arise from resistance among recipients of the change and from the nature of the manager's role in the organization. Within these categories, four challenges are delineated: (1) fall-out from 'change fatigue', (2) individual resistance to change, (3) managers being caught between two worlds, and (4) a lack of managerial discretion. These challenges could potentially limit the change agent's efficiency. The study suggests areas for future research and ways for public welfare organizations to improve their change processes.

KEYWORDS

Change management / public welfare organizations / social work / leadership / managerial discretion

Introduction

When we think of a leader, we easily imagine a powerful CEO, a person with great capabilities to influence change in individuals and organizations with a snap of a finger. Like mythical figures, they can turn organizations around with great enthusiasm and bravado. This idea is reflected in research describing the virtues and proficiencies of leadership (e.g., Bresnen 1996; Goleman 2006; Zaccaro & Klimoski 2002). Organizations have but one top executive, but many first-line managers; therefore, an understanding of successes and challenges of first-line managers is vital to improving change processes. This study offers an alternative view to the mythical change agents by presenting the real challenges first-line managers encounter when tasked with affecting change.

The role of the change agent in organizations has drawn interest from researchers (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Rouleau & Balogun 2011), yet we know little about change agents outside of the executive suite or research and development departments (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent 2016). In their review, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016, p. 326) explicitly identified the lack of research concerning first-line managers' relationship with their staff members, a knowledge gap they attribute to generic assumptions about resistance to change as a limiting factor. With this study, I seek to address this gap as I illustrate the challenges first-line managers face as change agents in public welfare services.

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Understanding these challenges are of practical importance because managers can be a driving force for change, as they play an active part in overcoming resistance to change (Balogun 2003; Huy 2002). Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to know how first-line managers interpret these processes and attach emotions to them in order to influence change (Balogun 2003; Huy 2002). In addition, this study contributes to the practice of public welfare services by illustrating the challenges change agents face within this context. Speaking to the public welfare setting this research illustrates the challenges that come with the tension between change agents' formal role and the resistance they may face. Finally, this study offers a broader understanding of the managerial change agent in public welfare organizations and the pressing issues first-line managers may face. Drawing on written responses, I answer the following research question: What challenges do first-line managers face as change-agents in public welfare organizations?

Although appointed managers are in charge, a department can have multiple formal and informal leaders (Denis et al. 2010). I define first-line managers as those in formal hierarchical positions, working directly above the organizational street level without other managers below them (Hales 2005). This study explores how these managers experience the change agent role. While informal leaders can be change agents, this study specifically examines how formally appointed managers of local social welfare and nursing units experience the change agent role. Perspectives on change are not limited to wholesale organizational turnarounds, but may include implementation of new routines, rules, and ways of doing things in the organization. Those tasked with creating such alterations are 'change agents', and those affected are the 'recipients'. In this paper, I use the terms 'employees' and 'recipients' interchangeably as I discuss the change agent and the participant roles in the work setting. Outside of this specific setting, an employee is not necessarily a recipient of change, nor a recipient of change an employee.

The 11 informants for this study worked in social work and nursing departments in public welfare organizations and are similar in their connection to the Norwegian welfare system. A majority came from NAV (Norwegian Welfare and Labour Services). Data from the Norwegian context mean that the findings must be understood as situated in a country where welfare services are generally provided as a public service, which is common in the Scandinavian countries. Therefore, the challenges described occurred in a setting with the limitations of operating under political control, rules, and regulations. However, the findings are transferable to a wider set of working life organizations, as the tension between control and autonomy with new public management (NPM) reforms is an essential contextual factor found in many organizations, such as in the UK banking sector and the Australian welfare services (Hales 2002; Healy 2002).

Change Agents

In this section, I review the literature on change agents and identify the utility of lower-level change agents. I draw on research to suggest that challenges may come from individual's resistance or from the nature of the manager's role in the organization, such as imposed financial or time constraints. In this process, I identify two knowledge gaps explored by this study: In the first instance, there is a curious mismatch between the emphasis on change agent behaviors, and how little we know about the challenges

first-line change agents face in that role. In the second, it is evident that we know little about the specific challenges they face within the public welfare sector.

The managers' change agent role are attributed to their beneficial position in organizations (Currie & Procter 2005). Flattened hierarchies with increasingly distributed power are believed to increase managers' power at the lower levels of organizations (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994). Caught between the logics of management and the front lines, first-line managers are in an optimal position between the two to translate the ideas of management downwards, while also passing ideas upwards to decision makers (Nonaka 1994).

Although this study concerns the challenges of first-line managers as change agents, I must clarify that this role is one of many that a manager may have within an organization; however, judging from the increasing importance put on the change agent role, it is essential to understand how the role is performed and the challenges it bring.

Overcoming resistance to change is an important aspect of the change agent's role (Agboola & Salawu 2011; Pardo del Val & Martínez Fuentes 2003; Piderit 2000). Resistance from recipients on a personal level is expressed in different ways, both active and passive, including deviant behaviors (Beaudan 2006), refusal, apathy, and inertia (Smollan 2011). Those resisting change may employ defensive mechanisms, such as projecting, acting out, isolation of affect, dissociation, and denial (Bovey & Hede 2001a), and their resistance may have many reasons (Smollan 2011). On the personal level, resistance may be rooted in rational reasons, such as differing values and beliefs about the change or politics (Pardo del Val & Martínez Fuentes 2003). But resistance may also be driven by irrational ideas and emotions to some degree (Bovey & Hede 2001a). While resistance can be challenging, research suggests that change agents can use it as a resource in the change process (Ford & Ford 2010; Ford et al. 2008), which illustrates the complicated nature of handling resistance.

Research suggests that change agents may handle resistance in a range of ways. In a case study, Gunnarsdóttir (2016) examined managers in Norwegian child welfare services during a 'period of radical change'. She found that managers handled challenges by conducting 'emotional work', 'emotional labor', and 'emotional balancing' in response to the increased complexity of organizational expectations during change processes. In their literature review, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) found that managers also overcome resistance by influencing the travel of new ideas through micro-practices such as bridging diverging goals and hand-picking likeminded allies. This suggests that managers have a role in translating and legitimatizing ideas as well as enrolling and aligning employees to partake in change. To aid recipients' satisfaction with and acceptance of change, managers must align recipients' values with those of the organization, such as promoting ethics, pride, meaningful work, involvement, and making a difference (Johannsdottir et al. 2015; Lozano 2013). Getting managers and employees in to embrace the change process is an important prerequisite for success (Johannsdottir et al. 2015; Lozano 2013).

As Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) noted, research has identified a range of activities that change agents do, but we know curiously little about the challenges they face in their role. This study seeks to explore this knowledge gap. In the findings section of this paper, I draw further on theories in the field to elaborate on obstacles to change, including change fatigue, individual resistance, and other challenges of the change agent role.



Change agents in public welfare organizations

Understanding the role of managers in modern organizations is contingent on an understanding of the context in which they operate (Thomas & Linstead 2002). Studies of public bureaucracies suggest that managers here have less room to maneuver than their counterparts in private enterprise (Currie & Procter 2005; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992); a goal of this study was to identify challenges related to this limited managerial maneuverability.

Research in the Norwegian welfare service context supports the expectation of limited maneuverability for these managers. Managers' local autonomy in NAV mostly centers on dealing with 'running tasks', beyond which managers are limited by 'structural contingencies' (Fossestøl et al. 2016, p. 10), such as dealing with competing streams of governance and various issues of standardization, including the delegation of tasks between local departments, control measures, and IT systems (Fossestøl et al. 2016, pp. 11–12). Sagatun and Smith (2012, pp. 169–170) described NAV as a bureaucratic institution with a culture characterized by 'hard values', such as routines, logic, rationality, methods, and tools, a culture that could make it difficult for employees to adapt to clients' needs and to focus on trust and relationships. From these descriptions, we can surmise that change agents in NAV could experience limited room to maneuver and that the public welfare context could be a hindrance to efficient change management.

The particularities of the public welfare setting could also pose challenges between change agents and individual employees. The public welfare organization is a professional environment in which welfare workers are guided by their professional training in how tasks should be carried out (Bøe 2013). Welfare workers often bring with them professional habits that may include protecting their clients, ethical considerations, and priorities that could clash with the rigidity of public welfare organizations (Brænd 2014; Dalsgaard & Jørgensen 2016; Witman et al. 2011). Tensions may result as occupational professionalism clashes with the needs of the organization (Evetts 2011). Studies on social workers and nurses in Denmark and Sweden reveal such tensions between balancing organizational control and professional autonomy (Brænd 2014; Dalsgaard & Jørgensen 2016; Hildebrandt 2016; Shanks 2016; Willig 2016). Existing tension between professionalism and control could mean that change agents in this context encounter stronger resistance on the individual level because employees (recipients) have priorities that do not match those of the organization.

Methods

This study draws on written reports from 11 managers in Norwegian welfare service organizations to gather information about their experienced challenges with their role as change agents. All managers had managerial responsibility for street-level professionals.

I recruited the sample in the fall of 2016 among managers taking a continuing education course on 'leadership' for work-and-welfare managers at a Norwegian institution of higher education. The sample includes 11 managers in formal first-line management positions, from 11 different welfare departments, municipal social work organizations, and hospitals. The managers came from organizations that varied in size, services offered, and clients served in the greater southeastern area of Norway.

As summarized in Table 1, six informants worked in different departments of the NAV front line such as local welfare offices, three in municipal offices of social work such as elder care, and two in hospitals. Five informants were responsible for their office's 'professional content', a position without formal direct reports, but considered a management role because of the responsibility to implement and control work standards. Three were department managers or assistant managers with direct reports, two in NAV and one in a municipal social work office. Two acted as team leaders tasked with implementing projects, one in NAV and one in a municipal social work office. One worked as a nurse responsible for leading a team and implementing guidelines. The diversity of the informants' positions served to strengthen the study, indicating how challenges may permeate different organizations and positions and are not peculiar to certain management functions or organizations, but are inherent in a change agent's role.

Beginning with a major reform in 2006 and a steady stream of reorganizations that followed, managers and employees in NAV have been through many changes in the last decade (Fossetøl et al. 2014). On the basis of the strain of undergoing a number of reforms over a relatively short time period, NAV can be considered an extreme example of a public organization undergoing change. Therefore, the interpretation and analysis of findings of this study are gleaned from an organization with more than its share of changes, a characteristic that could make clearer the resistance and challenges that change agents experienced than those from less extreme organizations.

Data Collection

I collected data through a written coursework requirement for the educational course in which the informants were enrolled. Broad, open-ended questions were used to explore the challenges the informants faced as managers; they were asked to relate a specific episode and more general experiences on the topic. The course requirement asked all participants to answer the following three questions in two-and-a-half to three pages (the underlined words appeared in the original questions):

1. Briefly describe your place of work (where, size), your position, how many employees you lead, and who you report to.
2. Write about a situation (detailed, specific) where you as a manager have been properly challenged. What was it about? Write about YOUR situation.
3. What is your greatest challenge as a manager in your job? Be specific. [To help them get started, participants were instructed to write on relational or structural challenges or both.]

These questions prompted stories from the informants, the content of which could be analyzed and used to illustrate the challenges they experienced as managerial change agents. The analysis is based on the contents of these stories.

After submitting this coursework requirement, the potential informants were asked if their responses could be used for research, on the condition of anonymity. One person declined and 13 gave their written consent. Guided by the categories emerging from the data analysis, I included in the sample only people with management experience in the organization. Thus, I excluded two informants who had experience from their unions,



which resulted in 11 final informants. The study did not collect any personal information and did not need a permit from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Quotes are translated by the author.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data thematically, an approach that provides flexibility and theoretical freedom because the researcher is able to identify themes independent of a specific theory (Braun & Clarke 2006). I was guided in where to look and what to look for by theory on the role of change agents as a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Bowen 2006) without any requirement that my findings fit a certain theory of change agents.

An initial reading of the material revealed that the challenges the managers experienced could be understood as pertaining to change. By comparing and contrasting the challenges described, I identified a common denominator among the responses: the challenge of implementing new guidelines, regulations, and situations. Further analysis of these themes showed these challenges could be sorted into the four major themes: ‘change fatigue’, individual relational issues, being caught between ‘two worlds’, and limitations of the managerial role.

Trustworthiness

The narrow scope of the data resulted in findings that present a constricted set of examples of managers’ challenges, which is consistent with using narrow qualitative data to explore ideas and illustrate challenges rather than to make generalizations (Alvesson 2011, p. 146). To increase the trustworthiness of the narrow data, I present theories and previous research that collaborate the validity of my findings. As is the case of any qualitative research, one could deride this study as lacking informants and controls for background variables, which are important when generalizing results to the wider population. However, my goal in this study was to provide more ‘meat on the bone’ concerning aspects of the change agent role that the managers found challenging. Therefore, although the data are not exhaustive, they illustrate the contemporary experiences of change agents in Norwegian public welfare services.

That being said, the nature of the findings suggests that they could be applicable to challenges experienced by a wider set of organizations dealing with rapid change and increasing demands of performance and innovation. Data from extreme cases such as this one present exaggerated findings that could be useful for other less extreme cases as well.

Limitations

The participating managers in the continuing educational course, from which the sample was drawn, may have enrolled in the course for the exact reason that they were seeking help to solve challenges. As a result, the sample could be biased toward those with a greater number of challenges, even ‘horror-stories’. In addition, the requirement to write about workplace challenges could have led some participants to construct or shape

challenging situations in order to have sufficient material to share. The fit with theories from other sectors and consistent nature of the stories suggests that this was not the case.

The stories that participants related also could have been influenced by the course content, a risk that may have been exaggerated by the timing of assignment, after an educational unit on change. Therefore, these findings should not be read as an argument for the relative importance of the change agent's role (which others have posed in theoretical discussions), but rather as stories about how public welfare service managers experienced this role. The data are robust for my conclusions as they enrich our understanding of the change agent's role. I have no data on the actual number of changes, so my discussion of change fatigue is not an effort to measure the effect of changes on managers, but again, how managers experienced the role and how it relates to theories on the subject. The narrowness of the data means that the results should be interpreted as illustrations of the challenges these particular change agents experienced. The nature of their challenges however suggest that they could be valid for other organizations.

Results

I sorted the responses into two main categories (each with two subcategories), one concerning resistance from the recipients of change and one concerning the nature of the manager's role. The resistance category included 'change fatigue' among recipients, and relational issues of dealing with 'impossible recipients'. Challenges categorized as related to the nature of the manager's role as change agent included 'being caught between two worlds' and limitations of the manager's position.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of responses. Although these challenges were described as continuous back and forth interactions between the agent and the recipient, for clarity in the analysis, I discuss them as four isolated types of challenges. 'Type' corresponds to the two main categories, resistance or role; 'size' indicates the number of employees reporting directly to the informant. Informant 9 failed to describe a change process, and Informant 10 failed to list the number of direct reports.

Change Fatigue

A recurring theme was collective resistance to change among employees, particularly 'change fatigue', in which 'constant change by an organization may burn out employees' adaptive resources and ultimately lead to the development of exhaustion and other negative consequences' (Bernerth et al. 2011, p. 322). To combat change fatigue, these managers are challenged in helping recipients overcome what they interpret as instructions from 'above', a boundary overstep of control from a superior entity into 'their' work.

Change fatigue is manifest as recipients' negative feelings about higher level management, 'them' exercising control over the local level 'us'. For some managers, the demands for change appeared to be incremental and continuous, a potential reason for the collective and individual resistance managers experienced. One informant, who was leading a new peer learning effort in NAV, related that coworkers boycotted the group she was tasked with establishing. Rather than a setting in which to learn from one another, the group became a place to vent frustration. The negative response of being

Table 1 Informants

Informant	Position	Organization	Size	Topic	Type
1	Professional content	NAV	22	Balancing professional and formal roles	Role
2	Department manager	NAV	16	Changing culture	Resistance/Role
3	Professional content	Municipality	19	Conflict with employees	Resistance/Role
4	Assistant manager	NAV	15	Budget restrictions	Resistance/Role
5	Professional content	Hospital	65	Implementing new project	Resistance
6	Team leader	NAV	7	Facilitating team development	Resistance/Role
7	Team leader	Municipality	5	Conflict with employee	Resistance/Role
8	Professional content	NAV	17	Implementing routines	Resistance/Role
9	Coordinating-responsibility	Hospital	2	Challenging work situation	N/A
10	Professional content	NAV	N/A	Implementing routines	Resistance
11	Department-manager	Municipality	11	Balancing professional and formal role.	Role

told what to do trumped the actual benefits of the group, which members recognized and acknowledged. One informant said:

... The day after I held a meeting for all employees and went through our use ... It resulted in a discussion in the meeting and great resistance (which I was prepared for) about what many believed are erroneous and controlling governance from the municipal level ... (Informant 4, Assistant manager NAV)

Informants described the challenging situation of selling a decision in an environment already saturated with change and new demands: ‘After some reflection did we realize that the negativity we felt was the feeling of “another chore they task us with.”’ A nurse coordinating a project to implement new routines had a hard time successfully convincing nurses to partake in the change process, something she attributed to the perception of change as an added burden:

When starting such a project I hope to experience the same glow and enthusiasm from other employees as I do myself ... instead it feels like employees see this as an added burden showing little interest in the project ... As leader and supervisor, I feel some times the frustration around them not sharing my glow and enthusiasm. Are employees in a department not obligated to have enthusiasm about the work they do and their own professional development? (Informant 5, Professional content hospital)

Change fatigue could be detrimental to organizational commitment and health (Bernerth et al. 2011; Bernstrøm & Kjekshus, 2015). As these stories indicate, managers must implement changes on top of dealing with the fallout from change fatigue. As a result, change fatigue could be just as detrimental to efficient management as it is to individual employees' work. Change fatigue can hijack a manager's time in the struggle to 'put out the fires', leaving little room for other pressing tasks.

We know little of the possible effects of change fatigue or the potential for management to mediate those effects; however, these stories indicate that change agents face challenges from collective resistance induced by change fatigue and by an aversion to being instructed. In addition to the detrimental effects on employees, described by Bernerth et al. (2011) and Bernstrøm and Kjekshus (2015), these findings suggest that change fatigue adds an increased burden to managers. The very position that managers hold that make them potentially great change agents also gives them the responsibility to sell change to individuals plagued with change fatigue. The challenge of this suggests that continuous change processes can be exhausting for employees and managers alike and detrimental to the organization. Change may not always be beneficial, and therefore should be carefully considered before launching, perhaps especially in organizations that have undergone considerable reforms and reorganizations.

Individual Resistance

Managers have a potential important role in limiting resistance through methods as motivation, manipulation, and interactions with employees (Beaudan 2006; Bommer et al. 2005; Bovey & Hede 2001b). Other ways of counteracting resistance may include setting the course, establishing a sense of urgency, acting as a role model, sharing a vision, providing necessary resources, empowering recipients, and demonstrating a wholehearted commitment to the change (Johannsdottir et al. 2015). All of these techniques require the manager to understand the recipients' points of view and to communicate effectively with them regarding the required change.

In addition to the challenge of change-fatigued recipients as a group, managers in the study encountered challenges from individuals who either could not or would not adapt to new or existing routines. This challenge represents an 'us-and-them' situation in which individuals refused to listen to and follow managers' directions. Managers experience it as difficult to understand employee's resistance and making them comply with instructions. Unlike change fatigue in which a group defies the general idea of change, this challenge is individualized, as the manager encounters someone who defies direct orders. As an extreme example of this challenge, Informant 8, who was responsible for professional content in NAV, described an employee who would not follow instructions and seemed to try to manipulate her way out of following protocol:

... I feel the employee is playing with my feelings (as a suppression technique), consciously or unconsciously to not have to change her behavior, but rather making me accept that she does not follow the current protocols of the office.

This type of resistance posed a challenge as the recipient undermined the manager's efforts to implement routines and protocols for the office as a whole. Similarly, Informant



10, a professional supervisor in a different NAV office, experienced challenges with a recipient who would not follow protocol for casework when the manager and recipient differed on how to solve the case: 'It is a challenge getting her to work with the full perspective of the user'. The recipient did not embrace the manager's understanding of how cases should be solved, and therefore, neglected to follow protocols and opposed further guidance. Being puzzled over how to reach someone resisting instructions or showing hostility when instructed are repeated by other managers: 'Many experience it as challenging to receive feedback about how to achieve similar practices in the facility' (Informant 7, Team leader municipality), and: 'They talked to others about me not caring about them or their well-being' (Informant 3, Professional content municipality).

Managers must overcome change fatigue and individual resistance for a successful change process to occur. To do this, they may employ techniques of 'sense making' and 'issue selling', interpersonal skills that allow managers to understand the context, prepare the scene, and perform the 'art' of helping recipients understand why they should partake in a change process (Rouleau & Balogun 2011).

This sense making, in which change agents help recipients to understand the change, frames the act of countering resistance as a subjective shaping of the recipients' interpretations of the change. Sense making implies that resistance to change is rooted in the recipients' frames of reference, rather than true hostility toward the change itself. Change agents use their position to influence the recipients' interpretation of the change processes and through it the outcome of the change. Therefore, 'selling the change' becomes an important tool for change agents. As 'sellers' and 'translators' of change, they are tasked with using their position, knowledge, and skill to frame change in a way that overcomes resistance among recipients (Piderit 2000).

However, these managers' experiences in dealing with individual resistance exemplify the limitations of framing resistance purely as an issue of perspective and interpretation. Managers found some recipients were downright difficult to lead, making it less likely that they would be able to achieve successful change solely from applying the correct 'framing' and 'selling'. Successful change also depends on the recipients' willingness and ability to change.

Of course, one could argue that these failures could just as well have stemmed from the managers' failure to properly frame and communicate the interpretation as described (Rouleau & Balogun 2011), and therefore, could not be attributed solely to a resisting recipient. However, the data suggest that a blind belief in the 'selling' and 'framing' way of overcoming resistance ignores the limitations of these techniques. Despite managers' best efforts, some were not able to reach the recipient, which put them at risk of being without the necessary tools to successfully accomplish the change they were expected to implement. The stories highlight the inherent limits of selling 'sense', as some recipients may be so locked into their point of view that managers may encounter great challenges with convincing them by these means alone. In this case, interpretative tools must be complemented with other ways of imposing change.

Caught Between Worlds

Another challenging aspect of the change agent's role concerns the psychological demands of managers being 'caught between two worlds' (Nonaka 1994). Managers are

required to interpret ‘corporate ideology’ (Turnbull 2001), and potentially conflicting streams of information, leading to a ‘managerial schizophrenia’, as they handle corporate rhetoric that may conflict with their own experiences. Always asked to play more than one role rather than to be themselves (Anthony 1994), managers operate in the grey areas between management and the front line, always maneuvering an inexact identity in an ambiguous role.

Managers in this study experienced such challenges from handling a continuous circle of development, inventions, and new ways of dealing with their work. For example, a unit manager of a NAV municipal office experienced it as demanding to muster enthusiasm in the development of her employees. This challenge is related to requirements from upper management that managers sell and promote change that may be counter to their own professional values, their employees’ values, or the clients’ needs. Managers then may utilize framing and selling techniques to make the change more acceptable, as these examples of managers who framed a change as a benefit:

.... As a manager, I must be loyal to governance from the municipal and directorate level, but I understand their arguments. The challenge was to position changes to the follow-up for clients, which was necessary, as leading to a better and more correct follow-up for the clients. Which it will be, but at the same time meaning more work for the guidance counselors. (Informant 4, Assistant manager NAV)

My greatest challenge as a manager in NAV on the relational level is to motivate the employees to change. Build a relation; create trust motivating them to change. Making them realize that change is the best for them as well, not just the clients. (Informant 8, Professional content NAV)

Managers experienced challenges dealing with demands from higher up in the organization, which were not shared or anchored at the street-level. Managers not only had to coax recipients to participate in changes coming from the top but also had to implement change they or the recipients did not necessarily believe in on a professional or personal level.

This tension might be greater among public welfare managers, as they deal with professional workers who have their own standards of work that may clash with organizational needs, placing the manager in the middle to mediate (Brænd 2014; Dalsgaard & Jørgensen 2016; Hildebrandt 2016; Shanks 2016; Willig 2016). The classical description of managers being ‘caught between worlds’ describes the challenge of mediating demands from employees and management (Nonaka 1994) and of interpreting ‘corporate ideology’ (Turnbull 2001). My results suggest that public welfare managers might face an additional challenge: overcoming professional skepticism and resistance to changes that are politically decided, which also may go against the training and values of the change recipients

Limitations of the Role

Managers’ place and role within the organization may also contribute to the feeling of being caught between two worlds. First, they may be asked to implement changes over



which they had no influence (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994, p. 543), and thus, they maneuver an ambivalent role without necessary discretion or authority. Second, managers may simply have too many responsibilities and too little time to be successful change managers (Conway & Monks 2011).

Managers' strategically important position as change agents are contingent on them interpreting context, knowing organizational resources and how to utilize them, and being secure in their own positions (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994). With these things in place, managers have the potential to play an important strategic role in championing, adapting, and implementing changes in an organization (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994). Caught between top leaders who champion the change, outside counsel, and front lines implementing the details, managers may be bypassed to the detriment of the change process (Holmemo & Ingvaldsen 2015). As change processes require continuous follow-up over long periods of time, the first-line manager is an important steady presence (Beaudan 2006). Implementations of new organizational forms can fail solely because managers were not involved early and often enough, or because they faced insufficient resources in their role to implement it.

As examples, evidence from this study suggests that managers faced the challenge of limited time and power to realize the changes they were tasked with implementing. They expressed limitations in the ability to prioritize the changes or to make discretionary adaptations of the changes based on local needs. While the origins of these challenges can be diverse, they all serve to limit what the change agent can achieve, as Informant 8 said, 'Time is often too limited to achieve the quality demanded from leaders in others parts of NAV and elsewhere in Norwegian public welfares'. Another said:

All needs for changes in rules, practices of rules, or other needs are similar for the whole organization; this entails a bureaucratic process which takes much time from me sending it, to change happens, if it happens at all. (Informant 7, Team leader Municipality)

The manager's role as a change agent is believed to come from changing organizational designs aimed at decentralizing decision-making and thereby increasing the power of lower level managers in organizations (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994). Interestingly, despite this theoretical rise in local power, managers experienced top-down control that limited their freedom. These findings suggest that being told what to do was a source of frustration among managers tasked with implementing change, which is entirely consistent with experiences of limited autonomy among managers in public welfare organizations (Brænd 2014; Dalsgaard & Jørgensen 2016; Fossetøl et al. 2016; Hildebrandt 2016; Shanks 2016; Willig 2016). The situation these managers described challenges the mythology of change agents as wielding a lot of power (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994), and suggests that these managers lacked the necessary resources, discretion, and freedom to solve the dilemmas of being a change agent at their level.

The findings suggest that first-line managers in welfare service organizations experienced limited discretion in their role, more so than the idealistic descriptions of the manager as a change agent would suggest (Currie & Procter 2005). In addition, the data indicate that these managers were challenged by the clash between the governing and professional values in the organization, as predicted in the public welfare sector.

These managers' limited maneuverability actualizes an interesting paradox in the change agent's role. Despite that the growth of managers as change agents stem from the increased empowerment of the role (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994), these managers' stories suggest that they did not experience the role as powerful. Rather, they described being under control, having little autonomy, and facing high demands for improvement. Rather than having freedom, they described being in a position limited to imposing the will of others more or less successfully onto those even farther down in the organizations. Eliciting the feeling among the managers that they were caught between higher-level demands and what they realistically could sell to recipients with limited time and resources. Similarly, Gunnarsdóttir (2016) found that Norwegian child welfare managers' autonomy became increasingly threatened during change processes, making it necessary for them to adopt emotional management strategies, similar to the seller/framer function, to retain their autonomy.

Managers may lack time or freedom to actually fulfill the change agent role because they have many other responsibilities and lack the necessary room for discretion. The managers in this study described having to sell ideas from above while having limited room to maneuver in their role. This strong structural control and corresponding small maneuverability among first-line managers risks reducing managers to organizational puppets tasked with selling whatever change the governance level decides upon, rather than allowing managers to be empowered 'agents of change'.

Concluding Discussion

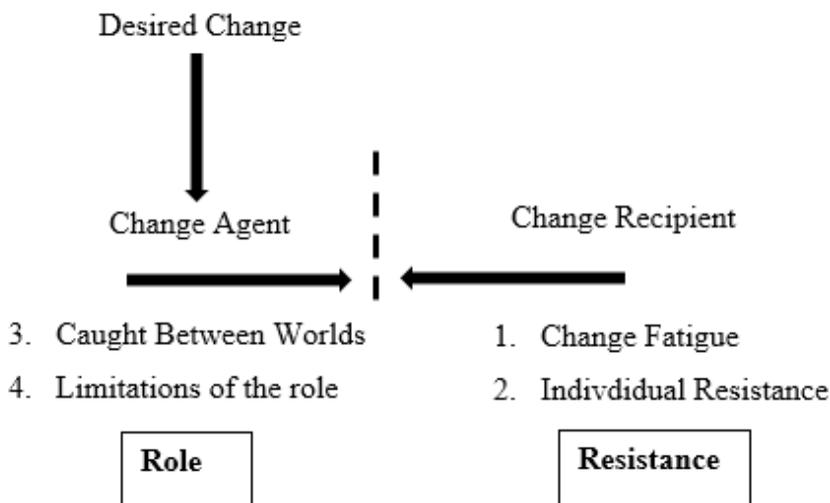
The experiences of managers in this study illustrate the potential challenges change agents face as they attempt to persuade recipients to embrace change. The study provides specific examples of these challenges—including persuading recipients to follow routines, procedures, and innovations—and also cites examples of structural and interpersonal issues related to the change agent's role. The results, which indicate the challenging nature of the change agent's role, are similar to those found in research and development departments and executive managers, supporting the assumption of Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) that resistance from first-line staff can be a limiting factor. In answer to Radaelli and Sitton-Kent's (2016) call for further studies, this research illustrates the personal and positional challenges change agents face in public welfare organizations. These can be sorted into two main categories: 1) resistance to change among recipients of the change and 2) the nature of the manager's role in enacting change.

Theory predicts that managers will find it a challenge to overcome resistance (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Piderit 2000; Rouleau & Balogun 2011), a prediction confirmed by how the managers in this study told about difficulties they experienced in convincing recipients to do something different or to do more than they were doing. This study's contribution is to describe the variety of challenges managers in welfare service organizations face in their role as change agents, both from the role itself and from recipients' resistance to change. The illustrated challenges show similarities between change agents in Scandinavian public welfare services and those in other sectors.

Figure 1 illustrates the four challenges of a public service change agent, which are categorized either as resistance to change or the nature of the manager's role. The dotted



Figure 1: Four types of challenges to successful change processes in public welfare services.



line illustrates the barrier hindering the desired change from taking place, and indicates that change is not always achievable, either because of impediments of the context limiting the manager’s role or because the resistance is too strong, or a combination of both. This barrier may make it impossible for the change agent and change recipient to reach each other, challenging the success of the change process.

Implications

These findings suggest that change agents within the Scandinavian public welfare system need time and resources to act as successful change agents. Like other change agents who seek to help recipients make sense of change, they act as role models, handle resistance, coach, train, and support the process (Balogun 2003). These organizations must recognize the demands and processes of the change agent’s role and in turn provide structural support and sufficient time for managers to fulfill their responsibilities in this regard (Balogun 2003, p. 80). Those delegating change downwards in an organization should consider the difficult role first-line managers have and the resistance they are likely to encounter. From this, those ordering change should be aware that change is not free; it comes with considerable costs to employees and managers who partake in these processes. These costs must be considered before implementing change.

Despite the discussed limitations of sense making and issue selling, research indicates that these techniques are important as long as we acknowledge its limitations. The frustration managers experienced when they were unable to persuade recipients to embrace change suggests that some managers may lack the discretion or the skills to reach their full potential as change agents when encountering resistance.

To aid this, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) suggested adopting more discursive, less analytical teaching strategies, which public welfare services could implement in their training as additional tools for managers to use. Incorporating an interpretative aspect

in training could help organizations to more successful change processes (Piderit 2000). These results, and those from other sources, suggest that change has become the standard in modern organizations; therefore, public welfare service organizations must train managers in techniques that support the successful implementation of change. While this study illustrates the challenges change agents face, nothing here refutes that resistance can ultimately be a resource for the organization (Ford & Ford 2010; Ford et al. 2008).

Future Research

Future research on first-line managers' role as change agents should develop the limitations of 'sense making' and 'issue selling' as tools to help overcome challenges from change fatigue, personal resistance, and structural limitations. Further developing typologies of limitations would help us to understand how techniques may be used in welfare service organizations to overcome challenges. Accounting for contextual influences would be beneficial for understanding how and when resistance becomes a challenge for managers. Broader comparative surveys or a series of interviews would improve on this study by illuminating the differences between challenges that change agents in the public welfare context may encounter and those found in other settings.

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to identify challenges faced by public welfare change agents. Drawing upon stories from 11 first-line managers in Norwegian welfare service organizations, I typified four challenging aspects of the change agent role, related either to resistance from recipients or the nature of the manager's role in the organization. The public welfare setting with its limited managerial discretion, distance between knowledgeable employees, 'us', and management far removed, 'them', along with reorganizations and reforms might exacerbate these challenges.

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