

Adaptability Features, Proactivity, and Change Readiness: An Empirical Investigation of Public Sector Organisations

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Abstract

This study examined the mediating role of proactivity in the effects of five adaptability features (i.e. work stress coping, creativity, dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability) on employees' change readiness. A total of 379 employees of public sector organisations in Malaysia participated in the study. Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyse the proposed model. The results indicate that out of the five adaptability features, three (dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability) significantly predict proactivity. Proactivity was also found to mediate the effects of these three adaptability features on change readiness. This paper contributes to the change readiness literature by identifying proactivity as mediator in the relationship between adaptability features and change readiness, which has received relatively scant attention. Practical and theoretical contributions are discussed.

Keywords: change readiness, adaptability, proactivity, proactive, public sector

1. Introduction

Change management in public sector organisations is far more difficult than in private sector organisations due to the diverging interests of various stakeholders, such as public and private organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and politicians (Kuipers et al., 2014; van der Voet et al., 2015). The role of public sector organisations is highly important as they are entrusted with the responsibility to provide varied services to the people and to guide the nation towards sustainable development. However, Malaysian public sector employees faced a whole new challenge in public governance and administration after the change of government in 2018 (Wong, 2018). Managing change in human behaviour, especially in Malaysian public organisations, is therefore even more complex as the sector had been under the administration of the same government for more than 60 years.

Following the change of government, several major change initiatives have taken place in the Malaysian public sector, such as ministry restructuring, reengineering of work procedures, and staff reshuffling. In the early stage of change, public sector organisations had to operate within an uncertain and volatile work environment (Bernama, 2018; Kaur, 2018; Sivanandam, 2019). This dynamic work environment requires employees to be ready for change to ensure an effective delivery system as well as high-performing public service (Zulfakar, 2018). Promoting readiness for change among employees can nonetheless be difficult. Prior studies suggest that employee adaptability may affect change readiness (Baard et al., 2015; Cullen et al., 2014; van Dam, 2013). However, limited research has examined how specific dimensions of adaptability promote individual proactivity, even though scholars (e.g. Griffin et al., 2007; van Dam, 2013) have emphasized the importance of adaptability for employees' change readiness. Moreover, studies on the mediation effect of proactivity on the nexus between adaptability features and change readiness are scarce.

To fulfil these research gaps, the present study aimed to extend the academic literature on change management by examining the effect of adaptability features on individual proactivity, specifically to find out which adaptability features promote individual proactivity and how that translates to change readiness among Malaysian public sector employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Change Readiness

According to Armenakis et al. (1993), change readiness is “the cognitive precursor to the behaviour of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort.” It is an individual's willingness to undertake a change initiative (Armenakis et al., 1993; Rafferty et al., 2013). Change success depends on the degree to which employees are willing to adjust their behaviour to align with the envisaged change (Ghitulescu, 2013). As such, previous studies (e.g. Bouckenoghe, 2009; Mueller et al., 2012; Stevens, 2013) have argued that creating employee readiness for change is crucial in the change process. If employees are not ready, they may reject the change and develop negative reactions like resistance or sabotage. In other words, when readiness exists, employees' resistance to change is reduced; consequently, change implementation is smoother and more effective (Drzensky et al., 2012; Vakola, 2013).

2.2 Adaptability

Adaptability refers to an individual's ability to adjust his/her behaviours in a changing environment, which is a trait-like factor likely to predict effective behaviours in the change process (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). According to Schmitt and Chan (2014), an adaptive employee is one who has the capability and motivation to adapt. In the year 2000, Pulakos and his colleagues introduced eight dimensions of adaptability via their study on military personnel. Their works was advanced by Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012), who presented five dimensions of adaptability (i.e. work stress coping, creativity, dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability) that are more applicable across various organisational and work contexts. The five dimensions, or features, of adaptability and their definitions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Five Features of Adaptability

Dimensions	Definition
Dealing with uncertainty	Taking effective action by adjusting plans, goals, or actions to deal with dynamic situations.
Creativity	Generating innovative ideas and solving complex problems.
Work stress coping	Remaining calm when dealing with stressful circumstances.
Interpersonal adaptability	Being flexible when dealing with new teams and co-workers to work effectively with them.
Training and learning	Anticipating learning new knowledge and skills needed by work requirements.

Note. Adapted from Pulakos et al. (2000) and Pulakos et al. (2002)

2.3 Proactivity

In this study, proactivity is a synonym for a proactive personality, that is defined as a personal disposition toward proactive behaviour wherein individuals show the initiative to act upon environmental change (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). Proactive employees are more motivated as they take personal initiative, especially during times of change (Crant et al., 2017). In the context of organisational change, proactive employees actively act on opportunities and take preemptive actions to improve change efforts. This means that they take control and act in advance against potential problems and threats caused by the change process.

2.4 Research Framework and Hypotheses

Figure 1 depicts the research framework of this study, which is underpinned by Lewin's (1947) change model. According to Lewin (1947), the change process occurs in three stages, i.e. unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. The first stage involves alerting employees about the change that might happen in the near future and assisting them in gaining the necessary skills

and knowledge that foster their ability to adapt. This is to ensure employees are prepared when the change is implemented. In the second stage, change is taking place. To resolve uncertainty, employees are likely to rely on the skills and knowledge acquired in the first stage to actively look for new ways to do things. They begin to familiarise themselves with the 'new normal' and act in ways that support the change, which directly leads them to the third stage, refreezing, where they are ready to embrace the change.

According to van Dam (2013), adaptability is likely to nurture positive behaviour, like proactivity, in a changing environment. In the context of a dynamic environment, when employees encounter problems or challenges, they may rely on their confidence and ability to adapt to new activities. This ability to adapt helps employees deal with the changing environment without difficulties (Collie & Martin, 2016), and thus promotes their proactivity. As indicated by Waugh (2018), adaptability is an essential work skill that ensures employees act proactively and ready themselves for change. Employees who display a high level of adaptability, for example by being open-minded and remaining calm when dealing with stressful change activities, are more likely to take personal initiative and leverage available resources to prevent problems. This would make them respond promptly and act appropriately in accepting change. In contrast, employees who exhibit low adaptability through their incapability to deal with uncertainty or learn new skills are likely to be demotivated, which subsequently hinders their proactivity. Without new skills and knowledge, employees face difficulties in taking self-directed action towards anticipating and embracing change in the work system. This is because they do not know why, what, or how to do things in new ways, which limits their motivation to act proactively in seeking the significant tools, methods, and new means to promote their state of change readiness. Hence, the inability to adapt affects employees' proactivity, which in turn, leads to a low level of change readiness. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1 : Work stress coping has a significant positive effect on proactivity.

H2 : Creativity has a significant positive effect on proactivity.

H3 : Dealing with uncertainty has a significant positive effect on proactivity.

H4 : Training and learning has a significant positive effect on proactivity.

H5 : Interpersonal adaptability has a significant positive effect on proactivity.

H6 : Proactivity has a significant positive effect on change readiness.

H7 : There is a mediation effect of proactivity on the relationship between work stress coping and change readiness.

H8 : There is a mediation effect of proactivity on the relationship between creativity and change readiness.

H9 : There is a mediation effect of proactivity on the relationship between dealing with uncertainty and change readiness.

H10: There is a mediation effect of proactivity on the relationship between training and

learning and change readiness.

H11: There is a mediation effect of proactivity on the relationship between interpersonal adaptability and change readiness.

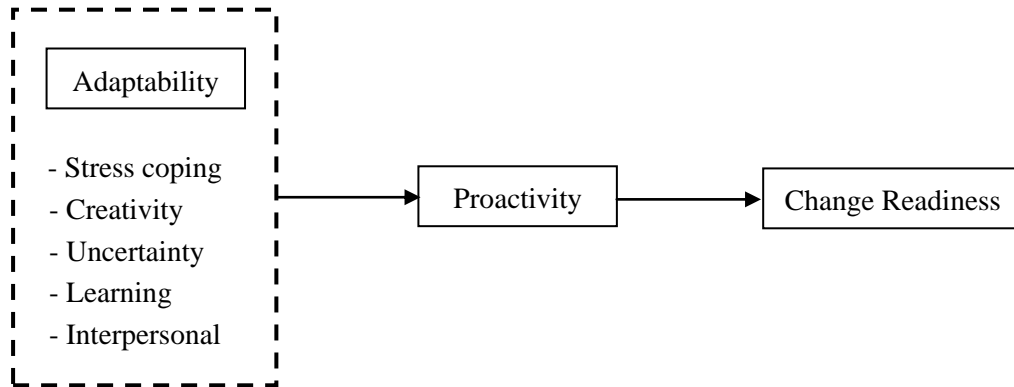


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Method

3.1 Sample

The sample of this study comprised administrative and diplomatic officers (ADOs) working in Malaysian federal ministries. With the agreement of the person-in-charge at the respective ministries, representatives were assigned to distribute the study questionnaires to respondents who were selected using simple random sampling. With the help of the representatives, a total of 500 sets of online questionnaires were emailed to the selected samples. Out of these, 379 returned questionnaires were usable for data analysis after discarding seven outliers.

A frequency analysis indicated that 168 participants were male and 211 were female. A majority of them were in the age bracket of 31 to 40 years old (58.3%). About half (50.9%) were junior officers (i.e. Grades 41 and 44), while the rest were senior officers (i.e. Grades 48 to 54). In terms of length of public service, most respondents (79.7%) had more than five years of work experience in public organisations. The remaining 20.3 percent had less than five years of work experience in the sector.

3.2 Measurements

To measure change readiness, three items were adapted from Bouckenooghe et al.'s (2009) scale. The items measured the extent to which an individual is willing to embrace a change initiative. Ten items were adapted from the scale developed by Seibert et al. (2001) to measure proactivity. These items assessed an individual's proclivity to take personal initiative to thrive in any change activity. Finally, a total of 19 items were adapted from Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel's (2012) work to measure the five dimensions of adaptability, which are (1)work stress coping (3 items); (2) creativity (4 items); (3) dealing with uncertainty (4 items); (4) training and learning (4 items); and interpersonal adaptability (4 items). All the measurement items were written in English. A seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree was used as the response scale for all the measures.

4. Findings

The data of this study was analyzed via Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with the SmartPLS 3.0 application. The constructs' reliability and validity were first established in the measurement model evaluation. Subsequently, hypotheses testing was performed in the structural model assessment.

4.1 Assessment of Measurement Model

The constructs in this study, which were all first-order reflective measures, were assessed for internal consistency as well as convergent and discriminant validity. As depicted in Table 2, the composite reliability (CR) of each variable was above the threshold value of 0.70. Hence, internal consistency of the constructs was established. Moreover, the significance of item loadings should be higher than the recommended benchmark of 0.70. Three items (i.e. AC1, P3 and P6) did not meet this criterion. However, these items were retained based on Hair et al.'s (2017) recommendation that items with loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 can be retained if their CR and average variance extracted (AVE) values are higher than the threshold values of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively. Therefore, no items were omitted from further analyses. The variables' convergent validity was further confirmed through the assessment of the AVE, which reported that all variables' AVE values exceeded the threshold of 0.50.

Table 2. Internal Consistency (Reliability) and Convergent Validity Results

Variable	Item	Loading	CR	AVE	M	SD
		> 0.70	> 0.70	> 0.50		
Work stress coping	AS1	0.820	0.871	0.693	5.515	0.798
	AS2	0.837				
	AS3	0.841				
Creativity	AC1	0.693	0.863	0.613	5.213	0.777
	AC2	0.793				
	AC3	0.818				
	AC4	0.821				
Dealing with uncertainty	AU1	0.825	0.907	0.709	5.421	0.796
	AU2	0.842				
	AU3	0.876				
	AU4	0.824				
Training & learning	AT1	0.709	0.881	0.651	5.278	0.825
	AT2	0.827				
	AT3	0.828				
	AT4	0.855				
Interpersonal adaptability	AP1	0.772	0.901	0.695	5.935	0.689
	AP2	0.856				
	AP3	0.853				
	AP4	0.851				

Proactivity	Pro1	0.758	0.930	0.574	5.519	0.712
	Pro2	0.796				
	Pro3	0.689				
	Pro4	0.797				
	Pro5	0.802				
	Pro6	0.600				
	Pro7	0.821				
	Pro8	0.801				
	Pro9	0.762				
	Pro10	0.720				
Change readiness	C1	0.913	0.950	0.864	5.778	0.774
	C2	0.938				
	C3	0.937				

Note: CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

Next, discriminant validity for each variable was evaluated through the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). According to Henseler et al. (2015), all the correlation values between variables should be less than the threshold value of 0.90. Table 3 shows that all the values met this criterion. Moreover, all independent variables also had variance inflation factor (VIF) values below the cut-off value of five as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). The results thus provided adequate evidence that discriminant validity was achieved for all constructs.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Results

Variable	VIF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Change readiness	-	-						
2. Creativity	2.956	0.553	-					
3. Interpersonal adaptability	1.608	0.624	0.605	-				
4. Proactivity	1.000	0.655	0.683	0.633	-			
5. Work stress coping	2.084	0.548	0.853	0.621	0.581	-		
6. Training & learning	2.287	0.677	0.837	0.670	0.730	0.674	-	
7. Uncertainty	2.628	0.578	0.879	0.628	0.700	0.764	0.776	-

Note. Discriminant validity is established at $HTMT_{90}$; VIF = Variance inflation factor

4.2 Assessment of Structural Model

Following confirmation of the constructs' reliability and validity, a blindfolding procedure (omission distance of six) was performed to determine the predictive relevance (Q^2) of the structural model. Table 4 depicts that both endogenous variables (i.e. proactivity and change readiness) exhibited adequate predictive relevance as their Q^2 values were greater than zero as per the criterion proposed by Hair et al. (2017).

Besides that, the model's predictive power was assessed through the coefficient of

determination (R^2) and effect size of the exogenous variables. Table 4 shows that 52.7 percent of the variance in proactivity was explained by the five exogenous variables (i.e. work stress coping, creativity, dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability). Meanwhile, proactivity explained 36.9 percent of the variance in change readiness. In terms of effect size, work stress coping did not show any effect on proactivity, while the other exogenous variables displayed a small effect on proactivity.

Table 4. Results of Model Predictive Power

Variables	R^2	Q^2	f^2
Change readiness	0.369	0.314	-
Proactivity	0.527	0.295	-
Work stress coping	-	-	0.000
Creativity	-	-	0.007
Dealing with uncertainty	-	-	0.049
Training & learning	-	-	0.071
Interpersonal adaptability	-	-	0.058

Note. R^2 = coefficient of determination; Q^2 = Predictive relevance; f^2 = Effect size.

The hypothesised relationships were tested via a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 re-samples (Hair et al., 2017). The analysis found that out of the five independent variables, only work stress coping and creativity were not significant in predicting proactivity. Meanwhile, proactivity was found to significantly influence change readiness. Hence, for the direct effects, only H1 and H2 were not supported. Regarding the mediation effect of proactivity, the results revealed that the effects of dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability on change readiness were mediated by proactivity. However, the indirect effects of work stress coping and creativity on change readiness via proactivity were found to be insignificant. Therefore, H7 and H8 were not supported. The hypotheses testing results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Hypotheses Testing: Direct and Indirect Effects

Hypotheses	β	<i>t</i> -value	Supported
H1 Work stress coping → Proactivity	0.017	0.310	No
H2 Creativity → Proactivity	0.101	1.548	No
H3 Dealing with uncertainty → Proactivity	0.248**	3.703	Yes
H4 Training & learning → Proactivity	0.278**	5.516	Yes
H5 Interpersonal adaptability → Proactivity	0.215**	4.489	Yes
H6 Proactivity → Change readiness	0.607**	15.912	Yes
H7 <i>Work stress coping → Proactivity → Change readiness</i>	0.010	0.309	No
H8 <i>Creativity → Proactivity → Change readiness</i>	0.062	1.545	No
H9 <i>Dealing with uncertainty → Proactivity → Change readiness</i>	0.150**	3.637	Yes
H10 <i>Training & learning → Proactivity → Change readiness</i>	0.169**	5.007	Yes

<i>readiness</i>					
<i>H11</i>	<i>Interpersonal adaptability</i>	→	<i>Proactivity</i>	→	<i>0.131**</i>
					<i>4.165</i>
	<i>Change readiness</i>				<i>Yes</i>

Note. β = Path coefficient; The *Italic* hypotheses represent indirect effects; **Significant at $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Underpinned by Lewin's (1947) change model, the present study argued that adaptability features initiate proactivity, which in turn enhances change readiness. The empirical results indicate that only three adaptability features (i.e. dealing with uncertainty, training and learning, and interpersonal adaptability) improve change readiness via proactivity. This means public sector employees are more ready for change if they exhibit proactivity stemming from their ability to (1) deal with uncertain situations, (2) work with different people, and (3) learn new knowledge and skills. Practically, these three adaptability features are crucial for public sector employees to thrive in dynamic circumstances, especially in today's Malaysian public sector. To be ready for any change, human resource (HR) managers and practitioners should ensure that their workplace has a system to support knowledge sharing and empower employees to learn from others. Adaptability leads employees to proactively experiment with new methods of completing their tasks. If employees stay adaptable and proactive, they will be flexible in confronting any change; thus, organisational change efforts would succeed.

Theoretically, the present study adds value to the change readiness literature by shedding light on the connections between adaptability features, proactivity, and change readiness that have been neglected by previous scholars. Moreover, this study extends the application of Lewin's (1947) change model to a wider range of organisational contexts and respondents. In particular, it illuminates how employees' proactivity is a result of their ability to adapt, as well as how proactivity translates such adaptability into change readiness in the context of the public sector. Overall, the study has provided empirical evidence that aligns this study's arguments with the assumptions of Lewin's (1947) change model.

Nevertheless, this study is subject to limitations. Though it was found that adaptability features substantially explained the variance in change readiness ($R^2 = 52.7\%$), upcoming research should incorporate other relevant factors to better understand what impacts proactivity and change readiness. Future studies may also expand this study's framework to different contexts to enrich the change management literature.

In conclusion, this study has presented empirical evidence that contributes to the limited literature on the links between adaptability features, proactivity, and change readiness. Specifically, this study established three adaptability features that significantly spur individuals' proactivity and thereby indirectly enhance their change readiness in the dynamic context of the Malaysian public sector.

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