

How change agents build and sustain their professional resilience: An identity-based process perspective

There is no doubt that being an organizational change agent is difficult work, and that role-related challenges may take a personal toll. These challenges may be particularly salient for individuals who have been hired to help their organization interpret and respond to shifts in outside pressures – such as increasing calls for business to address climate change, water scarcity, human rights, and poverty – but who have been given only limited authority to do so. Because their mandate is often ostensible, change agents' work may fall outside of a justifiable basis for conferred legitimacy, resource allocation and high-level action (Dougherty and Heller, 1994; Sonenshein, 2006), which may lead to a reduced pace and scale of change, as well as to identity and role conflict. As a result, change agents may experience guilt and self-doubt in his or her ability to effect change, significant stress (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017; Walker, 2012), periodic battles with burnout (Meyerson and Scully, 1995), and even decisions to relinquish their vision for organizational transformation (Hambrick, Geletkanycz, and Fredrickson, 1993), and instead acquiesce to the prevailing logic of managing business as usual. In light of this role-related adversity, how are some change agents able to restore their resolve and continue to mobilize organizational change?

To tackle this question, I briefly turn to the literature on change agents, professional identity, and professional resilience. To note, my conceptualization of resilience is developmental in that an entity, such as individual, “not only survives/thrives by positively adjusting to current adversity, but also in the process of responding strengthens its capabilities to make future adjustments” (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003: 5); as my study evolves, my definition of professional resilience will likely continue to be informed and framed by research on individual resilience, ecosystems resilience, change agency, positive psychology, and identity research. However, for the purpose of this short summary, I follow Kossek and Perrigino's (2016: 764) definition: “the synthesis of an individual's traits, capacities or coping strategies, and processes for positively adapting to adversity and risk in ones' occupational and organizational contexts.” The literature on change agency points to the many challenges that change agents face in enacting change, and the types of change they undertake (Meyerson and Scully, 2005; Wright, Nyberg, and Grant, 2012; Wright and Nyberg, 2012; Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, and Willmott, 2005; Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Hartley, Bennington, and Binns, 1997). Research also suggests that professional identity work and the construction of certain identities, or ‘characters’ may be central to how change agents overcome these challenges. According to Kolb and Williams (2003) identity work is particularly important for change agents, in terms of giving meaning to, and providing coherent self-narratives of, their organizational and personal experiences and expectations. Relatedly, identity work can be used to “recalibrate their expectations and find meaning in the communicative negotiation of difficult structural, organizational and political situations” that, perhaps paradoxically, quells their commitment to their work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017: 612). Steckler and Waddock (2018) also find that social change agents can enhance their personal well-being and resolve by participating in reflective, relational, and inspirational retreats. While this literature on professional identity work and retreats helps us to understand how change agents might sustain themselves and thus their change efforts, it is not yet clear how these individuals develop and deploy other resources, and what points in time, to cultivate and manage their professional resilience (Kossek and Perrigino, 2016; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2002).

To deepen our understanding of resilience, I have elected to undertake an abductive qualitative study of how corporate sustainability change agents develop and sustain their professional resilience over time. These sustainability change agents may occupy internal positions of Chief Sustainability Officer, Vice President of Sustainability, Director of Sustainability, or Sustainability Manager, and are often charged to make their “corporations ‘sustainable’ and ‘good corporate citizens’” (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014: 201). However, despite such formal mandates, sustainability change agents typically face significant barriers to achieving organizational change in terms of their perceived legitimacy, their

influence, and their access to the resources they need to do their work. Sustainability change agents also face identity conflicts, sometimes questioning their own authenticity (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012;), and may feel detached not only from their core self and purpose but also from their organization and its members. This can lead to a drain on their psychological and physiological resources (Caza & Milton, 2012). The multiple cognitive and emotional job demands placed on sustainability change agents are likely to necessitate the cultivation of a rich repertoire of strategies to both cultivate and maintain professional resilience. To date, I have conducted 45 interviews with sustainability professionals who operate across organizational levels, sectors, geographic regions, and who have varying levels of experience, as well as differences in degrees of professional resilience. I intend to collect multiple interviews with these individuals over the next year, as well as to observe them as they undertake their work, and to invite them to participate in journaling exercises at various points in time. Furthermore, I have begun interviewing their colleagues to glean a better understanding of these change agents' externally perceived resilience levels. My analysis to date has focused on the role-related adversities that these change agents face, how they view themselves in relation to their role and others, and the resources that they develop and draw upon in undertaking their work. Based on ongoing data collection and analysis, I aim to develop a process model illustrating how resilience is activated, depleted, restored, broadened, and deepened.

Upon early analysis, I find that change agents readily call upon formative belief-shaping experiences as a way to cognitively reappraise situations, regulate emotions, and return to their core purpose, or vocational calling, which in turn acts as a resource (identity re-activating). Secondly, I find that these individuals embed themselves in sustainability networks and peer groups which, through the processes of collective identification and experience sharing, engender a deep sense of belonging and competency development, which may attenuate certain challenges they face (identity development and re-radicalizing). These networks also become a platform from which they begin to undertake collective change efforts, outside of their organizations, as a means to activate or fulfill aspects of their true selves, particularly when they are not able to achieve the pace and scale of change within their organizations (identity fulfilling). Finally, I find that resilient change agents transform their challenges into learning opportunities, and eventually micro proof points, which bolster their ability to influence change, and help them not only to overcome some of the challenges that hinder their progress and undermine their resilience, but also to grow through their response.

By attending to the key mechanisms that underpin resilience, I contribute to a more complete understanding of how change agents develop and maintain the professional resilience necessary to continue their systemic change efforts. That is, I build upon the relatively scarce body of management work on individual resilience to offer a comprehensive and developmental view of the construct and its relation to others. I also extend research on the work of individuals who deviate from socially scripted or highly institutionalized trajectories and shed light on how these individuals construct and sustain personally and socially validated, positive complex identities that contribute to resilience. Additionally, I introduce an undertheorized group of actors, whom I develop as 'sanctioned radicals', and how they cultivate and curate a robust set of strategies to effectively undertake their work, and how this links back to their resilience, and the identity of the group.

In this manuscript submission, which is, in essence, my evolving dissertation proposal, I briefly synthesize and integrate diverse streams of literature on change agency, individual and collective identity, and professional resilience. I then examine the defining attributes, antecedents, and outcomes of both developing and sustaining this resilience. Next, I present my research question and the methods and context I use to address it. From here, I present my preliminary findings, and their potential theoretical and practical implications. Lastly, I discuss my study's limitations, and finish with possible avenues for continued study and future inquiry.

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