

Impact of Corporate Communication on Employee Engagement with Change: Insights from the Telecommunication Sector of Pakistan

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the importance of corporate communication during an organisation's structural change across the telecommunication sector of Pakistan that has experienced persistent planned changes. Structural changes in the study includes mergers, acquisitions and divestitures, focusing on how change leadership and change management relate to employees' experience of the change processes and their outcomes across these change situations. Data was analysed through structural equation modelling employing the two-step method. Data were collected from telecommunication companies undergoing restructuring changes. Utilising Kurt Lewin's three-step model, the study found that effective communication of change (unfreezing) creates employee's readiness with change (moving) which then fosters employee engagement (refreezing). This study adds to the knowledge by suggesting the boundary conditions between corporate communication and employee's readiness such that the relationship of corporate communication and employee's readiness with change is stronger when employee's openness is high rather than low.

Key words: *Corporate Communication, Engagement, Readiness, Openness.*

Introduction

New challenges like globalisation, technology advancements, competition and changes in the market are continuously threatening every organisation (Hansen, 2018). This change is rampant and evident in technology-based organisations such as the telecommunication sector where rapid changes in technology put pressure on leaders to adjust their strategies. It is mandatory for organisations to adjust with change with the development of technology (Haqq & Natsir, 2019). Hughes (2011) indicated that the changes implemented by organisations fails at higher rate in response to the complexity of the employee's attitude which an organisation is facing and the reason behind it is attributed to poor communication from management to integrate the human side of the organisational change. The attitude of the employees is a basic building block in order to explain their behaviours. Attitude with respect to change means an employee's experience arouses responses and emotions during the change process which forms into attitude, and attitude can be in a positive (i.e. change readiness) or negative (i.e. resisting change) way (Lines, 2005). So for understanding the recipe for organisational success, it is essential to determine the behavioural origins of employee reactions to change. Based on the study of Mangundjayaa, Utoyoa and Wulandari (2015) it was realised that more than 50% of the organisation's change initiatives failed due to unsupportiveness of employees, uncertainties during change and employee's readiness to accept the change.

The importance of change management communication cannot be overruled in an organisational change context (Elving, 2005). Historically, change communication has been part of prominent change management models, be it the ten-step model of Kanter, Stein, & Jick (1992) or the eight-step process of Kotter (1996). In order to guide change agents to undertake and implement change, scholars of change management literature and practitioners have outlined certain tools and models (Lynett, 2015). The most prominent model in the literature of planned organisational change, is the three-step model of Kurt Lewin (Burnes, 2015; Burnes & Cooke, 2012). In an extremely global and demanding environment, the extraordinary practice of technology has enforced the telecommunication sector of Pakistan to be involve in structural changes, as it is the second largest sector that is involved in structural changes after the banking sector (Kanwal, Ahmad, Majid, & Nadeem, 2014). The strategic option of structural change firmly established as an attractive business strategy (Schuler & Jackson, 2001; Veldsman, 2002), though there are positive results allies with the structural changes such as growth and development; the sad side is that there is a disappointing consequence i.e. mismanagement of the human side of it (Cartwright and Schoenberg, 2006). Kansal & Chandani (2014) indicated that 80% of the mergers and acquisitions fail, due to the inadequate handling of change management. The main reason of the increased failure rate does not lie in the financial issues but in the employee's behaviour, attitude and issues related to it (Galpin & Herndon, 2007; Etschmaier, 2010, Bodam, 2000).

Although the Asian region is contributing a lot in world economy and facing organisational changes at rapid pace as compared to western regions, however, the sad story is that there is no unified theory for the change management, which may have originated from a truly Asian context (Poon & Rowley, 2010). Asian scholars have used western theories and validated those models in Asian contexts. Falkheimer (2014) highlighted that the internal communication has been taken as granted during the implementation phase. Managers are unaware of employee's feelings and think that managing employee's emotions is not professionalism and it is beyond their responsibility (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). The way in which employees frame the communication will influence its perception and behaviour, which ultimately results in reducing resistance and engaging employees in the process of change. (Dilling & Moser 2007). A recent study is one by Hadi Davardoost and Seyed Mohammad Javadi (2018). A case Study on Iranian Petrochemical Companies found a positive link between change communication and change implementation but the communication was measured in terms of the communication mode, communication frequency, and communication direction They suggested to test this relationship in other Asian countries specifically in the technology sector. De Vries *et al.*, (2011) specified constructs such as communication content, composition and style, which have been criticised due to theoretical weakness. A careful analysis of literature suggests that empirical studies regarding the relationship between leaders' communication strategy and change implementation are scarce and little evidence present is also from western countries (McKay, Kuntz, & Näswall, 2013; Vakola, 2014); this important link has been lacking from Asian countries. The present research is a step ahead, concentrating on the communication strategy in the context of implementing change as organisational change and is a communicative challenge; more specifically it can be said that ultimate achievement or disaster of a change initiative is partially reliant on how supervisors successfully communicate change issues to their subordinates (Jacobs, Van Witteloostuijn, & Christe-Zeyse, 2013). Whether employees resist or accept change is not only based on the organisational context, but actually depends on how employee experience communication during change (Schulz-Knappe, Koch, & Beckert, 2019). Literature indicates that a concrete or practical recommendation or strategies of communicating change to experts are predominantly missing. Goodman and Truss (2004) determine that both process and content of a communication strategy are important to the result.

As a result, we tried to build the dimensions of leader communication strategy with the highly specified theoretical foundation of the Kurt Lewin model of change. Most of the researchers have focused their attention towards the applicability of the Kurt Lewin's model, but not much attention and efforts have been made towards communication with change receptivity, and to implement change successfully within the organisation with the three steps of Kurt Lewin's model. Thus, this study attempts to fill this gap by contributing to the existing planned organisational structural change literature from the telecommunication sector of

Pakistan. Moreover, Welch (2011) reviewed the literature on employee engagement and communication. They concluded that there is great dearth of research on the relationship between corporate communication and engagement. This study also fills this gap by identifying the mechanism underpinning corporate communication and engagement. Kang and Sung (2017) also tested the relationship between corporate communication and engagement, however, they also stressed the need to retest it in other contexts. Therefore, this study, while answering to calls of different authors', tests corporate communication in the change management context.

The present study attempts to identify the starring role of corporate communication on employee's behaviour that ultimately implements the structural change through employee's engagement. The theoretical foundation of the present study and its hypothesis is the Kurt Lewin theory of change, which is a sophisticated measure to implement planned change within the organisations. His three-step model is widely being used in change literature as it delivers strong backing for managing the employee perceptions or human aspect during the change process. Managers have to worry about two aspects during the implementation of change, first is the driving forces that support change and the other is the resistance to change (Hossan 2015). The Kurt Lewin model was developed to intricate on the encouraging factors in order to recognise organisational structure and encourage for change (Hussain et al. 2016)

Hypothesis Development

McKay, Kuntz, and Näswall (2013) conducted a study from public and private sector organisations undergoing restructuring changes. They found that change communication has a greater influence on change readiness and decreases resistance to change. Haqq and Natsir (2019) collected data from Shariah banks (Islamic mode of banking) from East Java. Applying structural equation modelling through PLS SEM, they found that communication contributes to different components of readiness for change such as cognitive readiness, affect based readiness and intentional readiness. This study is significant in a sense that this found support for importance of communication in developing multidimensional readiness for change. Haqq and Natsir (2019) also believe that change implementation requires organisations to manage employee positive perceptions and this can only be achieved through corporate communication.

Organisational change requires reorganising the whole system as employees experience a gap between their expectations and new experiences (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). According to Bartunek (1984), this reorganisation requires an effective communication, as communication enable employees fill the gap and understand the true meaning associated with the change process. (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Klein (1996) even provided the evidence based on his experiences of a system-wide organisational change in several manufacturing

plants that communication can make the employees be involved during organisational change as he believed that the communication strategy can help employees deal with the difficulties that arise during the change process. The employee's level of readiness to change can be increased if employees explore their uncertainty, which is established in increasing support from the management for the acting of new behaviours (Welch, 2014). Leadership and management approaches to change has a significant effect on the reactions or receptive power of an individual employee (Fugate, Oreg, Michel, & By, 2013). A recent case study of a government agency in Europe aimed to investigate barriers to change implementation. After analysing qualitative and quantitative data, the study found a lack of proper communication as a major hindrance to employee readiness for change and subsequent implementation of change (Van Praet & Van Leuven, 2019). They further argued that communication is very less researched topic in change management literature. Armenakis and Harris (2002) also suggested organisations should put a major focus on devising change messages more tactfully so that a true picture of change intervention may be presented to the employees. Based on above discussion it is posited that:

H1: Corporate communication is positively associated with employee's readiness

Employee engagement is a vast domain that reflects synergetic interactions of employees with their organisation. Engagement is special level of commitment that symbolises emotional attachment of employees with organisation (Bin, 2015). This study proposes that the engagement is target specific, therefore there is need to test change engagement at the time of organisational changes. The prerequisite for a successful change implementation is the connection between communication and the creation of readiness for change in employees. One aim of communication during a change process that is the foundation of a successful implementation change, is to stop or decrease the resistance to change. Another aim is to diminish employee's uncertainty for their future position and thus build readiness for change (Elving, 2005). Literature suggests a positive association between employee acceptance and engagement with change both direct and reciprocal in cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies (Giallonardo, Wong, & Iwasiw, 2010; Granziera & Perera, 2019). Jimmieson, Terry, and Callan (2004) conducted a longitudinal study in which they collected data from a public sector organisation undergoing a regionalisation process. They found that employee readiness created through corporate communication was positively associated with employee engagement and satisfaction. Change readiness is the best mode to implement change within an organisation (Soumyaja, Kamlanabhan, & Bhattacharyya, 2015). Therefore, this paper hypothesises that:

H2: Employee's readiness is positively associated with employee's engagement

In the process of change implementation, employees' readiness for change is important and crucial. In many studies, employee readiness has been found as a precursor to change supportive behaviours (Bouckenooghe, Schwarz, & Minbashian, 2015). In the context of TQM implementation, a positive association found between readiness and TQM implementation. Moreover, readiness for change also mediated the positive link between organisational culture and TQM implementation (Haffar, Al-Karaghoul, Djebarni, & Gbadamosi, 2017; Haffar, Al-Karaghoul, & Ghoneim, 2013). A study from an Asian country found that readiness for change mediated the link between leadership and commitment to change (Santhidran, Chandran, & Borromeo, 2013). Bakari, Hunjra, and Niazi (2017) collected data from Pakistani health sector organisations, using the same three step model of Kurt Lewin, as is done by this study; they found that that readiness for change mediated the link between authentic leadership and behavioural support for change, although there is no study that may have tested readiness as a mediator between communication and engagement with change. However, having found ample support for readiness as a mediator, this study posits that:

H3: Employee Readiness positively mediates the relationship between corporate communication and Employee Engagement

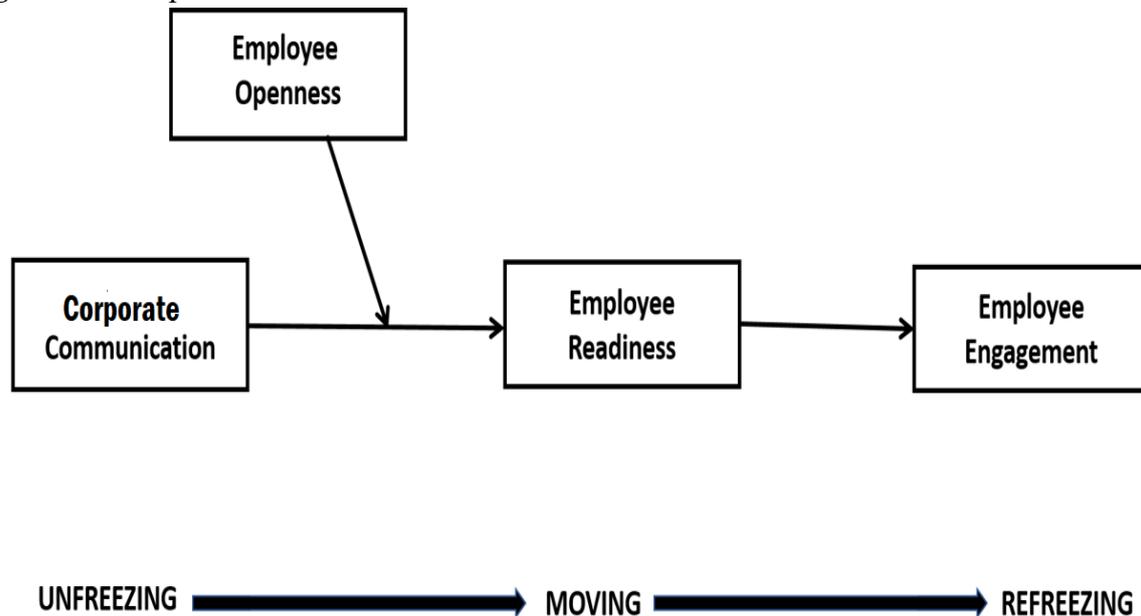
Literature suggests that employee trust, and employee readiness may have some boundary conditions; Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, and DiFonzo (2004) tested the role of communication in decreasing strain and turnover intention. Satisfaction mediated the link; however, this link was dependent upon the level of employee's openness to change. Employee openness is the state of mind where a person feels secure and safe in a new uncertain environment after the change. Although research takes openness to change sometimes as similar to readiness for change, it is in some way different from readiness as openness is willingness to analyse and listen to change messages. However readiness is a more mature feeling of being willing to accept, after thorough analysis, the change system and its likely effects. Employees open to the change will be enthusiastic about change, will be ready to accept it based on the felt advantages of the change (Devos, Buelens, & Bouckenooghe, 2007). Having said this, it is safe to think that openness can be created through sharing information and answering queries and uncertainties through communication and involvement. Wanberg and Banas (2000) conducted an empirical study to know the predictors and outcomes of openness to change. Among others, they found that when employees receive change specific information and are given the chance to share their views in change related decision-making, they experience more openness to change. Erwin and Garman (2010) correlated employees who are open and ready to alter their behaviours, can bring an achievement to the planned organisational changes. Employee's resistance to change can be overcome by increasing the receptive power of employees, which can be achieved by communication from the leaders in order to generate employee's trust (Smollan & Parry,

2011). Employees with a high degree of openness means more trust in top management and they feel that they will not be targeted negatively as they actually are open to believe that the intentions of the top management are trustworthy (Michaelis, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2009). According to Blau (1964) increase in trust in the supervisor would ultimately enhance employees' aspiration to respond to the organisation. Change readiness is the best mode to implement change within an organisation (Soumyaja, Kamlanabhan, & Bhattacharyya, 2015).

H4: The effect of corporate communication and employee readiness is stronger when employees are high on openness

Figure 1 specify the relationship of corporate communication and change implementation with a mediating construct of readiness representing the three stages of Kurt Lewin.

Figure1. Conceptual model



Method

Mergers, acquisitions and divestitures in the telecommunication sector is particularly the concern of the present study, specifically, the merger of PTCL & Ufone, Acquisition of Warid by Mobilink and the divestiture of Vimplecom shares by Telenor. As the respondents are dispersed geographically, the Web survey method is used. The study employed Stratified random sampling technique. Corporate Communication and Employee's Readiness scale was adapted from the work of Bouckennooghe, Devos, & Van den Broeck, (2009) from the dimension of quality of change communication and readiness for change respectively. Susskind et al. (1998) openness to change scale was used to assess attitudinal acceptance of

the structural change. Employee's Engagement scale was adapted from the work of "Utrecht Work Engagement Scale" developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006).

Results

Demographic detail presented in the table 1. In total 560 questionnaires were sent when considering the discarded questionnaire, the response rate of the study is 63.75%.

Table 1: Demographic Details

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	259	72.5
Female	98	27.5
Total	357	100.0
Cellular Mobile Operator (Company)		
Mobilink	108	30.3
Telenor	77	21.6
PTCL	93	26.1
Ufone	79	22.0
Total	357	100.0
Province		
Sindh	106	29.8
Punjab	94	26.3
Baluchistan	83	23.2
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	74	20.7
Total	357	100.0
Education		
Bachelor's Degree	117	32.8
Master's Degree	221	61.9
Doctorate Degree	19	05.3
Total	357	100.0
Employment Tenure		
Less than a year	43	12.0
2-5 years	172	48.2
6-10 years	112	31.4
11-15 years	28	07.8
More than 15	2	00.6
Total	357	100.0

In the measurement model analysis, Table 2 indicates that the outer loading is greater than 0.50 (Hair et al., 2017) Hence this establishes indicator reliability. The composite reliability is higher than the 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006) hence it establishes internal consistency reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2006) hence this establishes convergent validity. Table 3 indicates the establishment of HTMT, as values are greater than 0.85.

Table 2: outer loadings, CR, AVE

Construct	Items	Outer Loadings	CR	AVE
Corporate Communication	ECOM1	0.882	0.950	0.760
	ECOM2	0.903		
	ECOM3	0.901		
	ECOM4	0.852		
	ECOM5	0.822		
	ECOM6	0.869		
Employee's Engagement	EE1	0.723	0.934	0.739
	EE2	0.896		
	EE3	0.894		
	EE4	0.907		
	EE5	0.865		
Employee's Openness	EO1	0.715	0.875	0.638
	EO2	0.808		
	EO3	0.875		
	EO4	0.790		
Employee's Readiness	ER1	0.738	0.915	0.684
	ER2	0.877		
	ER3	0.877		
	ER4	0.856		
	ER5	0.778		

Table 3: HTMT

	1	2	3	4
Corporate Communication				
Employee's Engagement	0.613			
Employee's Openness	0.621	0.748		
Employee's Readiness	0.715	0.736	0.598	

Study employed bootstrapping method with 5000 resamples (Hair et al., 2017) using Bias-Corrected and Accelerated (BCa) Bootstrap with one tailed test, significance level 0.05.

Table 4: Significance and Relevance of Path Coefficients

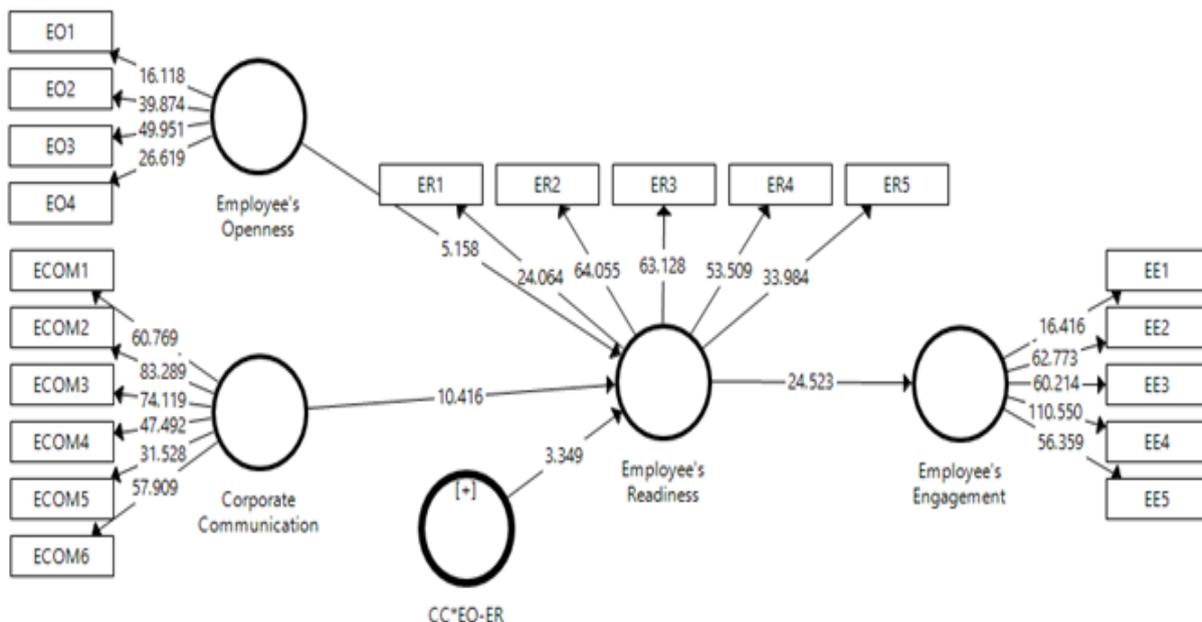
	Hypothesised Relationship	Beta	Std Error	T Value	P Value	(5%)	(95%)	F ²
H1	CC → ER	0.518	0.050	10.268	0.000	0.430	0.592	0.361
H2	ER → EE	0.677	0.028	24.094	0.000	0.622	0.717	0.844
H3	CC → ER → EE	0.350	0.039	8.976	0.000	0.278	0.408	--
H4	CC*EO-ER → ER	0.122	0.038	3.186	0.001	0.060	0.167	0.031

Sig <0.05 (one tailed test)

Table 4 specifies that corporate communication is positively and significantly associated to employee’s readiness ($\beta = 0.518$, t-value 10.268, $p < 0.05$) with CI [0.430, 0.592] not overlapping the zero value (Preacher and Hayes 2008) indicating acceptance of H1. The effect on the size of the relationship (f^2 0.361) is large. Employee’s readiness has a positive and significant effect on employee’s engagement ($\beta = 0.677$, t-value 24.094, $p < 0.05$). CI [0.622, 0.717] is not overlapping the zero value, indicating the acceptance of H2. The effect size (f^2 0.390) is large.

The mediating effect of employee readiness indicate that the indirect effect was positively significant ($\beta = 0.350$, t- value 8.976 and $p < 0.05$), with CI [0.278, 0.408] not overlapping the zero value in between indicating acceptance of H3.

Figure 2. SMART PLS Model



This study provides the support that employee’s openness exerts a positive and significant moderating effect ($\beta = -0.122$, t-value = 3.186 and $p < 0.05$). CI [0.060, 0.167] indicates acceptance of H4. The effect size of 0.031 is small (Cohen ,1988)

Figure 3. Interaction Plot

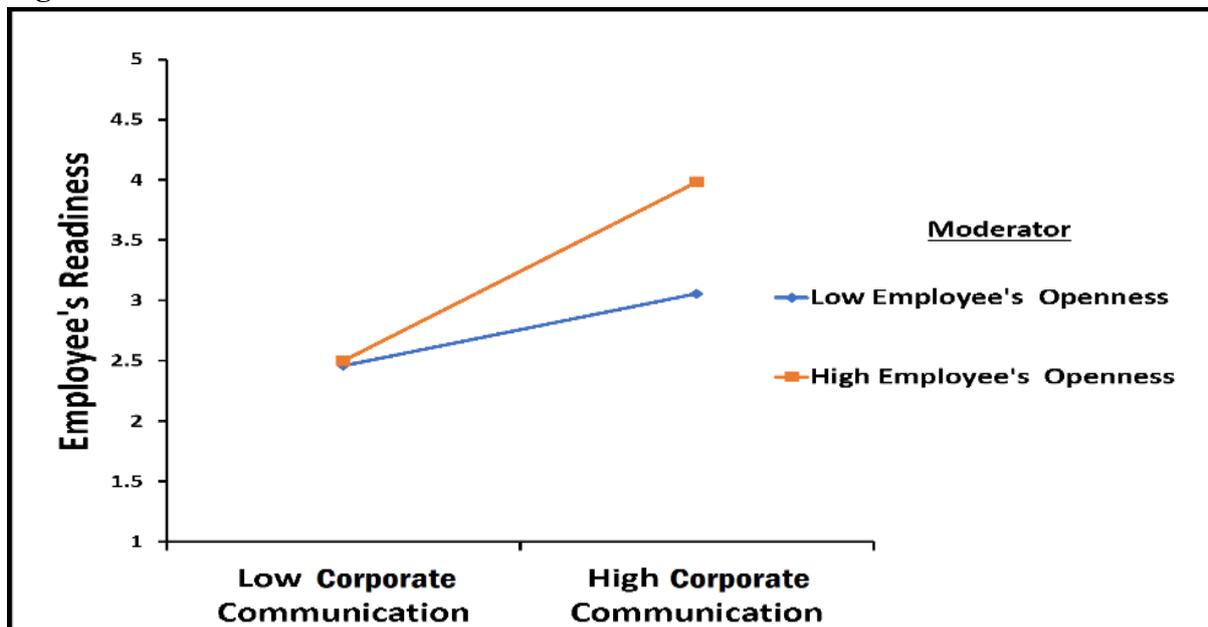


Figure 3 represent that employee's openness significantly moderated the relationship between corporate communication and employee's readiness suggesting that if they are high on openness, it increases their readiness towards accepting change. The graph represents the synergistic effect where higher levels of employee's openness enhance the effect of corporate communication on employee's readiness (Cohen et al., 2003).

The model explains that 45.7% is of total variance in employee's engagement and 46.8% is in employee's readiness, which shows a moderate level of R-square Chin (1998). The study indicates the predictive relevance of the model as the Q square value of all endogenous variables is above zero. (Hair et al, 2018). Employee engagement (0.364), Employee's Readiness (0.307).

Discussion

The first hypothesis has found a positive relationship of corporate communication and change readiness. This finding is in line with the literature that corporate communication may help employees to create readiness as a recent case study of a government agency in Europe aimed to investigate barriers to change implementation. After analysing qualitative and quantitative data study, it was found that a lack of proper communication was a major hindrance to employee readiness for change and subsequent implementation of change (Van Praet & Van Leuven, 2019).

The second hypothesis found a positive relationship of employee's readiness and employee's engagement. This finding is in line with the literature that when employees are ready to

accept the change, it makes them motivated and ready to get engaged in the change process, which ultimately results in the implementation of change. Men & Stacks, (2013) believed that it is the employees with whom the organisation has the adjoining connection and it is their behaviour that directly contributes with the success of the organisation.

The third hypothesis found a positive mediating role of an employee's readiness for change between corporate communication and an employee's engagement. This finding is supported by empirical findings from the literature, as Moore (2014) stated that communication helps employees to get engaged in the process of change and hence results in better change implementation. It is communication that informs and motivates the employees by creating their acceptance for change and then help them to move forward and be the part of the change process (Barrett, 2002). As researchers, we believe that a manager's communication has always been consistently linked with employee engagement (Men, 2014a, 2014b). Christensen (2014) supports the notion and argues that communication plays a vital role while going through a change process within the organisation. Successful implementation of change is reliant on the ability of the organisation to change the behaviour of their employees positively that can be ultimately achieved through corporate communication (Lewis, 2006).

The fourth hypothesis found the interaction effect of employee's openness, which indicates a strong relationship of corporate communication and employee's readiness when there is high employee's openness. This finding is supported by the literature because it is believed that during communication, employees are of different nature about how they perceive that message (Nzitunga, 2016) and the literature has witnessed the communication strategies from the past in order to assist employees for change implementation and growth of the organisation (Kang, Jia & Ju, 2016), although there is enough support for openness to experience and its moderating role in empirical literature. Openness to change is a relatively new construct and it is gaining popularity as a separate construct having distinct effects. Wanberg and Banas (2000) found that the communication package containing information related to change and employee participation in decision-making strongly related to higher levels of employee openness to change. The positive implication of the change receptivity will develop an attitude of the employees to willingly accept and support the goal of the planned change. The higher level of employee's readiness towards change will make them more committed and will show more supportive behaviour in the change process (Holt et al, 2007).

Limitations & Future Direction

A cross-sectional design adopted, the future researchers may consider a longitudinal design. It is quite difficult to generalise the results for the study, as the sample of the study was mainly driven from only telecommunication sector of Pakistan. It would be appropriate for



future researchers to include other sectors of Pakistan in the sample of the study for better generalisation of the findings, particularly further investigation of the phenomenon is encouraged in product-based industries. The future researcher can use a leadership style as a moderator to enhance the literature in terms of developing positive employee's behaviour.

Conclusion

Communication plays a vital role in developing a relationship with the employees as when management communicates the change information with the employees; it helps them to encourage employee's engagement in the change process. Two-way communication encourages to voice their concerns during the change process and inspires the employees to get confident and eradicates the uncertainty which ultimately helps them to create readiness to change, which results in the successful implementation of change process. Structural changes are an important strategic choice for organisations in order to survive and prosper, but the progression in managing that change cannot be accomplished without improving and considering the understanding of the human side or employee's approachability; so focusing on the employee's behaviour and attitude can provide the perception of understanding the challenges faced by structural changes.



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