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Is Employee Resistance to Change Really the Problem? Power, Leadership, and Employee Agency in Organizational Transformation: A Narrative Review

Original Article

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Abstract

Employee resistance to change is frequently framed as the primary obstacle to organizational transformation, yet contemporary literature suggests this framing is overly narrow. This narrative review examines whether resistance is better understood as a reaction shaped by power relations, leadership practice, and employee agency during organizational change. Using a qualitative narrative review approach, this paper synthesizes recent evidence across five themes: conceptualizations of resistance, power and politics, leadership and change reactions, employee agency and voice, and contextual moderators. The literature demonstrates that resistance is variably framed as a barrier to implementation, a sensemaking response to uncertainty and identity disruption, and a legitimate form of feedback or dissent that can improve change design. Power-laden change processes, particularly top-down control and symbolic participation, intensify resistance or push it underground. Conversely, participative, inclusive, and transparent leadership reduce resistance primarily through trust, communication quality, psychological safety, and employee involvement. The review concludes that employee resistance is often a diagnostic signal of flawed change processes rather than the root problem itself. Organizations are more likely to achieve sustainable transformation when they treat resistance as meaningful feedback and create voice-supportive, identity-sensitive, and power-aware change processes.

Keywords: Employee Resistance, Organizational Change, Power Relations, Leadership Practice, Employee Agency.

1. Introduction

Resistance to change has long been presented as a central barrier to successful transformation, often linked to fear, mistrust, uncertainty, loss of control, and job insecurity (Noroozi et al., 2024; Tu & Zou, 2024; Hubbard, 2023). This conventional view positions employees as the primary source of implementation failure, framing their reluctance as an individual deficit that must be overcome through persuasion or coercion. While this perspective remains common in implementation-oriented settings, it risks reducing a complex organizational phenomenon to a simplistic attribution of blame (Kouri et al., 2025; Mikel-Hong et al., 2024). Such a reductionist framing not only obscures the structural and relational dynamics that shape employee responses but also limits the repertoire of managerial interventions to communication campaigns and compliance mechanisms.

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Recent studies suggest a broader and more nuanced interpretation. Resistance may reflect how employees make sense of disrupted roles, identities, and power relations during change (Akella & Khoury, 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024). It may also operate as legitimate voice, surfacing risks, ethical concerns, weak consultation, or impractical implementation plans that management has overlooked (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Rath & Jena, 2024; Arif & Windarsari, 2026). This reframing shifts attention from the question of how to suppress resistance to the question of what resistance reveals about the change process itself. Consequently, the analytical focus moves from individual attitudes to the interaction between managerial framing, structural conditions, and employees' interpretations of threat, fairness, and legitimacy.

Accordingly, this review asks: Is employee resistance really the problem, or is it more often a symptom of power imbalance, weak leadership, and constrained employee agency? (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025; O'Hara, 2025; Sánchez et al., 2023; Kim & Leach, 2020). The scope covers recent qualitative, mixed-method, and empirical studies across sectors, with attention to resistance framings, micropolitics, leadership, voice, identity work, and contextual factors (Nowak, 2023; Mekonnen & Bayissa, 2023; Niquen-Levy & Bustamante-Pimentel, 2025; Valtonen & Holopainen, 2025). By synthesizing evidence from diverse methodological and sectoral contexts, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of resistance that transcends the conventional barrier metaphor.

The central argument advanced here is that resistance should not be reduced to opposition or noncompliance. Rather, it should be analyzed as a socially constructed, context-dependent response that may represent defensive coping, sensemaking, or diagnostic voice depending on how change is led and experienced (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2022; O'Hara, 2025; Hay et al., 2021; Burnes, 2015). This argument has significant implications for both theory and practice, suggesting that the effective management of change requires a fundamental reorientation from overcoming resistance to understanding and engaging with it.

2. Literature Review

Three concepts are essential for interpreting this literature. First, resistance is not a single behavior; studies describe it as visible opposition, silence, withdrawal, cynicism, workarounds, minimum compliance, or alternative voice (Goel et al., 2024; Sump et al., 2026; Huang et al., 2020). This behavioral heterogeneity suggests that what is commonly labeled as resistance encompasses a range of phenomena that may serve different functions and require different responses. Second, power matters because change is implemented through authority, discourse, participation structures, and control over meaning, resources, and decisions (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025; Ernst & Koll, 2024; Pye, 2005). Power operates not only through formal hierarchical authority but also through the subtle mechanisms of sensegiving, agenda-setting, and the construction of legitimacy. Third, agency refers to employees' capacity to influence change through speaking up, reframing messages, improvising, co-creating, or preserving valued identities under pressure (Goel et al., 2024; Capizzo et al., 2024; Mühlemann et al., 2022). Recognizing employee agency challenges the passive recipient narrative and opens space for understanding how employees actively shape change outcomes.

Taken together, these concepts suggest that resistance emerges not only from employee attitudes but from the interaction between managerial framing, structural conditions, and employees' interpretations of threat, fairness, and legitimacy (O'Hara, 2025; Hay et al., 2021; Niemeyer & Herrmann, 2026). This interactionist perspective moves beyond the dichotomy

of resistance as either an individual or a structural phenomenon, instead emphasizing the dynamic and relational nature of change processes.

2.1. Conceptualizations of Resistance to Change

Recent literature does not support one fixed definition of resistance (Gonzalez et al., 2022). In many studies, resistance remains a barrier associated with impaired implementation, lower readiness, reduced job satisfaction, and innovation loss (Nowak, 2023; Kouri et al., 2025; Zuperkiene et al., 2023). These studies typically adopt a managerial perspective, measuring resistance in terms of its negative impact on organizational outcomes and treating it as a problem to be solved. However, qualitative and mixed-method work increasingly reframes resistance as a response to uncertainty, threatened identity, and weak involvement (Akella & Khoury, 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024). From this perspective, resistance is not an irrational reaction but a meaningful response to legitimate concerns that employees perceive as unaddressed.

Several studies further argue that resistance can generate feedback, alternative perspectives, and learning (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Rath & Jena, 2024). This is especially visible where employees challenge impractical or ethically questionable initiatives rather than change itself (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024). Such findings suggest that resistance may function as a form of organizational voice that, if properly channeled, can improve the quality of change design and implementation. Taken together, these findings suggest that "resistance" often compresses distinct phenomena that should be analytically separated: obstruction, emotional defense, and constructive dissent (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Cieslak & Valor, 2025; Dipoatmodjo et al., 2026). This analytical separation is crucial for developing targeted and appropriate responses to different forms of resistance.

2.2. Power, Politics, and Control

Power is central to change outcomes (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025). Studies highlight power-over through unilateral control, power-with through inclusive dialogue, and power-to through enabling others' capacity to act (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025; van Baarle et al., 2021). These different modalities of power have distinct implications for how employees experience and respond to change initiatives. Where change is symbolically participative but substantively unilateral, resistance tends to intensify or move underground (Rosenback & Svensson, 2025; Hassan & Kodouda, 2023). This finding is particularly significant because it suggests that the mere appearance of participation, without genuine power-sharing, may be more damaging than the absence of participation altogether.

Ethnographic and public-sector studies show that hidden resistance can occur through bureaucracy, delay, workarounds, and minimum compliance rather than overt confrontation (Hassan & Kodouda, 2023; Huang et al., 2020). These subtle forms of resistance are often more difficult to detect and address than overt opposition, yet they can be equally damaging to change implementation. Health-system and reform research similarly shows micropolitics around values, gains, losses, and professional dominance (Waring et al., 2023; Sheikh & Ghaffar, 2021). Leadership communication is also political because it constructs narratives that define what change means, whose voice counts, and whether dissent is legitimate (Pye, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010). The political dimension of change communication highlights the importance of examining not only what is communicated but also how communication practices shape the distribution of voice and influence.

2.3. Leadership and Change Reactions

Leadership influences resistance less through command than through trust, legitimacy, and climate (Sánchez et al., 2023; Zainab et al., 2022). Transformational leadership is negatively associated with resistance and positively associated with readiness, openness, and support for change (Sánchez et al., 2023; Mekonnen & Bayissa, 2023). These effects are partly mediated by trust in the leader, organizational trust, follower openness, and self-efficacy (Sánchez et al., 2023; Zainab et al., 2022; Bayraktar & Jimenez, 2020; Groves, 2020). The mediating role of trust is particularly important because it suggests that leadership effects on resistance are not direct but operate through the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers.

Participative, inclusive, and empowering leadership styles show similar patterns (Katsaros, 2025; Neill et al., 2020; Santosa et al., 2025). Concrete behaviors include involving employees in decisions, maintaining open communication, appreciating differences, delegating appropriately, and fostering a trusting atmosphere (Neill et al., 2020; Khassawneh, 2025; Riu et al., 2026). These behaviors are not merely techniques for reducing resistance but represent a fundamental orientation toward employees as valued stakeholders rather than passive recipients of change. The consistency of findings across different leadership styles suggests that the common underlying mechanism is the quality of the relationship between leaders and employees.

2.4. Employee Agency, Voice, and Identity Work

Employees are not passive recipients of change (Goel et al., 2024). Agency appears through promotive and prohibitive voice, tactical reframing, target-switching, improvisation, discretionary effort, and identity reconstruction (Goel et al., 2024; Capizzo et al., 2024; Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2025). However, agency affects outcomes only when organizations provide protections and channels for it, such as consultation, confidentiality, corrective action, and feedback loops (Kim & Leach, 2020; Mazzei et al., 2025). This finding highlights the conditional nature of employee agency: it is not simply a function of individual disposition but depends on organizational structures and practices that either enable or constrain it.

Identity work is particularly important. Resistance is often intensified when transformation threatens professional autonomy, historical group identity, or identity continuity (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2025; Mühlemann et al., 2022; Ferrari, 2026). By contrast, identity-sensitive leadership and credible superordinate identities can support adaptation and commitment (van der Steen, 2022; Borlaug et al., 2023; Windarsari & Arif, 2026). The identity dimension of change is often overlooked in conventional change management approaches, yet it may be one of the most powerful predictors of how employees respond to transformation.

2.5. Contextual Moderators

Resistance patterns vary by culture, sector, and change intensity (Alshaikh et al., 2026). Developmental, supportive, clan, and adhocracy-like cultures are generally more favorable to readiness and commitment (Tsalits et al., 2022; Prajogo et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2023). Hierarchical and market-oriented settings are less supportive and often associated with lower satisfaction or weaker change-supportive intentions (Tran, 2021; Vlahović & Janićijević, 2025). These cultural variations suggest that change strategies developed in one context may not transfer directly to another, highlighting the need for context-sensitive approaches to change management.

Public-sector and healthcare settings face extra bureaucracy, stakeholder complexity, and strain (Niquen-Levy & Bustamante-Pimentel, 2025; Al-Tehewey et al., 2021; Hajjar et al., 2025). High-magnitude, rapid, digital, and AI-related change elevates uncertainty,

technostress, and job insecurity, which heighten resistance risk (Kim & Lee, 2025; Cieslak & Valor, 2025; Mubarik, 2025; Bausch et al., 2024). The accelerating pace of technological change, particularly in the context of digital and AI transformation, introduces new dimensions of uncertainty and threat that require renewed attention to the human side of change.

Drawing on the reviewed literature, Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework illustrating how power dynamics, leadership practices, and employee agency shape resistance to organizational change. The framework also highlights the role of contextual factors in influencing how resistance emerges and develops during organizational transformation.

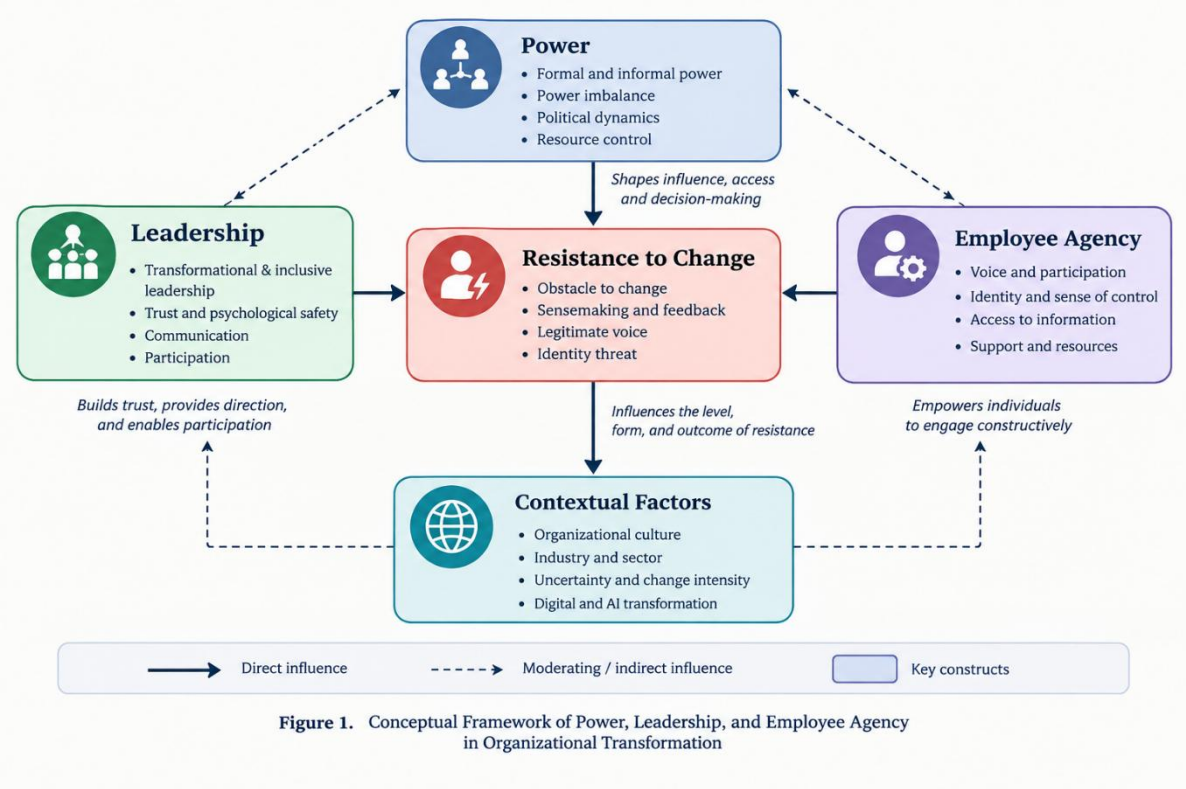


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Power, Leadership, and Employee Agency in Organizational Transformation

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationships between power, leadership, employee agency, and resistance to change in organizational transformation. Power dynamics influence access to resources, decision-making processes, and employees' perceptions of organizational change. Leadership practices, particularly transparent communication, inclusion, trust-building, and psychological safety, may shape how employees interpret and respond to change. Meanwhile, employee agency, expressed through voice, participation, and the exercise of individual identity, highlights that resistance may represent more than opposition; it may also constitute feedback or an attempt to influence organizational decisions.

The framework further emphasizes the role of contextual factors, including organizational culture, sectoral characteristics, uncertainty, and digital transformation. These factors may influence how power is exercised, how leadership is experienced, and how employees express resistance. Accordingly, the framework conceptualizes resistance to change as a context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the interaction of organizational structures, leadership practices, and employee agency, rather than as an inherently negative employee response. As a conceptual synthesis of the reviewed literature, the framework provides an

analytical lens for interpreting the different meanings and implications of resistance during organizational transformation.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative narrative review design to interpret recent literature on resistance to change, with emphasis on power, leadership, and employee agency (Neill et al., 2020; Erwin & Garman, 2010; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). A narrative review is appropriate here because the evidence base is conceptually diverse and methodologically heterogeneous, including qualitative cases, ethnographies, surveys, mixed-method studies, and conceptual frameworks (Akella & Khoury, 2022; Weis, 2025; Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025). Unlike systematic reviews that prioritize homogeneity and statistical aggregation, narrative reviews are better suited to synthesizing diverse evidence and generating interpretive insights.

The review scope prioritizes studies from the last five years that address organizational transformation, employee resistance, readiness, voice, communication, power, and leadership across sectors (Kouri et al., 2025; Sheikh & Ghaffar, 2021; Abou El Karam et al., 2024; Hajjar et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2025). The screening logic grouped studies into five themes: conceptualizations of resistance, power and politics, leadership, employee agency, and contextual moderators (Akella & Khoury, 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024; Borlaug et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2023). This thematic grouping was developed inductively through an iterative process of reading, coding, and comparing findings across studies.

The synthesis approach was thematic and interpretive rather than statistical. Findings were compared across settings and methods to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and practical implications (Gonzalez et al., 2022; O'Hara, 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Zulkarnain et al., 2024; Rafferty et al., 2013). This approach allowed for the identification of convergent findings across diverse studies while also attending to contradictions and tensions that reveal important nuances in the literature.

3.1. Method Section 1: Data Selection and Screening

A systematic search was conducted across major databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search included "resistance to change," "organizational transformation," "power," "leadership," "employee voice," and "agency." Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2020 and 2026. Exclusion criteria included non-empirical studies, book chapters, and articles not directly related to organizational change. A total of 86 articles were initially identified, and after screening titles and abstracts, 45 articles were selected for full-text review.

3.2. Method Section 2: Thematic Analysis

The selected articles were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. Data were extracted and coded inductively, leading to the identification of five overarching themes: (1) conceptualizations of resistance, (2) power and politics, (3) leadership and change reactions, (4) employee agency and voice, and (5) contextual moderators. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of resistance to change.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Thematic Synthesis of Recent Evidence

The synthesis of the literature reveals that resistance is a multi-meaning phenomenon rather than a singular behavior. Table 1 presents a summary of the key themes, their main patterns, implications, and supporting evidence. As shown in the table, the evidence consistently points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of resistance that goes beyond the simple barrier metaphor.

Table 1. Thematic Synthesis of Recent Evidence

Theme	Main Pattern	Key Implications	Evidence
Resistance Framing	Resistance appears as a barrier, sensemaking, and voice	Managers should diagnose before suppressing	Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Akella & Khoury, 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024
Power and Politics	Unilateral control and hidden micropolitics intensify resistance	Change design must address power asymmetry and legitimacy	Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025; O'Hara, 2025; Ernst & Koll, 2024; Rosenback & Svensson, 2025; Hassan & Kodouda, 2023
Leadership Pathways	Trust, inclusion, and communication reduce resistance	Leadership should be relational, not merely directive	Sánchez et al., 2023; Zainab et al., 2022; Katsaros, 2025; Neill et al., 2020
Agency Mechanisms	Voice, improvisation, and identity work influence outcomes when supported	Build formal and informal participation structures	Goel et al., 2024; Capizzo et al., 2024; Mühlemann et al., 2022
Contextual Moderators	Culture, sector, and change intensity alter reactions	No one-size-fits-all change strategy	Tsalits et al., 2022; Al-Tehewey et al., 2021; Kim & Lee, 2025

Source: author analysis

The table reveals that each theme captures a distinct dimension of the resistance phenomenon, yet they are interconnected in important ways. For instance, the power and politics theme highlights how structural conditions shape the expression of resistance, while the leadership pathways theme emphasizes the relational mechanisms through which power is enacted. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding resistance as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon.

Resistance as barrier, sensemaking, and voice.

The most consistent result is that resistance is multi-meaning rather than singular (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Some studies still treat it as harmful to implementation, especially in healthcare and operational settings (Kouri et al., 2025; Zuperkiene et al., 2023). However, qualitative studies show employees interpreting change through loss, uncertainty, and role reconstruction, which positions resistance as sensemaking rather than irrational opposition (Akella & Khoury, 2022; Rath & Jena, 2024). Other work shows resistance functioning as warning, feedback, or ethical challenge (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Rath & Jena, 2024). These divergent framings suggest that the same behavior may serve different functions depending on the context and the meanings that actors attach to it.

Power relations and political dynamics.

Resistance is strongly shaped by how power is used during transformation (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025; O'Hara, 2025). Subtle managerial control, unilateral sensegiving, and symbolic participation reduce trust and learning, while inclusive conversations increase engagement (O'Hara, 2025; Ernst & Koll, 2024; Rosenback & Svensson, 2025). Hidden resistance is especially visible in bureaucratic settings through workarounds and minimum compliance (Hassan & Kodouda, 2023; Huang et al., 2020). These findings underscore the importance of examining the micropolitics of change, including the subtle ways in which power is exercised and resisted in everyday organizational interactions.

Leadership pathways.

The strongest leadership pattern is indirect influence via trust, safety, and communication (Sánchez et al., 2023; Zainab et al., 2022). Participative and inclusive communication climates improve affective commitment, behavioral support, and participation (Katsaros, 2025; Neill et al., 2020). Transformational leadership appears more robust than transactional leadership for readiness to change (Mekonnen & Bayissa, 2023; Al-Tahitah et al., 2021). These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness in change contexts is less about the specific style adopted and more about the quality of the relationship that leaders establish with their followers.

Employee agency mechanisms.

Agency appears through voice, tactical reframing, anonymity use, improvisation, and identity reconstruction (Goel et al., 2024; Kim & Leach, 2020; Capizzo et al., 2024). These mechanisms matter most when organizations support consultation, information sharing, speech protections, and corrective response (Mazzei et al., 2025; Apalowo & Nukpezah, 2025). Identity continuity also matters because employees adapt better when change does not erase valued selves (Mühlemann et al., 2022; Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026). The recognition of employee agency has important implications for change management practice, suggesting that organizations should focus on creating conditions that enable constructive agency rather than simply trying to overcome resistance.

Contextual moderators.

Supportive and developmental cultures are more favorable to acceptance and readiness (Tsalits et al., 2022; Prajogo et al., 2021). Public-sector and healthcare transformations face added complexity from bureaucracy and strain (Niquen-Levy & Bustamante-Pimentel, 2025; Hajjar et al., 2025). Digital and AI change adds technostress, vulnerability, and capability gaps, making communication and training more critical (Valtonen & Holopainen, 2025; Mubarik, 2025; Bausch et al., 2024). These contextual factors highlight the need for contingency approaches that adapt change strategies to the specific characteristics of the organizational and sectoral context.

In summary, the thematic synthesis presented in Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted nature of resistance to change. The evidence consistently demonstrates that resistance cannot be reduced to a single cause or manifestation but must be understood as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon that requires differentiated responses.

4.2. Discussion

The findings support a reframing of resistance. Rather than seeing it only as noncompliance, resistance is more accurately understood as a response to how change is designed, narrated, and governed (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; O'Hara, 2025; Rath & Jena, 2024). In this sense, resistance can serve as a diagnostic voice, signaling poor legitimacy, threatened identity, low trust, or exclusion from meaningful participation (Mühlemann et al., 2022; Hay et al., 2021). This reframing has profound implications for how organizations approach change. If resistance is understood as a symptom rather than a cause, then the appropriate response is not to suppress it but to diagnose and address the underlying conditions that give rise to it.

Leadership emerges as a relational and communicative process rather than a purely positional one (Neill et al., 2020; Santosa et al., 2025). Leaders reduce resistance when they create psychologically safe participation, communicate transparently, and show procedural inclusion (Katsaros, 2025; Ge, 2020). Conversely, top-down control may secure short-term compliance but often increases hidden resistance and weakens organizational learning (Rosenback & Svensson, 2025; Hassan & Kodouda, 2023). This finding challenges the conventional wisdom that strong leadership in times of change means decisive, top-down direction. Instead, it suggests that effective change leadership requires the ability to create conditions in which employees feel safe to voice concerns and contribute to the change process.

Power is therefore not a background condition but a core explanatory mechanism (Biyagutane & Clegg, 2025). Employees' voice and agency are shaped by unequal access to decision-making, interpretive legitimacy, and speaking-up protection (Kim & Leach, 2020; Mazzei et al., 2025). The analysis of power relations in change processes reveals that resistance is often a rational response to genuine power imbalances rather than an irrational reaction to change per se. This insight has important implications for change management practice, suggesting that efforts to reduce resistance must address the structural conditions that produce it, not merely the surface-level behaviors.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the practical question is not how to eliminate resistance, but how to distinguish destructive obstruction from informative dissent and then convert the latter into co-creation (O'Hara, 2025; Goel et al., 2024; Rath & Jena, 2024). This reframing of the managerial task represents a significant departure from conventional change management approaches, which tend to treat all resistance as a problem to be overcome. Instead, it suggests that the ability to distinguish between different forms of resistance and respond appropriately is a core competency of effective change leadership.

Context also matters. Healthcare, public administration, higher education, and digital transformation display different combinations of bureaucracy, professional identity, speed, and uncertainty (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2021; Mekonnen & Bayissa, 2023; Hajjar et al., 2025; Valtonen & Holopainen, 2025). This implies that change leaders should adapt participation and communication strategies to setting-specific constraints rather than rely on universal prescriptions (Alshaikh et al., 2026; Erwin & Garman, 2010). The contingency perspective advanced here challenges the search for universal best practices in change management and instead emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive judgment.

A critical analysis of the literature reveals several tensions and unresolved questions. First, there is a tension between studies that treat resistance as a problem to be managed and those that view it as a resource to be harnessed. While the latter perspective has gained traction in recent years, it remains unclear under what conditions resistance is genuinely constructive

versus when it is merely obstructive. Future research should explore the boundary conditions that determine whether resistance leads to positive or negative outcomes.

Second, the literature reveals a tension between structure and agency in explanations of resistance. While some studies emphasize structural conditions such as power imbalances and cultural norms, others focus on individual agency and sensemaking. An integrative perspective that acknowledges the interplay between structure and agency is needed to fully understand how resistance emerges and evolves. This perspective should recognize that employees are neither passive victims of structural forces nor entirely free agents, but rather active participants whose agency is enabled and constrained by the structural conditions in which they operate.

Third, there is a tension between the short-term and long-term consequences of different approaches to resistance. While top-down control may secure short-term compliance, it may also undermine long-term organizational learning and adaptability. Conversely, participative approaches may be slower and more complex in the short term but may yield more sustainable outcomes in the long term. Future research should examine the temporal dynamics of resistance and change, exploring how different approaches unfold over time and what factors influence their long-term effectiveness.

Finally, the literature reveals a tension between the normative and descriptive dimensions of resistance research. Much of the existing literature is prescriptive, offering recommendations for how managers should respond to resistance. However, there is a need for more descriptive research that examines how managers actually respond to resistance in practice and what factors shape their responses. Such research would provide a more realistic understanding of the challenges and dilemmas that managers face in navigating resistance to change.

5. Conclusion

This narrative review finds that employee resistance is often not the root problem in organizational transformation. More often, it is a visible symptom of unequal power, weak leadership practice, poor communication, threatened identity, and constrained employee agency. The evidence synthesized in this review consistently demonstrates that resistance is a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a simple barrier to implementation.

The main contribution of this review is to present resistance as a context-dependent and relational phenomenon that may signify obstacle, sensemaking, or legitimate voice depending on how change is led and experienced. By synthesizing evidence across five themes conceptualizations of resistance, power and politics, leadership, employee agency, and contextual moderators this review provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of resistance to change.

For practice, the implication is clear: sustainable transformation is more likely when organizations work with resistance as feedback rather than simply trying to suppress it. This requires a fundamental reorientation in how change is conceptualized and managed, moving from a compliance-oriented approach to one that values employee voice, addresses power imbalances, and creates conditions for constructive engagement.

Future research should expand longitudinal, comparative, and power-sensitive designs, especially in digital and AI-enabled transformation. Such research would help to address the unresolved questions and tensions identified in this review, contributing to a more nuanced and actionable understanding of resistance to organizational change.

5.1. Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly Application and QuillBot to improve the clarity, readability, and language accuracy of the text. Output generated by the tools was carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article. All substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of data, and final decisions regarding content, arguments, and conclusions, were carried out solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic quality of this article.

5.2. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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