Stressful organizational change: The role of support in coping

Roy Smollan, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Roy.smollan@aut.ac.nz

Sub-theme 29: Understanding Power and Readiness to Change by Studying the Interactions and Perceptions among Leaders and Followers

Abstract

Support from various sources inside and outside the organization helps employees cope with the stress of work. Support becomes even more necessary when the processes and outcomes of organizational change place an extra burden on staff. This article presents and explores a model of support though different phases of stressful organizational change. The findings of a qualitative study of 31 participants in a public healthcare authority in New Zealand reveal that support took various forms (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal) and was sourced through contacts inside and outside the organization at different stages of the change. However, for some participants it was either denied to them or they were reluctant to mobilize it. Implications for research and practice focus on the provision of forms of support that enhance individual wellbeing and the likelihood of successful change.

Key words: coping; organizational change; qualitative; stress; support

Introduction

This paper addresses one of the potential questions raised by the convenors of this stream: *What are the specific coping mechanisms during organizational change processes, both of those who strive for change and those who strive to avoid change?* While the focus of the stream is on the relationships between leaders and followers the paper goes beyond the support offered by supervisors during stressful change to include that which is available from the organization, colleagues and people in the actors' external networks.

Stress is part of everyday work life but the causes and personal consequences vary as events occur and issues materialize. The processes and outcomes of organizational change often exacerbate pre-existing stress levels by introducing new stressors or by magnifying old ones, such as further increasing workloads. Evolving coping strategies are then needed as the

change unwinds. This article focuses on one form of coping, the use of support before, during and after organizational change. Support has long been researched as a means of coping with work-related stressors (Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2010), including those occurring through change (Lawrence & Callan, 2010). However, it is not well-known why people choose certain forms of support through periods of change and from whom, and how effective these different forms and sources of coping are in attending to wellbeing.

One contribution of this article is the presentation of a model of support through stressful change. A second contribution is the exploration of the model though a series of interviews with the staff of a public healthcare authority who had been through restructuring and other forms of change. A third contribution lies in identifying the options open to organizations in supporting staff who face change so as to mitigate the strain they experience and thereby repair or bolster their wellbeing and enhance their commitment to the change.

Literature review

Stress, coping and support

Stress is a phenomenon experienced by people when they encounter harmful or potentially threatening circumstances (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). In organizational life there are many possible causes of stress such as heavy workloads, complex responsibilities, fractious relationships, lack of autonomy, injustice and loss (Driver, 2014; Haar, 2006; Karasek & Thorell, 1990; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The consequences can be devastating for the individuals and include physiological, behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems (Leka & Jain, 2010). The ramifications for the organization are also highly negative, such as sick leave, turnover, poorer productivity, conflict, disloyalty – and demanding workloads for other staff (Cooper, 2006).

Folkman and Lazarus (1985; 1988; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis & Gruen, 1986) argue that coping has two main functions: problem-focused coping aims to address the source of the stressor while emotion-focused coping is used to deal with negative emotions. A third category is labelled as social support which can fit into the other categories as their survey items indicate: "talked to someone to find out more about the situation; talked to someone who could do something concrete about the problem; I asked a relative or friend I respected for advice; talked to someone about how I was feeling; accepted sympathy and understanding from someone; I got professional help" (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 996). One strategy can simultaneously address the stressor and the emotion, for example, successfully talking to a supervisor about workload can reduce performance anxiety. An issue that

researchers have still not resolved is whether coping (including support-seeking) is mostly dispositional style or situation-specific strategy (Bellman, Forster, Still & Cooper, 2003; Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Ingledew, Hardy & Cooper., 1997; Judge Thoresen, Pucik & Welbourne; 1999; Swanson & Power, 2001) and therefore if a coping strategy is intentionally adopted or less consciously derived (Dewe et al., 2010; Driver, 2014).

There are four types of supportive behaviours according to House (1981): emotional support provides empathy and comfort; instrumental support helps to address the stressor; informational support aids the stressed individual in dealing with the stressor or the emotions; and appraisal support is based on information that encourages stressed individuals to evaluate themselves. House, like other authors (e.g. Cunningham, Woodward, Shannon, MacIntosh, Lendrum, Rosenblum & Brown, 2002; Lawrence & Callan, 2010; Terry, Rawle & Callan, 1995; Swanson & Power, 2001) has identified different sources of support, for example, supervisors, colleagues and non-work contacts such as partners, families and friends. Trade unions have also been found to provide support (Brown, Zijlstra & Lyons, 2006).

The employer organization is an additional source of support through policies, programmes and systems of stress management and prevention (Karasek, 2004). Perceived organizational support is an umbrella construct of "employees' general belief that their work organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being" and derives from "employees' tendency to assign the organization humanlike characteristics" (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). Perceptions of support have been shown to help address the uncertainty and anxiety about organizational change (Cullen, Edwards, Casper & Gue, 2014). Thus while the perceived absence of support is a stressor its presence helps employees cope with stress. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of structured programmes to develop coping strategies and resilience in healthcare (Pipe, Buchda, Launder, Hudak, Hulvey, Karns & Prendergast, 2012) and other settings (Pignata & Winefield, 2015). One aspect of organizational support is the employee assistance programme (EAP) which is designed to support employees in stressful times (Dewe et al., 2010; Spetch, Howland & Lowman, 2011), including during and after organizational change (Bhagat, Steverson & Segovis, 2007). However, unless it is embedded in a supportive organizational culture an EAP is likely to have limited effectiveness in mitigating stress.

Support through stressful change

Literature on stressful change (mostly quantitative) has documented how beneficial support is to the employees' sense of wellbeing, from whom it comes and what form it takes.

In a longitudinal study of downsizing in the Canadian public sector Armstrong-Stassen (2003) found that organizational and supervisor support through all phases was helpful to survivors who were promoted, transferred or left in their current jobs. Fugate, Kinicki and Scheck, (2002) believe that, in line with Hobfoll's (2001) Conservation of Resources Theory, people's coping resources are taxed and depleted during stressful periods. The researchers surveyed staff of a commercial organization in the USA through four phases of a merger. Aggregated scores of availability of support from supervisors, colleagues and non-work sources decreased from the announcement stage through the next two stages but rose at the end. A more settled stage allowed for the replenishment of support resources. Swanson and Power (2001) found that after stressful change in a public utility company in the UK support was greatest from partners, then colleagues, managers and other non-work sources. Perceived instrumental support was more prevalent than emotional support.

Of relevance to the context of this article several empirical studies have been conducted in the public healthcare sector. Public health is a context that is prone to high stress levels, partly due to the nature of the challenging clinical work performed (Loretto, Poham & Davis, 2010) and partly due to the imperatives of New Public Management. This is a concept whereby authorities focus on financial performance and efficiency, often, it is alleged, to the detriment of patient care and staff wellbeing (Andersson & Liff, 2012; Kelliher & Parry, 2015, Teo, Yeung & Chang, 2012). Having investigated the stress of nurses six months before and after a merger of units of the National Health Service in the UK, Brown et al. (2006) found higher stress levels after the change and a perception of a low level of combined group, union and organizational support. A longitudinal study of a variety of clinical and non-clinical positions in a Canadian hospital by Cunningham et al. (2002) revealed that supervisor and collegial support reduced stress but was only weakly related to readiness for change. Lawrence and Callan (2010) surveyed staff, mostly in clinical roles, in an Australian hospital in the midst of a series of major changes. They investigated both the availability of support from colleagues, supervisors and non-work sources and the mobilization of support from these sources. They discovered an intriguing series of relationships. For example, they deduced that while the availability of support from colleagues was mostly considered beneficial the mobilization of this support was constrained by the burden of reciprocity this may have imposed on the participants. Bowling, Beehr and Swader (2005) have demonstrated the complex dynamics involved in giving and receiving work-based support. For example, while giving support was positively related to receiving support in their study, this reciprocity depended on the type of support in question and on the respondents' traits of agreeableness, extraversion and

neuroticism. Showing signs of stress can be seen as a stigma and militate against seeking or accepting support (Harkness, Long, Bernbach, Patterson, Jordan & Kahn, 2005). An article in *Time* magazine (Oaklander, 2015, p. 48) indicates that while many American doctors report being stressed a small minority admitted to looking for help due to the "the stigma against signs of weakness within the profession."

Few qualitative studies have explored the role of support in stressful change. In one study (Clarke, Hope-Hailey & Kelliher, 2005, p. 98), the stigma of showing stress was again apparent. The absence of support during the restructure of a British aerospace company added to the stress of managers who were "unable to discuss emotional matters, even with their peers, because of a fear of repercussions and showing weakness" (p. 98). More positively, Robinson and Griffiths (2005, 214-215) found evidence in a UK government department of valued instrumental support from supervisors during a transformational change ("I went to see what the boss could do about it when it got really bad"; informational support ("I would go and seek information about it, for example, try and get to see my director as much as possible"; and emotional support ("It really helps when things are bad just to have a good old chin wag, you know, get things off your chest").

Figure 1 is a conceptual framework which is "simply the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 20). It indicates that organizational change creates new stressors or exacerbates existing ones. To cope employees use problem-focused, emotion-focused and support-seeking strategies. Support can be take different forms (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal), can be sourced from inside and outside the organization and potentially leads to the individual outcomes of improved wellbeing and commitment to the change. Since the influence of disposition in support-based coping remains contested (Dewe et al., 2010) it was not included in the model.

Figure 1.
Model of organizational change, stress and support-based coping
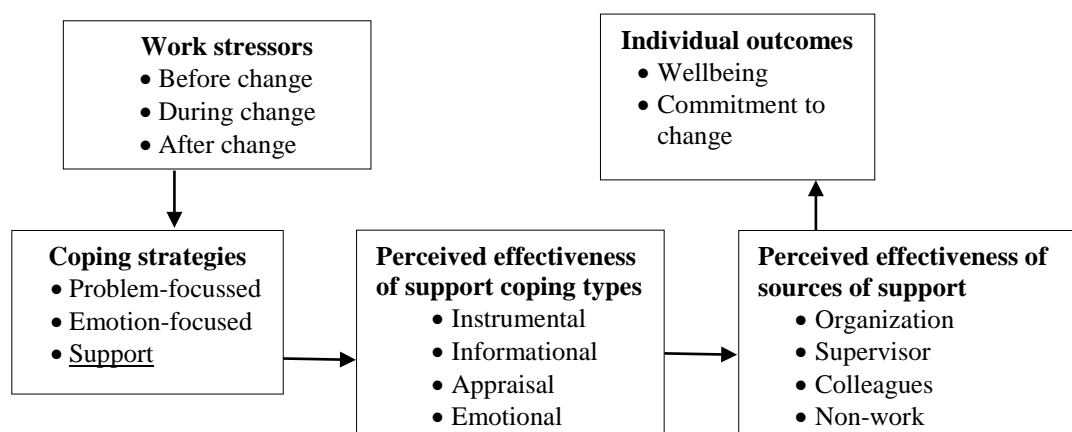
Given the paucity of qualitative research into stressful organizational change a new study was instigated to answer the following research questions: What forms of support are available and unavailable to those facing stressful change and how effective are they when mobilized? To what extent do they vary through the different phases of change and why? From whom do staff seek support and does this vary as the change unfolds?

Methods

Most studies of occupational stress have been quantitative and, in contrast to qualitative studies, this form of enquiry is not able to examine the circumstances that are peculiar to each individual (Mazzola, Schonfeld & Spector, 2011). In analyzing interviews, "Thick description requires that the researcher account for the complex specificity and circumstantiality of their data" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Narratives of stress, according to Driver (2014), help us understand how stress is subjectively constructed and experienced. Given the interwoven relationships between daily workplace issues, organizational change and the stress that both engender, interviews are a way of uncovering the nature, sources and benefits of support that employees use when embroiled in stressful change. The qualitative study by Robinson and Griffiths (2005) investigated coping responses during a radical change but was not solely about support. The stress experienced by managers was discovered by Clarke et al. (2007) in a longitudinal qualitative study (at three points in time after a major change) using a grounded theory approach, but it was not focused on stress or support. The current study was therefore devised to explore the support available or denied to participants in a range of hierarchical positions as they travelled through different phases of stressful change. This retrospective approach allowed participants to recall memories of change, with both the hindsight of distance and the introspection of current facets of stress in their working lives.

Research site and participants

Access was granted to a District Health Board (DHB) in New Zealand that provides regional public healthcare services on various sites. Substantial changes in the country's public health sector have been a feature for several decades (Gauld & Horsburgh, 2015). The DHB in question had experienced restructuring that led to the centralization of certain services, the disestablishment of some roles, the redesign of others, redundancy and redeployment. The DHB also collaborates with a contiguous DHB regarding the provision of some services by an integrated department. Through the HR department a list of employees who had been through recent change was provided to the researcher for a study specifically titled *Stress and*

organizational change. Semi-structured interviews with 31 participants were conducted in 2012. They comprised 25 women and 6 men, of whom 20 were White, 3 were Maori (the indigenous population), 4 were Asian and 2 were of Pacific island heritage. Ages ranged from 32 to 65 (mean 40.3) and length of service from 4 to 27 years (mean 10.7). There were 19 in clinical positions, such as nursing and physiotherapy, while the others had administrative roles, for example, in accounting and information technology. A number were in management positions (2 senior, 8 middle, 15 supervisory or professional team-leaders). Interviews lasting between 35 and 75 minutes were conducted onsite and the participants were asked to describe one change and talk about the causes and consequences of stress before, during and after the change. For each of these phases they were asked how they had coped, and, if they did not bring up the use of social support further questions were asked about this strategy. Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts were made available to the participants.

Data analysis

After several readings of the transcripts working tables were created to capture quotes from participants about support before, during and after the organizational change. Some of the comments were provided from direct questions about the extent of the support that had been offered and by whom. Some comments arose in answer to other elements of the interview, such as on causes or consequences of stress. Evidence was sought of different forms of support, using House's (1981) distinction between instrumental, appraisal, informational and emotional types of support. Sources of support were categorized as supervisors, colleagues, the organization itself and non-work sources (partners, family and friends).

It is noteworthy that several participants referred to their use of professional or peer supervision. This is a concept, separate from on-the-job clinical or managerial supervision, whereby some healthcare professionals in New Zealand (as they are in many other countries) are required by their own professional boards of registration to meet regularly with an experienced practitioner. This is also influenced by the need to comply with the continuing competence provisions of the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act, 2003 (www.health.govt.nz). One organization, the New Zealand Psychologists Board (2010, p. 2), defines supervision as:

> a scheduled time to meet with a respected professional colleague for the purpose of conducting a self-reflective review of practice, to discuss professional issues and to receive feedback on all elements of practice, with the objectives of ensuring quality of service, improving practice and managing stress.

While the main purpose is the discussion of the supervisee's regular work activities to facilitate reflection and enhance mastery (Ferguson, 2005) some of the participants in the current study chose professional supervision as a means of support in negotiating the stressful aspects of organizational change. It was thus added as a separate source of support in the tables because supervision of this nature is often provided by external contractors but not usually from conventional personal support networks.

Findings

Causes, consequences and coping with stress through phases of change

To provide some context for the support strategies used it is necessary to briefly examine some of the causes and consequences of stress and other forms of coping from the pre-change stage, through the transition to the aftermath. Before the change stress had been caused by problems with internal and external relationships, the latter mostly with patients and their families, heavy workloads, lack of resources, responsibility for tasks and accountability for results. During the change the main source of stress was uncertainty, often about changing job roles, potential redeployment and redundancies. The stress of others emerged as an additional stressor. Perceptions of poor change processes, particularly lack of consultation, information and management support, compounded these problems. In the aftermath some participants faced heavier workloads, accompanied by even more inadequate resources, together with poorer relationships and continuing anxiety about further change.

The consequences though all stages were high levels of anxiety and other emotional problems often resulting in sleeplessness, physiological problems like backache and skin rashes, behavioural issues, including over-eating and drinking, and cognitive problems such as forgetfulness and excessive rumination. For most participants the transition was the most stressful phase, given the uncertainty and attendant anxiety, while for the balance it was the aftermath. To cope participants employed a wide range of strategies, some of which addressed problems, such as working harder to manage a more demanding workload (even though this raised stress levels in another way), preparing for interviews for redesigned jobs during the transition phase and confronting others who were being difficult while the change took root. Emotional approaches were also employed, sometimes consciously, such as wishful thinking, humour, religion and alcohol.

The seeking or utilization of social support was evident in many of the responses through the different phases of change. In the following sections on support before, during and

after change, tables include quotes representative of the sources and types of support available (or absent).

Support before the change

   Overall, the participants sourced support from various potential providers and generally confirmed how valuable it had been in managing the stressful aspects of their work lives (Table 1). Supervisors had provided mostly instrumental support when they were able to, particularly related to workload and resource concerns. While colleagues and outsiders largely provided emotional support the organization was deemed by some participants to have adequate support systems in place, such as EAP and advice and information from the HR department. The role of professional supervision for those in clinical positions who had access to it was highlighted as a valuable form of appraisal support, and to a lesser extent of emotional support.

<p align="center">Insert Table 1 about here</p>

Support during the change

   As stress levels were ratcheted up during the implementation of change support was accessed from various sources. Some of the participants found the combination of emotional and instrumental support from their bosses was very helpful in coping while others were troubled that their own managers were unsupportive or had been made redundant and no-one else was available to provide support, other than the rather amorphous and distant EAP. Nevertheless, those who needed to apply (or re-apply) for positions found that guidance in compiling curriculum vitae/résumés and preparing for interviews was useful. Where EAP appeared to be offered as a fall-back position for change processes thin on information and participation it was ignored by participants.

<p align="center">Insert Table 2 about here</p>

   While emotional and appraisal support from colleagues was comforting it was not always welcomed when it became draining. Family and friends were often a reliable provider of emotional support but it was interesting that one participant (C) found she could not talk about the stress to her husband because she had strongly advised her against taking what he thought would amount to a challenging new role. Professional supervision, which is used by some as a regular tool of reflective practice, was even more helpful during change as an appraisal form of support reinforced with empathy. However, as one participant (K) found, her own internal supervisor was also stressed by upcoming changes and consequently was of little help.

Support after the change

For those who found the aftermath of change to be the most stressful phase, support was solicited from wherever it appeared to be most beneficial. As expected, managers would provide practical (instrumental) support where they could. Organizational support systems through HR and EAP were again found to be welcome but there were some participants who believed that the organization did not really care about its staff. Appraisal support from professional supervision and emotional support from outside sources helped to sustain the participants in the bedding-down phase of the aftermath and in the regular course of their duties.

Insert Table 3 about here

Collegial support was appreciated as a form of emotional and appraisal support, particularly from staff doing the same type of job. However, as one participant (EE) admitted, he did not like others to see how much stress he was under and how poorly he was coping. An unusual agreement of non-support (instrumental) was reached by one participant (L) with a colleague, although the emotional support was valued. They were profoundly angered by a change that put a huge burden on L. They believed that if the colleague had helped out, to her own cost, DHB management would not have provided any additional staff resources:

> We both agreed that we wouldn't do anything outside our job descriptions. Because if she helped
> me...we both realised that she's propping me up and she's having to do some of my work, which we
> had agreed that there was no way it could be done by one person. That means it makes it okay
> because I would've coped. We actually agreed that although she would see me getting stressed, she
> was not to do anything about it…if we don't fail, nothing will change.

Some of the participants noted that being willing to ask for support or accept unsolicited support is a key lesson they learned throughout the different phases of change. When asked what she had learned about her ability to cope with stress and change D remarked:

> What I learnt is I'm not ashamed to talk to people about my stress, especially my work colleagues.
> When I know I'm stressed I tell them and I seek support. Because when I seek help from my manager
> or my colleagues, I always learn something new.

An additional source of external support for some participants was the broad ethnic community with which they identified and this encompassed internal and external sources. One participant (FF) spoke poignantly of how his community nourished him during the most stressful elements of organizational change. When asked if he had been offered EAP support during any of the changes he had discussed he replied:

> To a Maori, it doesn't mean a damn thing…Because it's our cultural needs, our spiritual needs and
> our values…we have a tendency to go to each other, or we go back to our families, or we go back
> to our *turanga wae wae*, to our homesteads…that's where we get our assistance from. (FF)

Discussion

The study confirms the findings of previous studies that support from various sources, singly or combined, and of various types, helped staff either address the stressors or cope with the strain, or both (Cunningham et al., 2002; Fugate et al., 2002). Those who accessed social support before a change tended to use the same sources during and after the change. This is to be expected since people tap sources that have been beneficial in the past. However, the complexity of support-based coping was revealed through some the participants' narratives. As noted earlier, C reported that her husband was usually a source of support but this dwindled after he had urged her not to take on what appeared to be a difficult new role. When an employee's supervisor, who has been a strong source of support in the past, is herself faced with the prospect of her own stressful redundancy as in K's situation, or has been replaced by one who lacks knowledge or empathy, as in X's case, the participant feels a degree of isolation. While emotional support may be available from other people, the possibilities of instrumental supervisory support may have been severely diminished. As Hobfoll (2001) points out, coping resources are built up over time and may become depleted for various reasons. In this vein Fugate et al. (2002) found in a longitudinal study that the ability or willingness to access support sources varied through the transition to the aftermath.

While some participants were comfortable with receiving emotional support one (EE) was considerably embarrassed about how much stress he appeared to be suffering. The widespread perception that stress is a stigma, and therefore to be concealed, has been previously documented (Harkness et al., 2005; Oaklander, 2015). Thus, as Lawrence and Callan (2010) point out, there is a difference between the provision and mobilization of support, and there are complex psychological dynamics that underpin the relationship between them. Hobfoll (2001) makes the point that resources need to be obtained, safeguarded and replenished. That said, it appeared that a number of participants may potentially have benefited from support from various quarters but felt constrained in accessing it. The silencing of voices of stress is a powerful reminder of the fragility of identity (Driver, 2014; Major & O'Brien, 2005), particularly when organizational change is reshaping it (Thunman, 2015).

Professional supervision, for those who were entitled to it, proved to be a strong form of support during all phases. This hardly surprising since the role of the professional or peer supervisor is to facilitate competence through reflection on work-related matters (Ferguson, 2005; Kaufman & Schwartz, 2003) but also to help the supervisee manage stress (e.g. New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2010). This form of support is largely appraisal-focused but may be complemented by emotional support.

Limitations and Implications for Research

There are a number of limitations to this study which indicate the need for further research. Firstly, the interviews required the participants to look back in time and memories are notoriously fickle. Longitudinal studies, qualitative and quantitative (e.g. Fugate et al., 2002), perhaps even combined in diary studies (e.g. Schreurs, van Emmerik, Günter & Germeys, 2012) will produce a finer-grained understanding of the stress-strain-coping-support process that Folkman and Lazarus (1985) maintain is characterized by flux.

The role of disposition in coping with stress, debated in the literature (e.g. Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), lay outside the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, some participants spoke of confidence, assertiveness, resilience, optimism, openness to experience and other dispositional ways of handling stress. While Folkman and Lazarus (1988) do not dispute the relevance of trait forms of coping they assert that people use a specific coping strategy (or a combination of them) that is focused on addressing a situational stressor. Those seeking emotional support may be lower in self-efficacy, positive affect, resilience, locus of control and openness to change (Judge et al., 1999). Those seeking instrumental, informational or appraisal support, however, may be high in assertiveness, agreeableness and self-efficacy but Bowling et al. (2005) speculate that people high in optimism may not wish to talk about negative issues like stress. However, little has been reported on disposition-based support-seeking in stressful change situations which leaves this line of investigation open. The model in Figure 1 could thus be expanded to include the role of disposition in constructing a change event as a stressor and in accessing various forms of support from different sources.

Thirdly, the role of gender in seeking and providing support during stressful change needs investigation. Of the 31 volunteers in the current study 25 were women, a much higher ratio than figures supplied to the researcher by the DHB. Prior research indicates that more women tend to report stress than men (Thunman, 2015) and that female managers were more likely to perceive and access support than their male counterparts (Bellman et al., 2003).

Fourthly, it is almost taken for granted that support from others helps people in coping with stress. Research needs to explore more deeply why those who are confronted with stressful change sometimes avoid support, even when it is available. This study and prior research (e.g. Harkness et al., 2005) have shown how the stigma of stress confines some to the shadows of organizational existence while other studies note the relevance of dispositional resilience (Pipe et al., 2012) and self-efficacy (Judge et al., 1999). Whether other factors contribute to this spurning of support needs examination.

Implications for practice

A number of approaches can be used by management, with the support of HR professionals, to mitigate the stress of change and provide support. Since prior studies have shown the value of counselling and other forms of support through EAP, these services should be actively promoted before, during and after change. This may not be effective if staff are cynical about this form of support especially when the organization has instigated stressful change. In the DHB in this study various interviewees were only vaguely aware of the services provided by its EAP or dismissive of its usefulness, particularly for emotional forms of support. Yet others were appreciative of the instrumental and appraisal forms of support available, such as guidance on how to compile a résumé or prepare for an interview. Noting the shortage of empirical studies on EAP effectiveness, Spetch et al. (2011) call for the utilization of EAP to be destigmatized. Stigma can be both a cause of stress (Major & O'Brien, 2005) and an outcome of it (Harkness et al., 2014) and possibly deter those who need support from accessing it even though EAP services are usually provided by outside agencies. Bhagat et al. (2007) caution that the nature and perceived value of EAP is also subject to constructions that vary from one cultural context to another. Participants in the current study who were from ethnic minorities tended to look for support within their own communities rather than from the organization.

Organizations preparing for organizational change need to develop staff capabilities (including those of managers) in coping with stress. This could take the form of training courses focusing on organizational change and stress and the support that could be provided to those who need it. The provision of support also could be included in general training programmes of coaching and mentorship. Lawrence and Callan (2010) advise organizations undertaking large-scale change to develop peer coaching programmes among those of similar status. Given the strong endorsement given to professional and peer supervision by participants in the current study it makes sense to develop some of the mechanisms and practices used by healthcare professionals (Ferguson, 2005; Kaufman & Scwartz, 2003) in various occupations for wider organizational use in the prevention and mitigation of stress. However, these will need to be carefully researched and trialled before they are more widely used.

Training in emotional intelligence (EI) will also be useful in dealing with stress and the emotional aspects of organizational change EI will not only help staff to manage their own stress, but also enable them to provide the type of support needed by their colleagues, subordinates and even their supervisors (Smollan & Parry, 2011). McEnrue, Groves and Shen (2009) found that the usefulness of training in EI partly depended on dispositional tendencies

to accept feedback and speculated that EI would enhance the ability to deal with change. However, empirical studies of the impact of training in EI on providing and mobilizing support during stressful change do not appear to have been conducted. Attendance at courses in stress management by organizations may also be limited by perceptions of the possible stigma of doing so (Harkness et al., 2005) and steps will need to be taken to address this. For instance, examples could be set by senior and middle management in enrolling for such courses.

Finally, ad hoc promotion of EAP programmes or HR support services during times of change will be unlikely to improve staff wellbeing unless they are embedded in the cultural practices that lead to perceptions of organizational support (Cullen et al., 2014; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In the current study it appeared that those participants who perceived that the organization did not care about its staff sought support from personal and ethnic networks rather than from the DHB itself.

Conclusion

While the support from colleagues and external stakeholders can be of immense value to change participants, their plaintive cries for help should also coax more effective support from supervisors and higher levels of management. Stress is damaging for the individual and the organization (Cooper, 2006; Leka & Jain, 2010) and undermines readiness for change and (Cunningham et al., 2002; Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). This study had contributed to the literature by presenting and exploring a model of support through stages of stressful change that focuses on the nature and source of support that employees found most helpful.

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Table 1.
Support before the change

Source	Type
Supervisor	*Support: Instrumental*
	If I started to feel overwhelmed, would be to talk to my manager, and say: Look, I've got this, this and this going on. Can we talk about perhaps reprioritizing or doing something in a different way? And she was always open to that. (J)
	Support: Instrumental
	I would talk with my direct manager around how we might manage that, and talking with my direct manager was the – she supported me to work out what I needed to do to make the change. (V)
Colleagues	*Support: Informational, appraisal*
	So if you check it out with somebody and they might say: Oh yeah, I'd probably do something similar or had you thought of this? (S)
	Support: Emotional, appraisal
	Sometimes it's useful to simply say something out loud because it might change what you think. Because when it's in your head it can take many shapes and forms, whereas when you vocalize it, it's actually putting it out there and it gives you more of a sense of what you need to do to overcome that. Whereas I think the more that you bottle up and keep inside, sometimes that can manifest itself more negatively. (F)
Organization	*Support: All forms*
	The relationship issue is more of talking to HR and seeking advice on what to do. I mean, using some basic techniques like listening to what the person has to say. (O)
	You've got all these support systems around you…I think that's the greatest thing of this DHB, they always seek to help you. (DD)
Professional supervision	*Support: Appraisal*
	I think if you just do the peer chat, it can turn into a bit of a whinge. Whereas with supervision it's very much factual. (G)
	Support: Appraisal
	I get really good supervision with all of this stuff…it is very helpful… Because sometimes you can't see the wood for the trees. (H)
Partner, family and friends	*Support: Emotional*
	Partner, family, friends…that sort of thing is really important. (D)
	I talk to family and friends and let off steam a bit. (Q)

Table 2.
Support during the change

Source	Type
Supervisor	*Support: Instrumental, emotional*
	I also knew that if I felt I needed something else I could approach my manager and she would be open to providing the resources to do that...she would often check in and just say: How's it going? How are you? (J)
	Lack of support: Emotional, instrumental
	She didn't have any understanding of our roles and she seemed to be really busy before she took us on…So she'd said that she would make the time, which didn't happen. (X)
Colleagues	*Support: Emotional*
	You know that the other person is in the same place as you and that makes you feel less alone and isolated and all of those sorts of things, so certainly peer support is really important. (D)
	Support: Emotional
	Quite often it was just an opportunity to sit down and bitch and moan, really. I suppose to a degree you need a little bit of time to do that in order to feel still connected to people who are also going through it. But it went too far. (U)
Organization	*Support: Emotional, instrumental, appraisal*
	They provided us with EAP services. We had support from the learning development team about writing our CVs. We had interview training and support, other counselling support was there. (B)
	Lack of support: Emotional, instrumental
	It was a short, sharp meeting. She came with about three HR managers and it was basically: This is what's happening, blah, blah, blah, any questions? If you feel like you want EAP, contact such and such. Then they disappeared. (N)
Professional supervision	*Support: Appraisal*
	With supervision you would go and talk about a stressful situation that you've had and analyse it and critique it and critique your response and to do that learning in quite a thoughtful way. (D)
	Lack of support: Emotional, appraisal
	I had a supervisor, who's a really great person, who I get on really well with, but she was in the same position as me and under so much stress that she couldn't offer me what I needed. I would go to her for supervision, but she would be having really important cellphone calls come and having to answer the phone or cancelling supervision because she was too busy. So I could see that she was as stressed, if not more so, than me and I knew that she would give it to me if she could, but she couldn't. (K)
Partner, family and friends	*Support: Emotional*
	I've got a very supportive husband…so I could offload. (X)
	Lack of support: Emotional
	My husband in the beginning was quite reluctant for me to take the position because he thought it would have a negative impact…Normally I'd talk to my husband, but that was challenging, given all the other stuff that was going on. He was finding it quite hard as well…it it had a significant negative impact on the family. (C)

Table 3.
Support after the change

Source	Type
Supervisor	*Support: Instrumental, emotional*
	I can talk to him any time I want to...He's very supportive. He's very affirming. I don't feel like when I go in there, like I'm wasting his time. (H)
	Lack of support: Instrumental
	From these meetings he attends on my behalf…sometimes it might be easier for him just to agree with [group decisions]. Sometimes I feel like I've been lied to. As to supporting me…I don't see the evidence, so that's another stress. (T)
Colleagues	*Support: Appraisal*
	I do have people in other DHB's that are in similar roles that I can certainly bounce off. And that has been extremely useful sometimes. (F)
	Support: Emotional
	It was worrying because it made me realise that my stress level was more obvious than I was hoping it to be. So yes, I didn't enjoy having those people say those things to me. No, I did not like it because I was hoping to show that I was coping better. (EE)
Organization	*Support: Appraisal*
	I've been for three counselling sessions, through the…Employee Assistance Programme…And that was quite helpful actually, I think that prompted me to change my behaviour and to be more outspoken about it. I think that's probably what prompted me to coming out with the ultimatum a month ago. And I feel quite okay about that now, because I feel I've put my line in the sand. (K)
	Lack of support: Instrumental
	For two years I was left on my own…I didn't have the skills to do it, and I'd look for [administrative] support, I asked for support, the budget was there to pay for it, but I wasn't allowed to use the budget. (FF)
Professional supervision	*Support: Appraisal*
	Supervision is really important…it's the one safe place to have those sorts of conversations and process the feelings and then be able to get on with your job without them getting in the way. (D)
	Support: Appraisal, emotional
	I find it's enormously helpful around reflecting on what's going on and what the issues are, and problem-solving, and so on. The supervisor that I'm working with now is very supportive and encouraging and I mentioned earlier my lack of confidence sometimes. She's been very helpful in helping me work with that. (J)
Partner, family and friends	*Support: Emotional*
	If I need to talk and perhaps unburden myself to get things off my mind, I have some very good friends that I can do that with and then I can move on.'(F)
	Support: Instrumental
	He probably put words in my mouth too much and told me too much, rather than asking questions and eliciting information from you. You know, he was probably giving too much advice. It was good, and it helped, but it could have been better. It could have possibly been somebody more experienced. (K)