

# Toward a Theory of Change Readiness

## *The Roles of Appraisal, Focus, and Perceived Control*

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This research article describes and constructs a model of performance readiness. The goal of this article is to illustrate how one might meet the challenges of change effectively. The author explores the factors and principles driving the positive transformational change of a high-performing soccer team. Framed by theories of cognitive appraisal, stress, and coping, the study reveals critical variables to the change readiness process to be appraisal, focus, and perceived control. By inquiring deeply into individual appraisals of a change, it may be possible to facilitate a focal shift from “resistance” to “resolution” and from a desire for “power over” a change to a recognition of one’s “power to” change effectively.

**Keywords:** *organizational change; facilitation; readiness for change; workplace anxiety and stress*

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### INTRODUCTION

“The readiness is all,” concludes Shakespeare’s Hamlet, reeling from the changes in his kingdom and agonizing over how best to react. Organizational theorists worldwide might agree; readiness for change is often the crux to any change management strategy (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). If people are not ready for change, they will resist (Lewin, 1945; Prochaska et al., 1994; Prochaska, Redding, & Evers,

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1997). The key question for change agents appears to be how people get ready for changes in their environment in such a way that they are then ready to implement effective changes within their organization.

The following research sought to identify the principle components of a successful transformational change and in doing so, to gain insight into the process by which a state of change readiness might be achieved within an organizational setting. Readiness can be defined as “prepared mentally and physically for an experience or action” and at the same time as “preparation of a gun for immediate aim and firing” (Merriam-Webster, 2005). The irony of the latter definition is not lost on change agents who often witness intense resistance, defensiveness, and outright attack in those individuals undergoing organizational changes. The current study was more interested in exploring readiness in terms of being “at peace.” The study therefore focused on how best to equip people and facilitate their confidence in the face of change by asking the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What does it mean to be ready for change?

*Research Question 2:* How do organizations get ready for change?

*Research Question 3:* What kind(s) of organizational change readiness supports individual change readiness?

The author explores the factors and principles driving the positive transformational change of a high-performing soccer team.

The study followed a university soccer team through three seasons as they underwent a transformational change in their quest to become national champions. A theoretically and empirically based model of change readiness was constructed and evaluated in terms of appraisal, focus, and performance during an actual transformational change the team experienced in its final season of the study. Using Lazarus and Folkman’s (1987) transactional theory of stress and coping as a conceptual framework, the researcher explored the relationships among the variables of change, stress, stress appraisal, focus, and performance at the team and individual levels of analysis over the course of three seasons of play.

A sports team is an excellent subject for the study of organizational change. Many organizational variables are present in a sports team, including change, challenge, leadership, teamwork, communication, strategy, policy, creative problem solving, and decision making. Whereas conditions and scenarios may vary from the corporate world, the goal of a sports team, to win, is precise, unwavering, and unfettered, providing the researcher and the team with a clear and constant framework within which to evaluate variables of organizational change. Bougon, Weick, and Binkhorst (1977) used the Utrecht Jazz Orchestra for their study of sensemaking in organizations, illustrating that the study of unconventional organizations can lend great insight into conventional organizations by providing temporal limits (i.e., a season) and a clear performance outcome as the dependent variable, something not easily defined within a conventional organization.

In terms of appraisal and coping, it was hypothesized that the questionnaire and interview data would support a shift from emotion-focused coping to problem-

focused coping as being responsible for effective transformational change and performance in the face of environmental challenges (i.e., a change in goalkeeper and the loss of a key forward to injury). As well, it was expected that participants would indicate a positive secondary appraisal of any perceived challenges they faced during the transformational change process. It is theorized that a high level of perceived control or capacity to respond to a challenge or barrier (secondary appraisal) would increase their perceived efficacy in responding to perceived changes or challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b; Rotter, 1989). In terms of change readiness factors, it was expected that because the transformation was successful, participants would describe participation, clarity of goals, recognition of a need for change, as well as an increased sense of self-efficacy in attempting to deal with the change.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To unpack the concept of change readiness it is important to explore, understand, and identify the relationships between the topics of organizational change, individual change, change readiness, and the challenges of change as they are currently viewed in the research literature. Viewed as a challenge, the concept of change then provokes an examination of the physical, psychological, and emotional factors involved in confronting any challenge, including stress, appraisal, and focus.

### Organizational Change

Whereas many organizational change programs are initially perceived as being successful, long-term success has been elusive (Nadine & Persaud, 2003), and only one third of total quality management and reengineering programs met their planned goals (Carr, 1996; Porras & Robertson, 1992). Authors cite a variety of reasons for failed change efforts, including a lack of urgency (Kotter & Cohen, 2002), contracting against the right issues and outcomes (Block, 2001), and lack of systems thinking (Burke, 1982, 2002; Burke & Litwin, 1992). In this article, it is argued that fundamental to organizational change theory is the process of getting ready for change. Researchers have identified several components of the change readiness process:

- the stages of change (Lewin's [1958] theory of change and Prochaska et al.'s [1997] transtheoretical model of change),
- cognitive schemas or attitudes toward change (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Isabella, 1990; Lau & Woodman, 1995),
- the interactive and interpretive aspects of coping with change (Lazarus & Folkman's [1987] transactional model of stress and coping),
- the cognitive processes of change (see Armenakis & Burdick, 1988, for a review; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; George & Jones, 2001; Thompson & Hunt, 1996),
- the correlates of readiness for organizational change, including a perceived need for change, self-efficacy, perceived behavioral control, active participation in the change process, and decisional latitude and balance (Ajzen, 1991; Armenakis et al., 1993; Cunningham et al., 2002; Prochaska et al., 1997; Terry & Jimmieson, 2003).

However, despite increased organizational efforts to empower employees through mechanisms such as participation in decision making, empowerment projects still encounter resistance from employees and are often unsuccessful (Griffin, 1988; Locke & Schweiger, 1979; Wagner, 1994). Wagner (1994) in particular engaged in an exhaustive review of participation and performance, finding participation to have a minor impact on performance.

It is not clear how to facilitate the confidence, clarity, and control people crave to enact change. No studies have accounted for the gap between cognition (the preparation stage) and behavior (the action stage) (Armitage, Sheerhan, Conner, & Arden, 2004; Thompson & Hunt, 1996). In fact, Armitage et al. (2004), in their study aiming to predict changing eating habits ( $n = 787$ ) using the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the construct of perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1998), revealed through longitudinal analyses “a serious limitation of the [theory of planned behavior] (and, by extension, of decisional balance and self-efficacy), namely, that it was not possible to predict progression from preparation to action” (p. 498). Progression from the preparation stage is crucial because it involves the transition of the behavior to actual performance.

Despite our knowledge, despite the research, despite the theories and models available, there still remains an “implementation gap” in dealing with organizational and therefore individual change effectively (Armitage et al., 2004). In their discussion of change typology, Thompson and Hunt (1996) described the implementation gap from the preparation to action stage as a “black box” of change, drawing attention to the cognitive processes involved in an attitude change and decrying how “even where the kind of change is recognized and measured, little insight is gained as to how the change occurred” (p. 656). The purpose of this study was to gain insight into what best gets people ready for and to change.

### **Change Readiness**

Readiness takes its roots in early research on organizational change (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Perhaps the greatest challenge of change lies with the common assumption in the organization change literature that employees need to “be made ready” for the change that is imminent within the organization (Aremenakis & Harris, 2002). Increasing employee decisional latitude, participation, and power often requires a further change in managerial approach from authoritative to participative (Antonacopolou, 1998): Perhaps more important than facilitating employee readiness for change would be exploring how leaders can get ready to get employees ready for change.

The theoretical basis for change readiness begins with early studies on “creating readiness” by “reducing resistance to change.” Coch and French (1948) illustrated the power of participation in their experiments involving garment workers. The experimental groups who were presented with a stark message regarding the need for change and given an opportunity to participate in the change process showed increased productivity. Experiments in creating readiness involved proactive attempts by a change agent to influence the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and ultimately the

behavior of organizational members. At its core, it is believed that change readiness involves changing individual cognitions (Bandura, 1982; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Most change readiness models emphasize the importance of (a) generating an awareness of the need for change and (b) supporting people's perceived ability to change. At this point, it is important to differentiate between different kinds of change: Environmental change, whether it happens inside or outside of the organization, poses challenges to an organization's leaders that then demand a response and usually involve an organizational change. Organizational changes then lead to the need for individual change. For instance, the market may shift, making a product or service obsolete; a natural disaster may strike, increasing or decreasing the demand for the organization's service; or employee attitudes and expectations may evolve, placing increased pressure on organizational resources such as employee assistance plans. The message that change is necessary often stems from external contextual factors (social, economic, political, or competitive) and involves identifying a discrepancy between the current organizational performance and organizational goals (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Pettigrew, 1987). Therefore, organizational changes are often necessary. Of course, organizational changes then demand change at the level of the individual organizational member. Typical change management strategies of persuasion and influence can often result in resistance (Beckhard, 1992; Beckhard & Harris, 1987) and could undermine attempts to involve employees by the very fact that organizational changes are preordained by the leadership, the result of a decision-making model that excludes the employee. A leader's responses to environmental changes can impact the structure of organizational changes, the facilitation of individual changes, and the success of the organizational change overall.

The current study explores a successful organizational transformational change process to better understand how leaders get ready for external change such that they are better able to facilitate change within their organizations. Readiness for change does not necessarily imply armed and prepared in the sense that we often assume it must mean; readiness may also mean at peace, tolerant, or open to change. In this way, change readiness is defined as the state in which one is best prepared *to* change internally because one is best prepared *for* changes in the environment, and the challenge of change readiness becomes "How does a leader get ready to get employees ready for change?"

### **Individual Change**

The change readiness model explores and elaborates upon the gap between preparation and action by asserting first that effective organizational change begins at the individual level of analysis. Whereas social information processing models (Griffin, 1987) suggest that an individual's readiness to change may be shaped by the readiness of others, the present research begins from the assumption that all organizational change must first be enacted at the individual level and perhaps even more specifically at the leadership level. Leaders, after all, are individuals. George and Jones (2001) proposed an analysis of the process of change at the individual level, considering the change process as an "individual and group sense-making process

taking place in a social context that is the product of constant and ongoing human production and interaction in organizational settings” (p. 421). Ultimately, it would seem that all change, whether organizational, individual, externally, or internally initiated, depends on the individual’s resolve or willingness to change. Edmondson and Woolley (2003) discovered that variance in interpersonal climate and behavioral norms across different work groups are likely to affect responses to a change program or other organizational intervention, even when implementation methods are consistent in their delivery. George and Jones explored the interplay between affect and cognition and emphasized the key role played by individual affective processes in the change process because “first and foremost, change is initiated and carried out by the individuals in organizations” (p. 420). If at its most fundamental organizational change depends on the individual, it seems imperative to explore the process of change at the individual level of analysis to inform models of change at the organizational level.

Researchers in the area of individual change or “personal transformation” have described the individual change process in terms of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Lewin, 1951). Researchers have identified the “stages of change” (Prochaska et al., 1997), while suggesting a variety of psycho-socio-emotional factors that may contribute to an individual’s movement from one stage to the next, including self-efficacy, perceived behavioral control, and social support (Bandura, 1977; Courneya, Plotnikoff, Hotz, & Birkett, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). However, other commentators identify the failure to address processes that might explain the intention-behavior gap as a significant limitation of such theories (Sheeran, Trafimow, Finlay, & Norman, 2002).

Antonovsky (1987) refined and integrated theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 1988), and acquisition of coping skills (Meichenbaum & Cameron, 1983) into the construct of *sense of coherence*: an indication of readiness to change that includes the ability to cope, solve problems, and engage in healthy behaviors. Again, it is not clear how to facilitate or enhance an individual’s sense of coherence because it is not clear how one moves from preparation to action, or perhaps what makes one sort of preparation more conducive to action than another. It is suggested that “reflection-in-action” or “double-loop learning” can move the individual through the change process (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Although we are closer to understanding what factors are required by an individual to move through the stages of change, it is not clear how best to facilitate this movement, or specifically what factors or processes are involved in moving an individual through the final stage of change to a point of personal transformation. Adopting a reflection-in-action or double-loop learning approach in itself requires a certain degree of personal transformation or shift in paradigm.

If at the heart of organizational change is change in organizational members’ beliefs, interpretative schemes, and behaviors (Bartunek, 1984; Isabella, 1990; Lau & Woodman, 1995; Porras & Robertson, 1992), it is important to understand the role that cognitive and emotional processes play in the change process. When studying individual change, it is also important to take into account the infinite variables at play within the individual system and the infinite beliefs and values that arise from

a multitude of historical, psychological, emotional, biological, and situational factors; individuals change for infinite reasons. Acknowledging the complexity and variability of an individual facing change may enhance a leader's readiness to better respond to and facilitate change.

### **The Challenges of Change**

Organizational change poses many challenges to the individual. Organizations require the ability to adapt to the turbulence of today's ever changing organizational climate and the capacity to forge creative alliances of diverse individuals to collaboratively solve complex problems. Competition, funding reduction, efforts to improve cost efficiency, mergers, and the reengineering of work processes place enormous demands on both organizations and their employees. For this study, organizational change is conceived as a problem-solving process.

Effectively meeting any challenge demands certain physical, emotional, and psychological resources in such areas as creativity, problem solving, focus, memory recall, and task performance. Change is challenging and thus causes some level of emotional arousal or "anxiety" (Ferrie, Shipley, Marmot, Stansfeld, & Smith, 1995). Anxiety has been shown to be the greatest impediment to performance in a number of realms including problem solving (Hammond, Stewart, Brehmer, & Steinmann, 1986; Sawyer, 1990), learning (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Eubank, Collins, & Smith, 2000; Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Mathews, 1993), athletics (Easterbrook, 1959; Fazey & Hardy, 1988; Hanin, 1980; Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990), and organizational change (deVries & Wilkerson, 2003; Fineman, 1993; Gray, 1987; Hirschhorn, 1990). As with anything, when resources are reduced or impeded, performance decreases. If fear or anxiety goes unresolved within the individual, it may have negative physiological and psychological effects and lead to chronic anxiety, depression, or neurosis (Cox et al., 2001; Gabriel & Liimatainen, 2000; House, Landis, & Umbessen, as cited in de Vries & Wilkerson, 2003; Kivimaki et al., 2001; Kline, 2000; Statt, 1994; Strongman, 1996). If not addressed, negative appraisals have been shown to undermine human capital and block progress toward the fulfillment of organizational goals (Fineman, 1993; Hirschhorn, 1990) by impacting problem-solving and consequently, decision-making processes.

*Appraisal and coping.* Hans Selye, the prominent stress psychologist, explained that every experience or change represents a challenge or stressor to the human system, and thus every experience is met with some degree of "alarm" or arousal (Selye, 1956). It is individual difference, or "how we take it," that determines whether a stressor is interpreted as eustress (positive or challenging) or dystress (negative or threatening). Likewise, the multidimensional theory of performance anxiety (Jones & Swain, 1992, 1995; Jones, Swain, & Hardy, 1993; Martens et al., 1990) includes a directional component for measuring individuals' anxiety appraisal along with the traditional intensity component. Work-related dystressors may include lack of job security, opportunity, and autonomy; insufficient recognition or reward; overload; time pressures; organizational change and restructuring; as well as

the general unpredictability of the workplace. The challenges of change may be considered exciting or threatening to a person's goals and as such cause high levels of facilitative arousal or debilitating anxiety (deVries & Wilkerson, 2003; Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Jimmieson & Terry, 2004; Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

Challenges associated with change also require a process of cognitive appraisal to determine whether an individual believes he or she has the resources to respond effectively (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The appraisal literature presently explains the response or "coping" process in terms of problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1985; Lazarus & Launier, 1978), also referred to as *active* and *passive* coping styles (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001). As well, *approach* and *avoidance* style measures of coping exist (Anshel, 1996; Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Roth & Cohen, 1986). When faced with a challenge, an individual primarily appraises the challenge as threatening or nonthreatening and secondarily appraises the challenge in terms of whether he or she has the resources to respond to the challenge effectively. If the individual does not believe he or she has the capacity to respond to the challenge or feels a lack of control, he or she is most likely to turn to an emotion-focused coping response such as wishful thinking (i.e., "I wish that I can change what is happening or how I feel"), distancing (i.e., "I'll try to forget the whole thing"), or emphasizing the positive (i.e., "I'll just look for the silver lining, so to speak; try to look on the bright side of things;" Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). If the individual feels that he or she has the resources to manage the challenge, he or she will usually develop a problem-focused coping response such as analysis (i.e., "I try to analyze the problem in order to understand it better; I'm making a plan of action and following it"). It is theorized and empirically demonstrated that one's secondary appraisal then determines coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985).

*Focus and performance.* Perception and focus may also play a large role in generating and resolving barriers to change, thereby enhancing the change readiness process and determining the success of the change itself. If the challenge is perceived to be manageable or within the individual's resources, attention will then be focused on addressing the problems the challenge creates for the person (problem-focused coping). If the challenge on the other hand is perceived to overwhelm resources, attention is directed toward attempting to control the resulting distress or anxiety (emotion-focused coping). Secondary appraisal holds important implications for the change process. If an individual's attentional resources are focused on reducing anxiety, his or her capacity for problem solving is reduced and the process of getting ready for a change may be seriously impaired. If on the other hand a person's cognitive resources are free, he or she is ready to address the tasks or challenges associated with change.

In conditions of high demand, individuals who interpret information in a threatening manner show a bias in the processing of threatening stimuli, resulting in a slower processing of this type of information (Mathews & Milroy, 1994; Mathews & Sebastian, 1994) and reduced performance. Being more sensitive to threat cues in



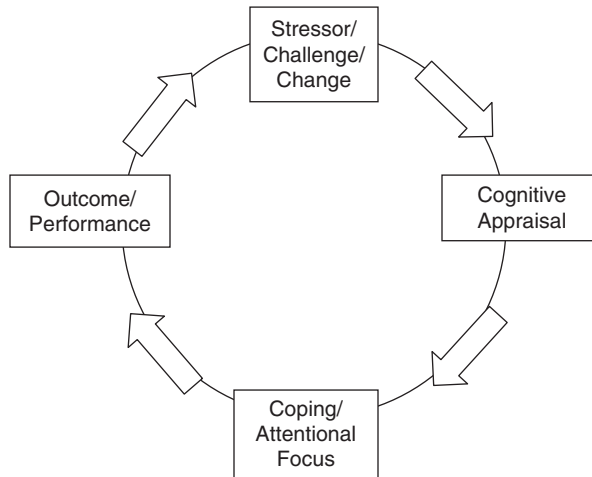
the environment decreases the processing resources available and limits the capability of anxious individuals to deal with more task-relevant demands. Problem-solving research points to similar cognitive/emotional dynamics. Ansburg and Hill (2003) suggested that creative problem solving similarly depends on an individual's capacity to use peripherally presented cues effectively. They pointed to a need for "breadth of attentional focus" as a predictor of effective creative problem solving. An individual's hypervigilance toward threat cues would impede such attentional breadth and thereby inhibit creative problem solving in the face of the challenges of change. Several researchers have also suggested that self-confidence or "internal stability" may act as a moderator influencing the directional interpretation of anxiety symptoms (Jones et al., 1993; Jones & Swain, 1992). Organizational change facilitation tends to emphasize an increase in an individual's perceived control, decisional latitude, and participation (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976; Karasek, 1979). Individuals' interpretations or beliefs appear to be a promising point of leverage for change agents.

Attentional resources directed toward avoidance, resignation, control, or denial of feelings are no longer available to address a challenge or problem or decide on and complete the correct course of action for a successful outcome (Bond & Hayes, 2002; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). In their study of mental health and work performance, Bond and Bunce (2003) found that "people who do not try to avoid or control psychological events have more attentional resources, engage in less avoidant behavior, and may learn how they can most effectively use the control that they have to promote their mental health" (p. 1064). The present research explored the interplay of individual stress, appraisal, and coping responses or focus (Figure 1) for university soccer players to gain insight into how people get ready for the environmental, organizational (or team), and individual challenges of change.

## **METHOD: THE CASE OF A UNIVERSITY SOCCER TEAM**

### **Research Design**

The research design followed a case study methodology, ideal for investigating contemporary phenomenon within real-life context and with multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1984). The participants included 29 university-level soccer players and their coach ( $n = 30$ ). The study spanned three seasons of play during which time the team experienced several challenges and a key transformation, overcoming several environmental and internal challenges and moving from being a highly ranked team to becoming national champions. The transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) was used as an orientational framework to guide the study (Patton, 1990). The model is multidimensional and assumes that adaptation to stressful events involves dispositions, cognitive appraisals, and coping responses that then determine an individual's attentional focus. Lazarus and Folkman (1984a, 1984b) proposed a process-oriented approach in which coping (a) refers to specific thoughts, feelings, and acts; (b) is examined in the context of encountering a specific



**FIGURE 1: Relationships Among Stress, Appraisal, Focus, and Performance**

source of stress; and (c) is studied in slices of time so that changes can be observed in what is thought, felt, and done as the requirement of the situation changes. A mix of qualitative and quantitative measures sought to address the research questions guiding the study:

*Research Question 1:* What does it mean to be ready for change?

*Research Question 2:* How do organizations get ready for change?

*Research Question 3:* What kind(s) of organizational change readiness supports individual change readiness?

## Participants

The sample consisted of 29 soccer players and their coach ( $n = 30$ ). The team was a mixture of rookies and varsity players ranging in experience from 1st year to 5th year and in age from 17 to 23. The coach had been coaching the team for 4 years and had previously coached championship teams. Over the course of three seasons there had been some critical turnover in terms of players as older players retired and rookies joined the squad. During the third season and final year of the study, the team experienced several changes: First, they lost their key goalie to an altercation that resulted in her being released from the team and left the team with a 1st-year player as their primary goalie; second, they lost a key player (forward) to a broken leg mid-season; and finally, they experienced a losing streak during a road trip that found them at the lowest that they had ever been in the team rankings. The team went on to earn a berth in the national championships that found the novice goalie saving the day in a shootout performance. At the championship tournament they emerged victorious.

## Measures

Qualitative data were collected using a primary and secondary stress appraisal questionnaire (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) that captured perceived barriers, threat appraisals, and control appraisals. As well, the Ways of Coping questionnaire (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985) was used as a guiding framework to theme and capture resulting foci or coping strategies. Other measures of coping exist, including approach and avoidance style measures (Anshel, 1996; Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Roth & Cohen, 1986), but the Ways of Coping instrument best suited the needs of this study because it includes a wider variety of coping strategies. Questionnaires were administered six times over the final season, pre and post three games. It was important to capture both pre- and postgame appraisals and coping responses to differentiate between imagined challenges and real challenges and compare imagined and actual coping responses in case there is a disconnect between the two. Questionnaire questions included:

Pre:

- What is your goal for this game?
- Describe what you believe will be the biggest challenge or most difficult task for you in this upcoming game.
- What problems does this challenge create for you?
- What will your focus be?

Post:

- What was your goal for this game?
- Describe one particular challenge from the game.
- Describe an example of a particularly intense, critical incident or defining moment in a recent game.
- What did you focus on in responding to this challenge?
- Or what decisions or strategies did you employ?

Coping decisions or foci were assessed using a situation-specific approach. Although the dominant approach to the measurement of coping has been to assess coping as a trait, that is, as a stable person property that affects actions and reactions under a variety of stressful circumstances, coping traits are often poor predictors of the ways people actually cope in a specific context (Cohen & Lazarus, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The power of trait measures to predict coping processes is limited because by definition, they are concerned with person characteristics that transcend situational characteristics whose properties are apt to produce variability rather than stability in how people cope. Two criteria were thus addressed to study coping as a process: (a) Coping was examined within the context of a specific stressful encounter, such as a game, and (b) what the person actually does (as contrasted to what the person usually does or would do, which is asked by the trait approach) was described (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b). The questions were asked in a group setting, but answers were written by individuals to protect anonymity and reduce external influence on answers.

To further explore questions of appraisal and focus, 20 in-depth interviews (19 players and coach) were also conducted following a similar pattern of questioning to that of the questionnaires. Interviews, unlike the questionnaires, reflected back over the three seasons of play and inquired into both personal and team challenge and change scenarios. For instance, whereas a personal challenge may be “my opponent’s speed in this game” a team challenge might be “the loss of a key player” or “the general speed of the other team.” Participants were asked to describe specific challenges and changes the team experienced over the course of three seasons, how the team appraised these challenges or changes, and what decisions, foci, or coping strategies were employed by the team. With regard to personally challenging or stressful situations, participants were asked to describe their personal appraisals (primary and secondary) of the stressor (What made this incident critical for you? What were your thoughts and feelings at this time? What was beyond your control? What was within your control?) and their foci, decision, or coping strategies in responding to the stressor (What decision did you make, or what action did you take, at this moment? What decision[s] did you make when faced with this incident? What solutions or strategies did you employ in order to deal with this incident? Why?).

Finally, performance was measured with one item in the questionnaire and interview asking whether “the outcome of the decision or coping strategy was satisfactory or not.” A measure of performance is difficult to achieve in most situations. Considering the low scoring nature of the game of soccer, in this study the soccer player’s subjective evaluation of the satisfactory quality of their decision in response to a challenge or stressor was taken as an appropriate measure of performance. Often, satisfactory results meant “scoring,” but not always. At times, a satisfactory performance was simply “a good decision.”

## **Analysis**

Content analysis of verbatim expression (CAVE) was used to extract the stressors or “critical incidents,” appraisal of the stressors, and resulting coping strategy or “focus” (Peterson & Seligman, 1987). A thematic analysis (Grbich, 1999) was conducted by independent judges using NVivo software and a reciprocal coding approach (McDonnell, Lloyd Jones, & Read, 2000) where researchers engage in open dialogue about themes and data interpretation. In doing so, each transcript is first reviewed independently. Then, through dialogue, composite themes and related critical issues are developed. Thematic analysis, or pattern coding, is a method for grouping diverse sections of data into smaller analytic units (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **RESULTS**

Questionnaires and interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software to extract recurring themes as they related to the guiding research questions.

## Interviews

When asked specifically about the transformation they perceived their team to have gone through, participants were first asked to identify the major external, environmental, or contextual changes they had faced that prompted a transformation within their organization or team. Participants identified four key contextual changes:

1. the “release” of the starting goalie,
2. the loss of a key forward to injury,
3. the loss of several key games midseason,
4. a “changing of the guard” as older players graduated.

In the face of the changes stemming from their environment, team members then identified internal changes that had occurred within the team itself over the course of 3 years and throughout the key transformational period in their final season. These factors were perceived to have contributed to the successful transformation of the team and were believed to have resulted from a change in team members:

1. a more participative role structure,
2. an increased clarity in communication among teammates.

The following factors were perceived to have emerged from the transformation itself:

1. an increased clarity in the identification and expression of team goals,
2. a shift in goals from general to specific,
3. a shift from negative to positive attitudes.

How their transformation unfolded was the subject of the rest of each interview.

In an effort to better understand the factors that determine both team (organizational) and player (individual) change readiness, participants were asked to describe their appraisals of the challenges the external changes posed for the team and what strategies they employed in response to these challenges both as a team and as individuals. In terms of all three external changes confronting the team (the loss of a goalie, a player, and their standings) the key emergent appraisal theme emerged as that of “hitting rock bottom” and feeling “powerless”:

It was a downward spiral because once we lost, it kept getting worse. It couldn't get any worse.

We were just brutal. We couldn't even put together a two yard pass. Nothing was working.

We kind of felt powerless and out of control and no matter what we tried, we didn't get the outcome we wanted. We were out of control and we didn't know why we were out of control.

I felt that [key player who broke her leg] was basically irreplaceable. Nobody could step into her shoes. She is the fastest player on the team.

We were all over the place. We panicked.

A need for internal change was recognized and very apparent; however, in terms of their sense of efficacy in facing the challenges the external and internal changes implied for the team, participants described powerlessness rather than empowerment. Across the 20 interviews there was consensus as to the inability of the team to cope with changes that had occurred. Common descriptors used were “powerlessness,” “out of control,” and “hitting rock bottom.” According to the theory of cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), once an individual appraises a threat as beyond his or her resources, he or she typically responds with a coping strategy that is emotion focused rather than problem focused. Emotion-focused coping strategies or foci are generally less effective because they tend to shift attentional resources away from the task at hand and toward reducing, controlling, or avoiding the anxiety that results from a perceived lack of control. However, results showed that despite a lack of perceived control, coping strategies were more often specific and goal oriented rather than emotion focused:

Before we hit our turning point, we felt kind of powerless, out of control, and no matter what we did, we did not get the outcome we wanted. It was important that we realized we couldn't go any lower, we had nothing to lose, we just had to move on.

In terms of the loss of our key goalie [to expulsion] and key forward [to injury], we knew that nobody could step into their shoes, they were irreplaceable, but it was important to realize that we could do it without them, that we had people just as prepared to win.

There was obvious breakdown [when we lost two players] and you have to get down there so that you can build it back up, it was like pushing a restart button, we got over that and realized we could do it without those people.

We had hit rock bottom. We needed to. But it was like the players just decided that we would have to win all our games from then on, that it wasn't too late, and that we were still in the running.

If we couldn't go over a rock, we would find a way around it.

Other ways of coping emerged in response to the “powerless” appraisal, including withdrawal (“we just didn't talk about it”), positive thinking (“we just had to believe that we could do it”), social support (“everything is a team problem, everyone has a role”), blaming (“we were just all blaming each other”), and self-control (“everyone just bared down and decided there was no way we were losing”), but of the 20 participants interviewed, 10 described problem-focused coping strategies of the nature described earlier.

Interviews illustrated general team appraisals and responses to the changes but also included appraisals and responses to environmental changes that were specifically impactful to individual team members. Changes that emerged as particularly salient for participants individually included weather, opponents, and coaching. A similar pattern was observed in the participants' descriptions of their appraisals and coping: Solution effectiveness seemed to hinge on the relationship between negative secondary appraisal (perceived lack of control) and problem-focused coping (specific and goal oriented). For instance, although one player found the cold to be challenging, her coping response was to “just live with it and dress warmly” despite her

dissatisfaction with the “disconnectedness” that extra layers gave her. Her coping response signified a self-controlling subscale of the emotion-focused coping scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b) and her performance was rated as “unsatisfactory.” Likewise, a player who struggled with her opponent’s size felt that she had little control over the fact that her opponent was taller and thus “beat her to the header balls.” She explained how she would “just kinda fade away when we play that team . . . get passive and just fade into the background.” Her coping response signified a withdrawal subscale on the emotional-focused coping scale and when asked about her degree of satisfaction with her chosen path of response she replied that she was “unhappy but could see no other alternative.”

On the other hand, one player who had struggled with her coach described a sense of powerlessness in that she “couldn’t control the coach or her inability to communicate with her.” At the same time, her coping response was very specific and goal oriented (problem focused rather than emotion focused): “I decided I was going to just focus on my own playing, set my own goals, play my own game, and contribute that way rather than trying to change her [the coach]. And all my goals came true.” The ability to respond in a problem-focused manner even when perceiving a lack of control led to the most satisfactory performance outcomes for the majority of the interviewees (8 out of 12) who described a negative secondary appraisal or perceived lack of control.

## Questionnaires

Questionnaires were also administered to explore how the team and individuals appraised and responded to specific challenges they as individuals faced throughout the season due to contextual changes. Interviews were accompanied by a series of questionnaires administered over the course of the final season pre- and postgames for three games (30 × 6). Questionnaires were categorized according to the guiding themes of barriers to goals, primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and coping/focus. Once a player identified a stressor as threatening or not, she appraised the stressor as within or beyond her resources and then articulated her coping response and focus and her satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance result. Secondary appraisals of individual perceived challenges mirrored the theory of cognitive appraisal as shown in Table 1 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985, 1987).

Actual coping responses (postgame) did not differ significantly from imagined (pregame) coping responses. Appraisal statements fell into one of two categories of “having control over or the capacity to deal with the threat or challenge” or “not having control over or the capacity to deal with the threat or challenge” as shown in Table 1. Subthemes emerging from analysis of coping reflected the ways of coping identified by Lazarus and Folkman (1984a, 1984b) in their transactional theory of stress and coping as shown in Table 2.

However, when comparing appraisals and coping responses within individuals, an unusual anomaly emerged in the area of secondary appraisal. It is theorized that a person who appraises a stressor as beyond his or her resources tends to use emotion-focused coping, whereas people who have a favorable sense of their ability to meet

**TABLE 1**  
**Participant Secondary Appraisal and Coping/Focus**

Secondary Appraisal	Participant Coping/Focus
I have control over the threat or challenge and can change it or respond to it effectively.	I focus on my own playing. I don't get down on myself. I don't stress. I can work toward more confidence. I try to ignore other problems or outside influences in order to focus on the task. I deal with it when it comes. If I make a mistake, I don't let it get to me afterwards. I stay fit. I know every position on the field. I mentally picture myself performing well. I play hard. I stayed positive.
I do not have control over the threat or challenge and cannot change it or respond to it effectively.	I don't worry about my opponent. We couldn't even put together a two yard pass. You couldn't stop the flow of negativity. It just couldn't get any worse. We kind of hit rock bottom. I felt really frustrated. We were out of control and we didn't even know why we were out of control. No matter what we tried we didn't get the outcome we wanted. Nobody could step into her shoes, she was the fastest player on the team. There was no connection between us and we couldn't communicate. It was a downward spiral, it kept getting worse. I just can't feel comfortable, that was just me. I felt disconnected.

problems and overcome them are more likely to use effective (problem-focused) strategies of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b). Of 180 secondary appraisals of challenges, 107 described a lack of perceived control, and of those 107 negative secondary appraisals, there were 59 cases employing problem-focused coping strategies despite their negative secondary appraisal of a challenge. These individuals were more able to focus and act productively toward resolving the challenge they faced than even those of their colleagues who reported a positive secondary appraisal (perceived control) and an emotion-focused coping response such as “self-control” or “positive thinking.”

An overview of comparative negative secondary appraisals and coping strategies is presented in Table 3. The final category (beyond my control 2) is unaccounted for theoretically or empirically. Despite appraising the challenge primarily as a threat and secondarily appraising the threat as “beyond her control or capacity to deal



**TABLE 2**  
**Ways of Coping Subscales and Participant Focus/Coping Strategies**

Ways of Coping Subscales	Participant Coping/Focus
Confrontive thinking	I yelled. I played hard.
Distancing	I just kept saying "We are going to Nationals." I don't get down on myself. If I make a mistake, I don't let it get to me afterwards. I didn't worry about what others thought.
Self-controlling	I kept it to myself. I didn't let my teammates see how I felt [after my mistake].
Seeking social support	I stayed loud and confident. I just asked a teammate to help until I got there and never stopped running. I talked with the other players on the team. I told them how I was feeling and what I needed in order to pull myself together.
Accepting responsibility/self-blame	I tried that much harder to win back the ball in order to redeem myself. Work hard because I can do better.
Escape/avoidance	I tried to forget about it. I just walked away.
Positive reappraisal	I decided to be happy even though it wasn't a good game for the sake of team support.
Problem focused/increased effort	Yes, I sucked it up and kept working hard. I thought about doing my best and focusing on what the coach told me to do for the team and myself. We didn't give up until the bitter end.
Wishful thinking/regret	It shouldn't have happened. I could have made a better pass. I should never have done that.
Blamed others	It became very "us and them." We made silly decisions, we weren't doing our jobs. I had a nightmare of a coach.
Acceptance	I realized I wouldn't be able to change her or fix our communication problem. We realized we couldn't go any lower. We realized we didn't need those people, we could play and we could win. We just adjusted.
Playful problem solving/specific goals	If we couldn't go over the rock, we just went around it. I just kept trying different things. We focused on what we could do individually, on our own skills. I concentrated on the ball and the person. I set my own goals. We used to play [the player they lost to injury] all the way down the field, but now we had to play the feet more.

with,” 19 different participants described a problem-focused coping response as well as satisfaction with the outcome at various times over their final season (an overview of all 6 questionnaire responses may be requested from the author).

An emergent theme from the interviews and questionnaires was that of acceptance. When framed within the theories of appraisal and coping, the questionnaires and interviews revealed a different sort of acceptance than the acceptance that involves “resignation” or “giving in” to a lack of control as described in the ways of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b). The acceptance derived from this study instead spoke of clarity and empowerment, resulting not in diverted attentional resources but in specific, goal-oriented and problem-focused coping strategies as shown in Table 3. When asked specifically about their secondary appraisal of specific personal challenges, 14 members of the team, at various times throughout the season, articulated an acceptance of their lack of control as well as a problem-focused resolution to the challenge:

I guess the spin on the ball was out of my control, but I had total control in terms of adjusting to it.

I was not in control of what my opponent did with the ball or could have done to ensure that I did not win the ball, but I was in control of making sure I did not dive into the tackle, I held my check up so we could get numbers back and avoid a counter attack.

I went forward when I probably shouldn't have and I left our defenders outnumbered in the back, so I made sure I won the ball so that we would not be faced with a 3 on 2.

Despite my fatigue, I decided to make better decisions of when to commit myself and made sure I communicated when I needed help so that my opponent wouldn't get a breakthrough.

The lights in my eyes were beyond my control, but I could control my focus on the ball and my positioning.

I was not in control of the fact that they were fast, I was in control of my positioning and my decision making.

Other members of the team described a perceived sense of control and either a specific problem-focused coping response or an emotion-focused response. For instance:

I was in control of my performance and so I just focused on making sure it did not happen again. (Try harder)

I was in total control of my preparation, and I just made sure that I had a good warm up, ate well, hydrated and did some visualization before the game. (Problem focused)

The key to effective transformational change emerged as possibly having more to do with an effective stress appraisal stance that involved an acceptance of lack of control, or tolerance for ambiguity, than simply an increased level of perceived control. When compared to the overall transformational response to the “rock bottom” state the team experienced after losing their keeper, key forward, and several games, responses to specific personal challenges captured in the study possessed a similar quality of acceptance and “letting go” as that described in the larger team scenario. A relationship emerged between tolerance for a lack of control and an individual's

**TABLE 3**  
**Primary Appraisal, Secondary Appraisal, Ways of Coping,**  
**and Participant Coping/Focus**

Primary Threat Appraisal	Secondary Appraisal	Ways of Coping	Participant Coping/Focus
Weather, injury, mistake	Within my control	Positive thinking, self-control, tension reduction	I just push through it. I stay positive and don't worry about it.
Weather, field conditions	Act of God	Resignation, increased effort, faith	I just don't feel comfortable in the cold, but I know I have to work with it. I focus on my own playing. I just kept telling myself "We are going to Nationals." Realizing that we can do it!
Mistake, loss, injury	My own fault	Berate self, withdraw	We made silly mistakes, we just started blaming I just fade away. I just walked away.
Reffing, mistake	Someone else's fault	Blame and chastise, anger	One of our players dribbled up her butt [lost the ball], I yelled. I got angry.
Other team, mistake, injury	In need of support	Seek support	I talked with the other players on the team. I told them how I was feeling and what I needed in order to pull myself together.
Injury, other mistake, other team	Beyond my control (1)	Resignation, denial, positive thinking, sticking with routine, attempting to increase control	I have to be used to the same things, the way I warm up for a game, I kinda do it the same. There would be a problem and it would just sort of not be dealt with. I just sat back, I got kinda passive. I stayed positive, loud and confident.
Injury, loss, mistake, reffing, weather	Beyond my control (2)	Specific goals, acknowledge lack of control and move on, planful problem solving	I let in a goal so I adjusted to the spin on the ball. My check was skillful so I made sure I did not dive into the tackle, I held my check up so we could get numbers back and avoid a counter attack. I made an error so I made sure I won the ball so that we would not be faced with a 3 on 2. There was a missed ball so I just worked hard to get back so I could help out my teammate.

*(continued)*

**TABLE 3 (continued)**

Primary Threat Appraisal	Secondary Appraisal	Ways of Coping	Participant Coping/Focus
			I was tired so I decided to make better decisions about when to commit myself and made sure I communicated when I needed help so that my opponent wouldn't get a breakaway.
			It was hot so I focused on using smart direct routes.
			My opponent was tackling me so I focused on where I put the ball when I crossed it.
			The lights were in my eyes so I focused on the ball and my positioning.
			I decided to pass instead of turn because she had a better chance than me [at scoring].
			A player was on a breakaway towards our keeper, I ran towards the goal to cut off the player's angle so that I could get there quickest or get behind the goalie in case she got by her.
			I focused on getting closest to the player and taking away her chance of scoring.

ability to shift focus from attempting to control or change the barriers themselves to seeking solutions to the problems that such barriers created for the individual. In other words, a tolerant stance may have allowed the individual to move from a desire for power over the challenge or change to a recognition of their power to resolve the problems, threats, or barriers the changes might have caused for them. In this way, individual focus emerged as a potentially mediating variable for determining the success of a transformational organizational change.

**Discussion**

A longitudinal study of a soccer team informed the research into how and why transformational change occurs within an organization by enlarging understanding of the theory of individual stress, appraisal, and coping. The research questions guiding the study asked: (a) What does it mean to be ready for change? (b) How do organizations get ready for change? (c) What kind(s) of organizational change readiness supports individual change readiness?

The participating team members identified two factors thought to have resulted from a change in team membership and perceived to have initiated a team transformation: (a) a more participative role structure and (b) an increased clarity in communication among teammates; however, although participation and clarity may support organizational transformation, a personnel change in this case was based on expired tenure as opposed to intention. Personnel change is not always desirable or possible and likely is not the only factor responsible for creating a more participative and clear culture or causing the further changes identified, including (a) an increased clarity in the identification and expression of team goals, (b) a shift in goals from general to specific, and (c) a shift from negative to positive attitudes. Such cultural and operational changes typically come only after a prior transformation has occurred at the leadership and individual levels.

### **What Does It Mean To Be Ready for Change: Armed or at Peace or Both?**

Getting ready for change, as with any challenge, would demand primary and secondary appraisal and result in certain coping strategies and foci. With greater tolerance for ambiguity, people may be more capable of a productive or developmental approach to change as opposed to a defensive or aggressive approach (Hammond et al., 1986; Sawyer, 1990). The subtle focal distinction presented in this study has meaningful implications for treatment interventions. Rather than the intervention encouraging acceptance of feelings as a means to freeing up cognitive resources, it may be more effective to generate acceptance of perceived lack of control as a more generalizable variable. Recognizing and accepting one's lack of resources in one area may point to resources in another. However, rather than attempting to facilitate acceptance of "lack of control," there may be more power in facilitating a shift in focus to the challenges that perceived threats pose to an individual's goals (Walinga, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

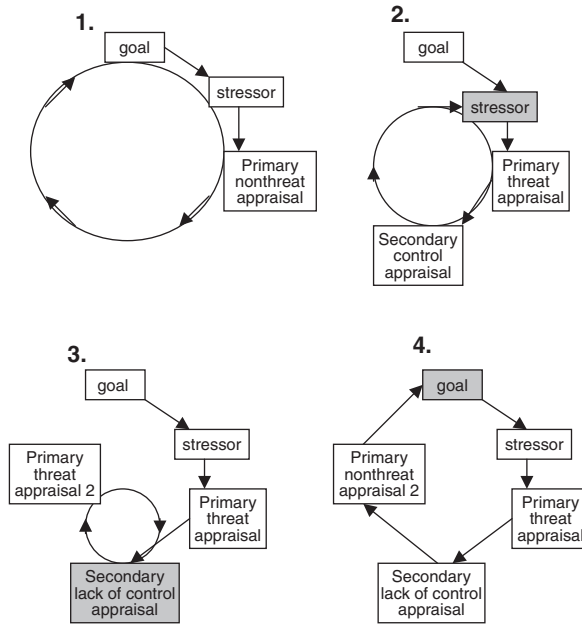
A change of any kind poses challenges and therefore is subject to human appraisal. How a problem, challenge, or stressor is appraised, interpreted, framed, or constructed can influence visibility of solutions due to what is referred to as cognitive processing bias. As Nadler and Tushman (1989) described, an awareness of a discrepancy between the organization's current performance and desired performance can often bring counterproductive energy. Negative information can result in ineffective coping responses such as withdrawal, denial, defensiveness, or blame (Mossholder, Settoon, Armenakis, & Harris, 2000; Vince, 2002). The concept of cognitive bias implies that appraisal influences how an individual allocates cognitive resources (Mathews, 1993). For instance, a negative bias can cause one to prioritize attention to threatening cues in the environment, thereby depleting resources required to attend to supportive cues (Easterbrook, 1959). Cognitive or interpretive bias has been shown to mediate performance and problem solving in a variety of realms, including athletics (Jones et al., 1993; Jones & Swain, 1992, 1995; Locke & Latham, 1994), academics (Ansbarg & Dominowski, 2000; Ohlsson, 1984, 1992), and organizations (Basadur, Graen, & Green, 1982; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

By interfering with or supporting an individual's ability to generate a positive cognitive bias during a performance or competitive challenge, stress appraisal may predict focus and consequently performance.

The case for transformative change tends to focus on helping people to accept the change or manage the threat appraisals and resulting emotions that a change may incur. Current rehabilitative interventions assert that acceptance of the negative feelings or anxieties that accompany a stressor is facilitative to rehabilitation (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Bond & Hayes, 2002; Hayes, 1987); however, not everyone interprets anxiety as debilitating, and therefore not everyone would benefit from accepting their negative emotions as a means to moving past them. Within a mental health study, negative feelings may in fact be the primary threat to treatment outcome. To generalize the concept of acceptance, it may be more fruitful to shift our focus to acceptance of perceived lack of control.

If one considers anxiety to be yet another reality accompanying a stressor, the result of a threat appraisal and a physiological readiness mechanism, it is possible that anxiety will meet with a similar cognitive appraisal process. In fact, sports psychologists have found that people appraise anxiety in much the same way that they might appraise any stressor or challenge (Jones et al., 1993; Jones & Swain, 1992, 1995); that is, one would primarily appraise anxiety as a threat or a nonthreat and if deemed threatening, secondarily appraise one's capacity to respond to the threat posed by the anxiety. If one finds one's perceived inability to control the anxiety to be threatening, then one would focus on trying to increase one's control over the anxiety rather than focusing on the actual threats or problems that the anxiety may bring. It becomes apparent that the key variable determining performance may more likely be acceptance of perceived lack of control over anything, not just anxiety.

By extending the theory of stress and coping, it is hypothesized here that when an individual perceives himself or herself as lacking in resources to manage a threat, his or her perceived lack of control, and not necessarily his or her anxiety, becomes the new challenge and focal point (Figure 2). If the person deems his or her perceived lack of control to be threatening or problematic for any reason, this would hypothetically cause the person to fixate on increasing resources for managing the threat (control-focused coping) and impede any kind of response to the particular threats the challenge itself generates. If on the other hand the person accepts his or her lack of control, deeming his or her lack of resources to be a benign reality, the person would be able to move his or her focus to the problems this threat creates and consider options for resolution and goal achievement (problem-focused coping). Control-focused coping seems to be a more generalizable construct for explaining an individual's inability to focus on the problem at hand. The readiness model proposes that the appraisal process continues to cycle through the primary and secondary phases to determine an individual's coping response (i.e., primary appraisal = is it a threat?; secondary appraisal = do I have the resources to change or control the threat?; if not we find ourselves back at primary appraisal = is my lack of control a threat?), and it is this cyclical process of appraisal that offers leverage for facilitating change readiness in that how an individual appraises his or her lack of control may determine his or her response to and capacity for the change process.



**FIGURE 2: The Roles of Appraisal, Focus, and Perceived Control in Confronting Challenges to Goals**

NOTE: The first figure shows a nonthreat appraisal resulting in a goal focus (“How do I achieve my goal?”). The second figure shows a primary threat appraisal, a secondary control appraisal, and a narrowed threat focus (“How do I overcome or control this threat?”). The third figure shows a primary threat appraisal, a secondary lack of control appraisal, a primary threat appraisal of lack of control, and an extremely narrowed control focus (“How do I increase my control in this uncontrollable situation?”). The fourth figure shows how a primary nonthreat appraisal of lack of control will then bring the focus back to the goal (“How do I achieve my goal given that I do not have control over the threat?”).

The data from this research revealed a new type of focus not accounted for in the transactional theory of stress and coping. Although several members of the team had a negative secondary appraisal, believing themselves to be lacking in the resources required to deal with the changes that occurred to the team, during the interviews it became apparent that such powerlessness did not, as was expected, lead only to emotion-focused coping, such as defensiveness, blame, or withdrawal; an acknowledged lack of control often resulted in an ability to move on and solve the challenges of change effectively. Many of the team members believed “hitting rock bottom” accounted for their successful transformation, acting as a sort of “trigger” or “restart” and enabling them to gain greater clarity about their goals as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

Although one would hope that hitting rock bottom would not be a mandatory precursor to effective transformational change, some component of hitting rock bottom presents an intriguing insight into positive transformational change. Perhaps it is the letting go that occurs within a state of failure or hopelessness that offers a leverage

point for change (Linley & Joseph, 2004). In gaining a more specific insight into the nature of letting go, the present research proposes that most important to the concept of letting go is a shift in focus. Those who are able to let go of their desire for control no longer focus on increasing power over the stressor, barrier, challenge but instead are free to address their goal and resolve any threats posed to it. Rather than focusing on increasing control or controlling the barrier or threat itself, the tolerant individual accepts the barrier as reality and accepts his or her lack of control as a reality. The person can now attend to and identify the challenges that the barrier poses to his or her goal attainment. For instance, the goalkeeper focused not on regretting or blaming herself for a missed save, or even trying harder next time, but instead focused on the challenges that a difficult shot posed for her and how she might resolve an unexpected “spin on the ball.” When faced with rainy conditions, the tolerant player focused not on denying or pushing through the rain but on the problems the rain creates for her and how to resolve the resulting “lack of ball control” or “slippery field conditions.”

The readiness model (Figure 2) illustrates the proposed reconstruction of the transactional model of stress and coping. Figure 2-1 shows a nonthreat appraisal resulting in a goal focus (“How do I achieve my goal?”). Figure 2-2 shows a primary threat appraisal, a secondary control appraisal, and a narrowed threat focus (“How do I overcome or control this threat?”). Figure 2-3 shows a primary threat appraisal, a secondary lack of control appraisal, a primary threat appraisal of lack of control, and an extremely narrowed control focus (“How do I increase my control in this uncontrollable situation?”). Figure 2-4 shows how a primary nonthreat appraisal of lack of control will then bring the focus back to the goal (“How do I achieve my goal given that I do not have control over the threat?”).

The beliefs, fears, concerns, and anxieties that can accompany any change strategy may need to be understood and resolved before people can be fully ready, confident, or committed to change; however, although negative affect may signal perceived lack of control and in fact may help to identify the particular threats a challenge poses for an individual, negative feelings do not in themselves offer the same point of leverage for change agents that perceived lack of control does.

Unique to this study is the concept that acknowledging one’s lack of control in a situation may lead to identifying one’s personal point of control within the scenario. Until now, the stress and coping literature has considered emotion-focused coping to be the polar opposite of problem-focused coping, when perhaps a more specific, insightful, and facilitative conceptualization of the model would find control-focused coping as the complement to problem-focused coping. The subtle focal shift that this study represents for the theory of stress and coping poses distinctly different implications for intervention: Change agents may wish to operate on a spectrum of control rather than a spectrum of emotion when attempting to understand and facilitate readiness for organizational change. Attempting to facilitate the resolution of the individual emotions impeding change or trying to increase an individual’s sense of control over a change may prove less productive than focusing on an individual’s absence of control. The ability to perceive one’s lack of control as non-threatening opens the cognitive doorway to a more powerful problem-solving stance



and therefore a more powerful state of readiness for change, a stance that is both armed and at peace. The definition for readiness includes “the preparation of a gun for immediate aim and firing” or “armed and ready,” but perhaps being “at peace and ready” is a more productive stance when confronting change.

### **How Do Organizations Get Ready for Change?**

It is important to consider in what ways the insights gained from this study into individual change readiness may be applied to organizational change. Classic change readiness strategies cite the individual’s need for perceived control as a determinant of readiness and participation (Bandura, 1977, 1982; Cunningham et al., 2002; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Jimmieson & Terry, 2004; Karasek, 1979). Change agents tend to rely on control factors when managing change, whereas control-oriented words regularly appear in many of the change management literature: *influence, leverage, persuade, convince, pressure, change, reengineer, manage, reorganize, merge, restructure, redirect, mandate*. Is it possible for both the leaders and the employees to have control? Leaders are encouraged to relinquish their control to empower employees, yet from where then do leaders derive their confidence? Is control the answer? Although a sense of control can bring confidence, control has been shown to inhibit growth and performance (Baumeister, 1984; Keele, 1973; Kimble & Perlmutter, 1970; Langer & Imber, 1979). As Susan Folkman (1984) herself stated in her analysis of coping, stress, and personal control,

Believing that an event is controllable does not always lead to a reduction in stress or to a positive outcome, and believing that an event is uncontrollable does not always lead to an increase in stress or to a negative outcome. (p. 850)

In some studies, the concepts of control and coping have resulted in confusing results. It is assumed that people with an internal locus of control (who believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain) are more efficacious than those with an external locus of control (who believe that their own behavior doesn’t matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b; Rotter, 1989). However, an internal locus of control may in fact interfere with problem solving in the face of objective uncontrollability because the individual may be overly confident in his or her strategies despite their apparent ineffectiveness (Walinga, 2006; Wortman & Brehm, 1975).

In certain situations, lack of control can lead to a psychological state known as *reactance*. Wortman and Brehm (1975) argued that the initial response to uncontrollable outcomes is an increase in motivation and performance to attempt to regain control. Thus, the child that experiences the death of a loved one may be motivated to become a doctor so that he or she can treat patients with similar problems and prevent the same thing from happening to other loved ones. The effects of reactance are limited though. Wortman and Brehm theorized that when perceived uncontrollable experiences continue to arise, the state of helplessness is likely to emerge. In situations of low certainty, such as an injury, a lower internal locus of control (not necessarily an external locus of control but rather a modest, more realistic, internal locus

of control) may prove more beneficial to outcome because tolerance for uncertainty or uncontrollability may release an individual's focus from that of asserting control over the uncontrollable to addressing the challenges that the uncontrollable variables pose to individual goals. Similarly, though a high internal locus of control is found to be a desirable quality in employees (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989; Karasek, 1979; Xie, Schaubroeck, & Lam, 2000), the "work through it" strategy is problematic in terms of both incurring and recovering from injuries, causing individuals to focus on making strategies work rather than on generating creative solutions. Studies in *presenteeism*, in which workers attend work even though they are sick, support the deleterious effects and associated costs of "working through it" (Caverly, Cunningham, & MacGregor, 2007; Schultz, 2007).

A more modest internal locus of control may be most effective when confronted with a challenge, perhaps supported by a higher general sense of self-efficacy. Under a more modest form of internal locus of control, an individual tolerates uncertainty but does not reluctantly resign or surrender to it helplessly. Acknowledging one's lack of control in one area may enable an individual to relinquish his or her focus on "making this strategy work" and open him or her up to a new representation of the challenge such as "Given that these strategies do not work, what new challenge am I now faced with?" Although a high internal locus of control may generally enhance performance (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989; Karasek, 1979; Kotter, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b, 1985; Xie et al., 2000), in situations of high unpredictability a high internal locus of control has been shown to cause an individual to fixate even more completely on perceived barriers or threats, relentlessly attempting to change or control the perceived barrier.

### **What Kind of Organizational Change Readiness Supports Individual Change Readiness?**

If focus rather than acceptance or tolerance is considered the mediating variable within the readiness model, convincing people to be more tolerant or accepting of change would of course be counterproductive. Efforts should instead be made to shift focus from areas where individuals lack control to areas where they possess control (Walinga, 2007a). Locating personal points of power within the change process would encourage people to let go of their desire for control over the change or barriers posed by the change and enable them to focus instead on resolving the interference such barriers and changes create to the attainment of their goals. Whether an organization (and its leaders) facing the reality of environmental changes and the increasing threat of competition that this new environment creates or an individual within that organization facing the reality of organizational change and the increasing threat of instability and uncertainty that this change creates, the key to change readiness is an ability to treat realities as such, tolerate a lack of control, and thereby identify and resolve the challenges that these uncontrollable realities pose to one's goals.

For instance, a large health care facility was operating with success in a large urban center (Caldwell, Chatman, O'Reilly, Ormiston, & Lapiz, 2007). The center employed

more than 1,000 doctors and several thousand nurses and staff. A smaller health center opened within the same area, offering good care at a reduced rate, and soon lured a good portion of the clientele away from the larger center. Focusing on reducing their rates would have put the larger organization at a disadvantage considering the greater overhead costs they sustained. A threat focus would have resulted in an unsustainable strategy for addressing the threat the smaller center presented. One can imagine the implications of cost cutting on both employee and client satisfaction. Instead, the larger center explored the challenge more deeply, discovering that the problems the smaller center created were a reduced market share. Tolerance for lack of control found the larger center addressing the threat to clientele that the smaller center's reduced rates presented while keeping in focus the goal of market share. The large center decided that to increase market share, they would focus on quality. Their new mandate of offering "quality care at a moderate rate" found commitment from organizational members and was implemented over 2 years with a positive response from clientele.

In this way, focus not acceptance is proposed to be the pivot point for facilitating change readiness (Walinga, 2006). Attempting to persuade an individual to accept his or her lack of control may prove challenging. Helping them to refocus their attention and reframe the challenges of change in terms of the problems that uncontrollable threats pose to their goals may prove more fruitful. A leader who understands the principles of change readiness may be better able to facilitate readiness among his or her employees and better able to focus on creating sustainable solutions rather than focus on sustaining compliance and control. A change ready leader would ask:

- "What are the threats this change poses to the organization?"
- "Can we control this change or the threats it poses?"
- "Accepting our lack of control, what are the problems these particular threats pose to the organization's goals?"
- "In what ways can we resolve these problems or challenges?"
- "What changes do my proposed solutions imply for my employees?"
- "What problems do these proposed changes present for my employees?"
- And finally, "How can I help my employees solve the problems that such changes mean for them?"

Change readiness demands that a person (leader or organizational member) is able to focus on his or her power to respond to the challenges of change rather than his or her power over the challenges of change or the change itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

Implications for further research include testing whether tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty, or lack of control can predict performance in other settings both in the field and in the laboratory. As well, it would be important to test whether tolerance moderates problem-solving and decision-making outcomes.

Limitations of the study include a small sample size ( $n = 30$ ,  $N = 1$ ) and an unusual case for the study of organizational change (a sports team). Despite these

limitations, the longitudinal nature of the study (over three seasons of play), two levels of analysis (both team and individual), and the multimethod approach to collecting data (questionnaire and interview) increase the significance of the results.

This article describes an approach for encouraging readiness for change, a model illustrating the power of focal optimization in the workplace. Change readiness seeks a more effective change management strategy that involves facilitating the clarity and confidence individuals require in committing to and implementing a change or performance initiative by inquiring deeply into individual appraisals of the change and helping individuals find a pivotal point of personal power within the change. The model integrates theories and models of organizational change and learning with those of information processing, performance, stress, and coping. By enlarging on the theory of stress and coping, this article provides change agents with an increased insight into change readiness within their organizations. The procedural model proposed demands a fundamental shift from a paradigm of power over to a paradigm of power to and is relevant to all levels of the organization, particularly leadership. Within the readiness model, it is suggested that effective organizational change depends on individual tolerance for change, or what amounts to a tolerance for lack of control (Sonnenberg, 1997). In helping individuals to inquire into their perceived threats and their perceived control concerning a change, the proposed readiness model aims to support individual change readiness by enabling a shift from threat- and control-focused coping to problem-focused coping, thereby increasing capacity to deal positively with the change.

As Robbie Burns (1785) so aptly asked in his 18th-century poem, *To a Mouse*, can we do anything today but “guess and fear?” Despite our constant striving for predictability, certainty, stability, and control, “the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/gang aft a-gley.” Control is illusory. Yet, leaders are regularly faced with just such problems of ambiguity in attempting to effectively steer their organizations or teams through rapidly changing conditions. Though a precarious stance, uncertainty may be the most realistic summation of the human condition, and it is possible that tolerance for change, uncertainty, ambiguity, and lack of control offers the greatest insight, opportunity, and power for human growth and development:

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,  
 In proving foresight may be vain:  
 The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men  
 Gang aft a-gley,  
 An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,  
 For promised joy!  
 Still thou art blest, compar’d wi me!  
 The present only toucheth thee:  
 But och! I backward cast my e’e,  
 On prospects drear!  
 An forward, tho I canna see,  
 I guess an fear!

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