

Leadership As a Catalyst or Constraint: Examining Employee Resistance in Organisational Change Initiatives

Dr. Meenakshi Singh

*Assistant Professor, Department of Management (BBA), Feroze Gandhi Institute of Professional Studies,
Lucknow University, Ratapur, Raebareli, Uttar Pradesh, 229010, India*

Abstract

Organisational change initiatives often are not successful because they are technically flawed rather than because of employee resistance that is influenced by leadership behaviours. While leadership has been widely recognised as critical to change outcomes, existing research focuses primarily on describing leadership as a positive force and resistance as a static or binary response. Addressing this imbalance, the current study uses a conceptual - integrative literature review to determine leadership as a double-role actor that can act as either a catalyst of change acceptance or a constraint of employee resistance. Synthesising empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 and peer-reviewed before publication, the paper conceptualises the dynamic multidimensional trajectory of employee resistance as a combination of cognitive, emotional and behavioural stages. The results of the analysis reveal trust in leadership, communication quality, employee participation and psychological safety are important mediating mechanisms through which leadership behaviours influence resistance trajectories. Drawing on this synthesis, the following study suggests an Integrative Leadership-Resistance Framework to systematically link leadership behaviours (inputs), mediating mechanisms (processes), resistance trajectories (dynamics) and change outcomes (outputs). The framework develops leadership and organisational change theory by moving from static models of success and failure and emphasising the conditional and processual nature of leadership influence. Practically it provides managers with a diagnostic window for identifying stages of resistance and implement mechanism-based interventions to reverse the resistance to a positive engagement. The study concludes by providing directions for empirical validation and contextual extension of the proposed framework.

Keywords: Change leadership; Employee resistance; Leadership behaviours; Mediating mechanisms; Trust in leadership; Communication quality; Psychological safety; Resistance trajectories; Organisational change; Conceptual framework

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: Leadership and Organisational Change

Organisations from every sector are undergoing constant change, sparked by digitalisation, technological disruption, crises and changing workforce expectations. These transformations often involve letting go of the routines, taking on new roles and reinterpreting the professional identities of employees. While organisational change is often located as a strategic necessity, less technical design and more employee interpretations and responses shape its outcomes. Prior studies have shown repeatedly that leadership behaviour is an important factor in how employees experience and respond to change initiatives (Potosky & Azan, 2023; Nyberg et al., 2025).

Leadership behaviours are a key factor in sensemaking processes in the context of change in that they influence the perceptions of uncertainty, fairness, and legitimacy of employees in the change. Studies from across crisis management, digital transformation and public sector reform contexts suggest that leaders influence employee reactions by regulating emotions, making the expectations clear and signalling organisational priorities (Wechler & Suseno, 2025; Panchamia et al., 2025). On the flip side, misaligned leadership behaviours could exacerbate the ambiguity and anxiety of employees, which would in turn undermine engagement and cooperation within employees during change processes (Hilhorst et al., 2025).

1.2 Motivation: Leadership-Centred Explanations of Resistance

Despite the vast amounts of investments that have been made in change management frameworks, a significant proportion of organisational change initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Increasingly, scholars blame such failures not on strategic and technical shortcomings, but on the resistance of employees,

stemming from fear, uncertainty, and perceived loss of control. Leadership behaviour as an explanatory factor has become a key factor in this context, which affects how employees may view change as an opportunity for growth or as a threat to stability (Islam et al., 2024; Wechtler & Suseno, 2025).

However, much of the existing leadership literature implicitly takes leadership as a predominantly positive force. Research on transformational, ethical, authentic and resilient leadership to a large extent focus on positive outcomes like innovation, commitment and performance (Bagga et al., 2023; Cheng & Teng, 2025). In contrast, leadership behaviours that limit change, such as authoritarian control, disengagement, coercive communication and erosion of trust are comparatively under-theorised. Emerging work on disengaging and destructive leadership behaviours has suggested that leadership can actively contribute to resistance, disengagement and defensive responses, especially in high-pressure or digitally mediated environments (Hilhorst et al., 2025; Ferhani & Isseque, 2026). This imbalance in the literature provides motivation for a more integrative study of leadership as an enabler and an inhibitor of organisational change.

1.3 Core Conceptual Foundations

1.3.1 Leadership Behaviours During Change

Leadership during organisational change goes beyond the formal authority to include behavioural patterns that influence employee cognition, emotion, and action. Prior research shows that there may be several leadership orientations, such as transformational, ethical, bureaucratic, change-oriented, and digital leadership, which influence the employee reactive by vision articulation, moral signalling, and behavioural consistency (Bagga et al., 2023; Orkamo et al., 2025). Importantly, leadership behaviours act as interpretive cues that either legitimise change initiatives or add to the scepticism and resistance, especially under the conditions of crisis or technological disruption (Ndone & Kyriakopoulos, 2024; Zhou & Shi, 2025).

1.3.2 Mediating Mechanisms: Trust, Communication, and Psychological Safety

Across varied organisational situations, trust in leadership, quality of communication and psychological safety turn out to be key mechanisms linking leadership behaviour to employee outcomes. There is empirical evidence that transparent communication, ethical consistency and participative leadership reinforce trust and mitigates defensive responses during change (Artinger et al., 2025; Wechtler & Suseno, 2025). In contrast, leadership behaviours that are marked by opacity, coercion or inconsistency undermine trust and psychological safety and lead to higher emotional strain, as well as greater tendencies toward resistance (Ferhani & Isseke, 2026; Shaik, 2026).

1.3.3 Employee Resistance as a Multidimensional Process

Employee resistance to change is increasingly conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising that of cognitive resistance (negative beliefs and sensemaking), emotional resistance (fear, anxiety, frustration) and behavioural resistance (withdrawal, reduced effort, opposition). Contemporary studies tend to understand that the resistance is not necessarily dysfunctional but is frequently the employee's attempts to handle the uncertainty and maintain valuable resources (Potosky & Azan, 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Leadership responses contribute significantly to the escalation and transformation of resistance into obstruction and constructive engagement and adaptive behaviour.

1.4 Research Positioning and Contribution

Based on the latest leadership and organisational change research, this research views leadership as a dual-role actor, which may act as a catalyst that fosters employee acceptance or as a constraint that fuels resistance during organisational change. By combining leadership styles, mediating mechanisms, and multidimensional resistance outcomes into one analytical framework, the study covers a significant gap in the literature. Rather than considering the leadership effectiveness and employee resistance as two separate domains, the paper goes further by promoting a process-oriented perspective to understand how leadership behaviours influence the trajectories of resistance that eventually contribute to change outcomes.

1.5 Problem Statement

Despite the strategic relevance of organisational change, many initiatives do not consider mechanisms of resistance from leadership that influence the employee response. Inconsistent, coercive or poorly communicated leadership behaviours in many cases will amplify the fear and uncertainty and multidimensional resistance to change. While the role of leadership in change is well recognised, integrative frameworks for understanding how specific leadership behaviours manifest in pathways of resistance are limited, and a critical gap is found in understanding the dual role of leadership as both an enabler and a constraint in organisational change.

1.6 Objectives

- **O1:** Identify leadership behaviours influencing employee resistance.
- **O2:** Classify resistance forms associated with different leadership styles.
- **O3:** Examine leadership mechanisms reducing resistance.
- **O4:** Analyse leadership failures that intensify resistance.
- **O5:** Propose a conceptual framework for leadership-driven change outcomes.

1.7 Hypotheses / Propositions

- **P1:** Transformational leadership reduces employee resistance.
- **P2:** Authoritarian leadership increases behavioural resistance.
- **P3:** Trust and communication mediate the leadership–resistance relationship.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Leadership Behaviours in Complex and Transformational Contexts

Recent leadership research has increasingly recognised that organisational change takes place within complex, adaptive and technology-mediated environments in which leadership behaviours require a departure from more traditional command-and-control models. Conceptual work on complex adaptive leadership emphasise that leaders need to balance flexibility, learning and coordination in order to allow organisational adaptability during transformation. Gavalas (2023) suggests that leadership readiness within complex systems relies on behavioural elements that increase adaptability not just the compliance as leadership plays a role in influencing employee readiness for changes.

Empirical studies have also shown that leadership effectiveness varies greatly depending on how leaders match their behaviours to the demands of the situation. Research in digital transformation settings indicates that leadership behaviours need to simultaneously operate in task, relational and change-oriented dimensions in order to support acceptance and performance outcomes (Orkamo et al., 2025). Similarly, studies on robotic substitution of tasks and automation show that leadership styles affect the meaning of technological change for employees, organisational identity, flexibility, and behaviour responses (Jin, 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that leadership behaviours are not universally beneficial, but instead are effective in their impact depending on the way they interact with the nature and intensity of organisational change.

2.2 Trust, Learning, and Multi-Level Leadership Mechanisms

A growing amount of literature emphasizes that leadership behaviours affect the outcomes of change mainly through mediating mechanisms such as trust, learning, and relating alignment. Studies looking at ambidextrous leadership have shown that leadership behaviours can start out causing tension or ambiguity before leading to positive results when mediated by team learning processes and reinforced by trust in leaders (Muzakki et al., 2025). These results contradict the presumption that some leadership styles are, in themselves, effective, and highlight the need to consider intervening mechanisms.

Multi-level leadership research goes further, however, by showing that the influence of leadership is not limited to interactions between leaders and followers. Work on skip-level leadership reports that indirect leadership behaviours can determine employee attitudes and behaviours through cascading relational effects, making it difficult to simplify leadership-outcome models (Schilpzand et al., 2026). In parallel, studies on sustainability and green leadership have shown that leadership effects frequently occur at individual, team and organisational levels, with mediation processes in the culture and behaviour of the organisation translating the leadership intent into observable effects (Katou & Gianni, 2026). These insights support the need for integrative frameworks that take into account the role of leadership mechanisms and not focus solely on leadership styles.

2.3 Leadership Constraints, Identity Tensions, and Resistance Dynamics

While there is a lot of leadership research in the area of positive, emerging research is now considering leadership behaviours that limit adaptation and trigger resistance. Research in policing and public sector organisations shows that misalignment between leadership behaviours and employee values can weaken organisational identification, increase scepticism and decrease engagement during change initiatives (Schneider et al, 2024). Such findings suggest that the effectiveness of leadership is dependent on behavioural - value congruence and less dependent on positional authority.

Studies done in digitally intensive and service contexts further suggest that leadership behaviours can actually amplify stress, identity disruption, and defensive responses in the midst of transformation. Investigations into digital and AI-driven change show that leadership practices with no regard for ethical, emotional, or relational dimensions may be a factor contributing to insecurity and resistance, even when change is strategically justified (Bevilacqua et al., 2026; Ullah et al., 2025). These research presentations cumulatively

show that leadership can act as a constraint (by weakening trust, destabilising identity and increasing resistance) especially when change challenges deep-seated work practices and professional self-concepts.

2.4 Research Gap

Taken together, three critical limitations are revealed in the literature. First, leadership studies are still fragmented in terms of styles, contexts and outcomes, limiting the accumulation of theory. Second, leadership is mainly conceptualised as a positive driver of change with little attention paid to behaviours that constrain adaptation or increase resistance to change. Third, employee resistance is often treated as a static outcome and not as a dynamic, multi-dimensional process which is shaped by leadership mechanism. Addressing these lacunae necessitates an integrative approach which takes explicit account of leadership as a catalyst and constraint in organisational change processes - a goal that the present study aims to promote.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Methodological Orientation

This research uses a conceptual - integrative literature review approach to identify the role of leadership behaviors as either a catalyst or a constraint in shaping the resistance of employees during organizational change initiatives. Rather than producing primary empirical data the current study is a systematic compilation of existing peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual research to construct an analytically grounded framework. Conceptual- integrative reviews, for example, are generally well-suited to develop a theory in fragmented areas of research in that theories can be synthesized and diverse findings can be pulled together and consolidated into coherent explanatory models that contribute to advancing conceptual clarity (Potosky & Azan, 2023).

3.2 Literature Selection and Data Extraction Process

The review concentrated on peer-reviewed, open-access empirical studies, published between 2020 and 2025, which explored the themes of leadership styles, organisational change processes and employee resistance or related negative employee responses. Studies were selected according to their relevance on leadership behaviours during change, resistance manifestations and mediating mechanisms like trust, quality of communication, participation and psychological safety. From the selected studies, key variables were systematically extracted, that is, leadership behaviour dimensions, resistance indicators, contextual conditions and reported relational patterns. This systematic extraction facilitated thematic synthesis and conceptual mapping between studies.

3.3 Identification and Conceptualisation of Leadership Styles

Leadership styles were conceptualised as latent behavioural configuration based on recurrent empirical patterns in past studies. Four dominant leadership styles (i.e. transformational, transactional, authoritarian, laissez-faire) were revealed according to consistent behavioural dimensions such as articulation of vision, individualised consideration, contingent reward, control orientation and decision centralisation. In order to analytically capture the relative prominence of these behavioural dimensions of each leadership style, a conceptual leadership style index was constructed:

$$LS_i = \sum_{k=1}^n w_k D_{ik} \quad (3.1)$$

where LS_i denotes the conceptual score of leadership style i , D_{ik} represents leadership behaviour dimension k , and w_k reflects the relative weight assigned based on the frequency and emphasis of the dimension in prior literature. As shown in **Equation (3.1)**, this index is a conceptual aggregation intended to illustrate theoretical emphasis rather than a statistically estimated measure.

3.4 Conceptual Mapping of Employee Resistance

Employee resistance was considered as a multidimensional process consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects. Cognitive resistance is related to the beliefs, interpretations and sense-making processes of employees; emotional resistance relates to the affective responses such as fear, anxiety and uncertainty; and behavioural resistance relates to the observable action of employees such as withdrawal, reduced effort or opposition. The total response of resistance was written as a function:

$$ER = f(CR, ER_m, BR) \quad (2)$$

where ER represents overall employee resistance, CR denotes cognitive resistance, ER_m denotes emotional resistance, and BR denotes behavioural resistance. **Equation (3.2)** conceptualises resistance as an interrelated process rather than a single outcome variable.

3.5 Analysis of Mediating Mechanisms

Consistent with leadership and change literature, trust in leadership, communication quality, employee participation, and psychological safety were considered important mediators of the relations between leadership behaviours and employee resistance. The mediating logic was represented analytically by interaction-based conceptual formulation:

$$ER = \alpha + \beta_1 LS + \beta_2 M + \beta_3 (LS \times M) + \varepsilon \quad (3.3)$$

where LS represents leadership style, M denotes the mediating mechanism, and the β terms indicate the direction of conceptual influence. As indicated in **Equation (3.3)**, this formulation reflects theoretical mediation logic and does not imply empirical regression estimation.

3.6 Catalyst and Constraint Pathway Identification

Leadership behaviours were analytically categorized into the catalyst pathways and constraint pathways. Catalyst pathways were characterised by leadership behaviours that decreased resistance by building trust, communicating transparently and being participative. In contrast, constraint pathways were found where leadership behaviours increased resistance by coercive decision-making, inconsistent communication or exclusion. Resistance escalation under misaligned leadership conceptualized itself into:

$$ER_{t+1} > ER_t \text{ if } LS_{\text{misaligned}} \quad (3.4)$$

where ER_t and ER_{t+1} denote resistance levels at successive stages of the change process. **Equation (3.4)** illustrates the dynamic escalation of resistance when leadership behaviours are misaligned with employee expectations and contextual demands.

3.7 Integrative Framework Development

Findings in all the stages of analysis were synthesised into an ordered input-process-output framework, linking leadership styles as input, mediating mechanisms as processes and outcomes of resistance as output. The overall change outcome in terms of leadership was articulated as:

$$\text{Change Outcome} = f(LS, M, ER) \quad (3.5)$$

As we have seen in Equation (3.5), organisational change outcomes are conceptualised as a function of leadership behaviours, mediating mechanisms and employee resistance. This integrative formulation offers a coherent explanation of the role of leadership as it speeds or restricts change initiatives.

IV. ANALYTICAL FINDINGS AND FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Leadership Styles and Resistance Patterns

The collage of previous empirical studies shows a systematic relationship between leadership styles and patterning patterns of employee resistance in an organisational change. Rather than having homogenous effects, leadership styles influence the way employees cognitively interpret change, emotionally react to uncertainty and behaviourally try to engage with, or resist, change initiatives. This evidence supports the proposition that leadership is a structuring force that channels resistance to take either adaptive or maladaptive trajectories.

Transformational leadership is consistently linked to lower levels of cognitive and emotional resistance, this is mainly because of its emphasis on articulating vision, sense making and individualised consideration. Employees working for transformational leaders are more likely to understand change as purposeful and aligned with common goals, so there is less misinterpretation and fear. As for behavioural resistance, it is often converted to engagement or constructive voice as against opposition (Bagga et al., 2023; Potosky & Azan, 2023); emotional resistance is overcome by inspirational motivation and leader credibility.

Transactional leadership shows a conditional relationship with resistance. While clear structures, contingent rewards, and performance expectations may decrease behavioural resistance in a context of stable or incremental change, they can typically fail to address deeper cognitive and emotional concerns in the case of transformational change. As a result, resistance under transactional leadership often consists of latent cognitive scepticism or emotional detachment rather than explicit behavioural resistance (Nyberg et al., 2025).

In contrast, authoritarian leadership is very much associated with increased emotional and behavioural resistance. Coercive decision-making, a lack of participation, and a lack of flexibility add to fear, uncertainty, and perceptions of unfairness among employees. A number of studies have consistently reported that such leadership styles stifle open expression of concerns, resulting in passive resistance, withdrawal or covert opposition. Emotional resistance is common under authoritarian leadership before this resistance escalates to behavioural resistance when employees experience misalignment between leadership behaviour and their values or expectations over extended periods of time (Hilhorst et al., 2025; Schneider et al., 2024).

Laissez-faire leadership is linked to diffuse but continual patterns of resistance, especially cognitive and emotional resistance due to ambiguity and a lack of guidance. The lack of clear leadership signals during change

causes uncertainty, distrust, and lack of commitment. Although behavioural resistance may not always be readily observed, the absence of leadership over extended periods of time typically leads to disengagement, lack of effort and loss of organisational identification over time (Nyberg et al., 2025).

Collectively these patterns point to the fact that resistance is not simply a response to change as such, but a leadership-mediated process. Leadership styles have a bearing on which side of the resistance dimension is dominant and whether resistance remains latent, escalates or is diverted for constructive use. This again reinforces the conceptual approach to leadership as either a catalyst (reducing resistance) or a constraint (increasing resistance).

Table 1. Synthesised Leadership Styles and Dominant Employee Resistance Patterns

Leadership Style	Core Leadership Behaviours	Cognitive Resistance	Emotional Resistance	Behavioural Resistance
Transformational	Vision articulation, empowerment, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation	Low	Low	Low; often redirected into constructive voice
Transactional	Contingent reward, performance monitoring, corrective feedback	Moderate	Moderate	Low to moderate; primarily compliance-based
Authoritarian	Centralised decision-making, coercive control, limited participation	High	High	High; withdrawal, opposition, passive resistance
Laissez-faire	Avoidance of decision-making, absence of guidance, delayed intervention	Moderate to high	High	Moderate; disengagement and reduced effort

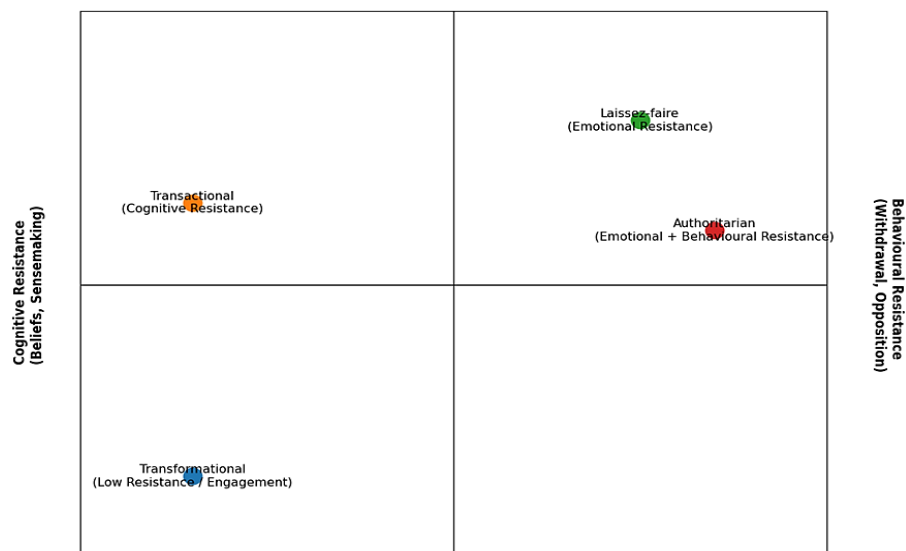


Figure 2. Leadership Styles and Dominant Resistance Pattern Mapping

4.2 Mediating Mechanisms and Resistance Trajectories

The results of the integrative synthesis go further to reveal that leadership styles do not have a direct consequence on employee resistance, but rather their effects are largely mediated by a set of mediating mechanisms that influence the way by which employees interpret, emotionally process, and behaviourally respond to organisational change. Across the reviewed studies, the most influential mechanisms of resistance trajectories are found to be trust in leadership, communication quality, employee participation, and psychological safety.

Trust in leadership underpins resistance by affecting the perceptions of leader intent and organisational fairness in employees. When behaviours of leadership create a sense of credibility, consistency and ethical matching, the likelihood of employees cognitively reframing change as legitimate and necessary (avoiding defensive interpretations) increases. On the other hand, trust erosion promotes scepticism and fear and adds to the pace of emotional resistance, as well as the probability of behavioural withdrawal or opposition (Wechtler and Suseno, 2025; Artinger et al. 2025).

Communication quality is part of a sensemaking function forming trajectories of resistance over time. Transparent, timely and two-way communication minimises the potential for ambiguity and minimises the escalation of cognitive resistance to the extent that it becomes confusion or rumour-driven anxiety. In a contrast, inconsistent or top-down communication increases the uncertainty, which creates a chance for emotional

resistance to take over and overflow into disengagement or hidden resistance behaviours (Potosky & Azan, 2023; Nyberg et al., 2025).

Employee participation functions as a psychological mechanism of ownership which determines the real or latent resistance of the employees. Participative leadership practices empower employees to give voice and co-create solutions and shape implementation processes to turn resistance into adaptive engagement. Where there is no participation or only symbolic participation, resistance trajectories tend to move from cognitive disagreement to emotional frustration and behavioural non-compliance (Bagga et al., 2023; Muzakki et al., 2025).

Psychological safety is mediating resistance by influencing the willingness of employees to voice out dissent without fear of punishment. High psychological safety enables cognitive resistance to be expressed openly and resolved through discussion without any emotional flare up. Low psychological safety stifles voice and results in hidden resistance which is behaviourally manifested over time, especially under authoritarian or disengaging leadership contexts (Hilhorst et al., 2025; Artinger et al., 2025).

Collectively, these mediating mechanisms explain the divergent resistance results that can arise from similar leadership styles across situations. Resistance trajectories are therefore processual not static: they change from cognitive appraisal to emotional reaction and finally behavioural response depending on the strength and alignment of mediating mechanisms. This finding strengthens the conceptualisation of leadership as either a bed of nails or a bed of bricks.

Table 2: Mediating Mechanisms and Their Influence on Resistance Trajectories

Mediating Mechanism	Primary Function	Effect on Cognitive Resistance	Effect on Emotional Resistance	Effect on Behavioural Resistance
Trust in leadership	Legitimacy and credibility	Reduces scepticism	Reduces fear and anxiety	Limits withdrawal and opposition
Communication quality	Sensemaking and clarity	Aligns interpretations	Mitigates uncertainty	Prevents disengagement
Employee participation	Psychological ownership	Channels disagreement constructively	Reduces frustration	Encourages adaptive behaviour
Psychological safety	Voice openness and	Enables articulation of concerns	Prevents emotional escalation	Reduces covert resistance

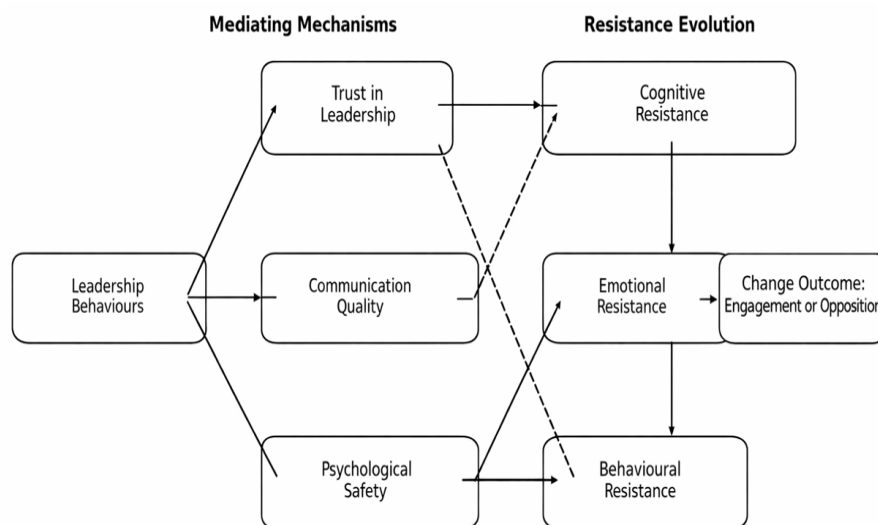


Figure 3: Mediating Mechanisms and Resistance Trajectories (Conceptual)

→ Solid arrows indicate catalyst pathways (resistance attenuation).
 --→ Dashed arrows indicate constraint pathways (resistance escalation).
 All relationships are conceptual and derived from integrative literature synthesis.

This figure shows the role of leadership behaviours in influencing employee resistance via key mediating mechanisms, which are trust in leadership, communication quality and psychological safety. These mediators influence the development of resistance in terms of cognitive, emotional and behavioural stages, and as a result of these stages, change is determined whether in the form of engagement or opposition. Solid arrows indicate the catalyst pathways in which leadership reduces resistance and dashed arrows indicate constraint pathways which increase escalation of resistance. All relationships that are depicted involve conceptual relationships and are based on integrative synthesis of previous empirical literature.

4.3 Catalyst versus Constraint Leadership Pathways

The dualism of integrative synthesis delineates two analytically opposite but co-existing leadership paths in the quest for organisational change and they are: leadership as a catalyst and leadership as a constraint. These pathways are not fixed categories of leadership but rather trajectories, process dependent, of interaction between leadership behaviours and mediating mechanisms as they influence the resistance of the employee and either attenuate or amplify it over time.

Catalyst leadership pathways are created when leadership behaviours are coherent with trust-building, quality communication and psychological security. In this pathway, leadership actions boost credibility and legitimacy, allowing the employees to cognitively understand change as purposeful and fair. Clear and consistent communication is an aid to collective sensemaking that prevents misinformation and lessens interpretive ambiguity. At the same time, psychologically safe environments foster the open expression of concerns so that cognitive resistance can be brought to the surface, discussed and resolved constructively. As a consequence, resistance trajectories are kept short at early stages, thus avoiding escalation into emotional distress, or behavioural opposition. Resistance, if present, is reframed as adaptive engagement, and supports learning, participation and commitment to change implementation.

In contrast, constraint leadership pathways are created when leadership behaviours damage mediating mechanisms through inconsistency, coercion, exclusion or poor communication. Erosion of trust undermines perceptions of leader intent and organisational justice and heightens scepticism and defensive sensemaking. Inadequate or one-way communication compounds uncertainty and gives cognitive resistance the opportunity to turn into fear, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Low psychological safety depresses voice, leaving resistance underground, where it comes out behaviourally as withdrawal, lowered effort or outright opposition. In this pathway, leadership serves as a structural constraint triggering faster escalation of resistance than mitigation of it and making successful change outcomes much less likely.

Crucially, the analysis shows how leadership can be dynamic and can move from one role to another - from catalyst to constraint - at different phases of change. The same leadership style may be a catalyst in situations characterised by trust and participation, but may be a constraint when mediating mechanisms break down. This finding calls into question binary interpretations of success and failure in change leadership and the need to consider leadership influence as conditional, processual and mechanism-driven. By conceptualising leadership using catalyst and constraint pathways, this study offers a nuanced framework for understanding the simultaneous enabling and constraining role of leadership in enabling or constraining organisational change by differentially influencing trajectories of resistance.

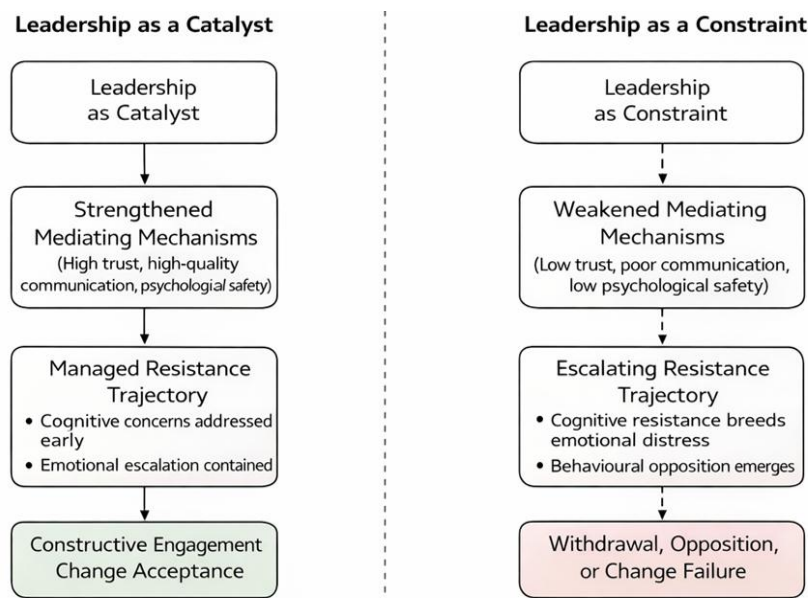


Figure 4. Catalyst versus Constraint Leadership Pathways (Conceptual)

Figure 4, illustrates to visually contrast how leadership acts as a catalyst or a constraint and shapes mediating mechanisms and trajectories of resistance, and it culminates in divergent change results.

Table 3. Comparison of Catalyst and Constraint Leadership Pathways

Analytical Dimension	Catalyst Leadership Pathway	Constraint Leadership Pathway
Leadership behaviour pattern	Consistent, inclusive, supportive	Inconsistent, coercive, exclusionary
Trust in leadership	High and reinforced	Eroded or absent
Communication quality	Transparent, timely, bidirectional	Ambiguous, delayed, top-down
Psychological safety	Encourages voice and dialogue	Suppresses dissent and voice
Dominant resistance form	Managed cognitive resistance	Escalating emotional and behavioural resistance
Resistance trajectory	Interrupted and redirected	Amplified and accelerated
Employee response	Engagement and participation	Withdrawal or opposition
Change outcome	Acceptance and adaptation	Partial or failed implementation

4.4 Integrative Leadership–Resistance Framework

Synthesising the analyses presented in Sections 4.1-4.3, this study contributes to the development of an Integrative Leadership - Resistance Framework to holistically explain the role that leadership behaviours play in the change outcomes in organisations based on the dynamics of resistance. Rather than dealing with leadership and resistance as isolated constructs, the framework conceptualises leadership influence as a multi-stage mechanism-driven process where resistance emerges, evolves and resolves over time.

At the input stage, leadership behaviours are as starting conditions of change. Leadership is conceptualised not in terms of monolithic style but in terms of a set of observable behavioural patterns related to direction, support, participation and control. These behaviours are signals that are used to interpret leader intent and organisational priorities by employees in times of change. Importantly, the framework makes no assumptions about the direct effects of leadership behaviours on resistance outcomes, rather their impact is mediated through underlying psychological and relational mechanisms.

At process stage the framework places trust in leadership, the quality of communication, the degree of participation of employees and psychological safety as essential mediating mechanisms that translate leadership behaviours into resistance-related responses. As shown in Figure 5, these mechanisms act as transmission channels about which leadership actions can cause attenuation or amplification of resistance. When the mechanisms mediating are strong and aligned, leadership behaviours encourage legitimacy, clarity and voice and constrain escalation of resistance. On the other hand, where these mechanisms are weakened (due to inconsistency, coercion, exclusion), leadership behaviours add to the increase in uncertainty, fear and disengagement.

At the trajectory stage, resistance is conceptualised as a dynamic and sequential phenomenon, moving in from cognitive resistance (beliefs and sensemaking) through emotional resistance (fear, anxiety and uncertainty) to behavioural resistance (withdrawal, reduced effort, or overt opposition). This trajectory-based view, shown in Figure 5, is an advance from previous research on resistance, as it seeks to go beyond static outcome models and emphasise the view of resistance as an evolving process. The framework shows the role of effective leadership in breaking the resistance at early cognitive or emotional stages, and of ineffective leadership in escalation to behavioural opposition.

At the outcome stage, the framework separates the types of change outcomes, either constructive or adverse, and reflects the dual role of leadership as a catalyst or a constraint. In the case of catalyst pathways resistance is redirected into constructive engagement, learning and adaptation, supporting successful change implementation. In constraint pathways, resistance results in disengagement, opposition or partial failure of change. Crucially the framework emphasises that the role of leadership is contingent rather than fixed and that the same leadership behaviours can behave as a catalyst in situations where trust and participation are alive; but behave as a constraint when the mediating mechanisms are broken down.

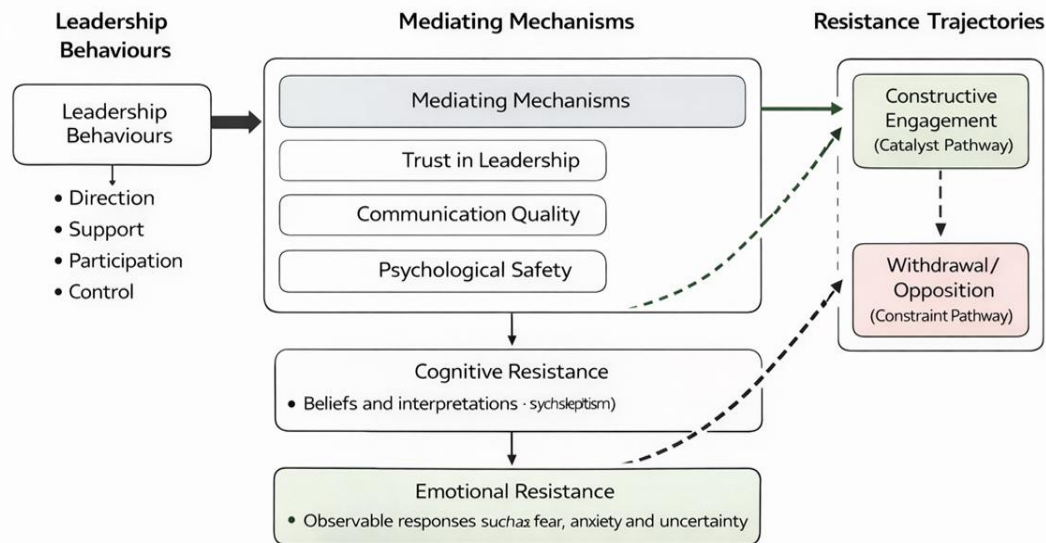


Figure 5. Integrative Leadership-Resistance Framework

Figure 5 presents a visual impression of integrating these stages into an overall conceptual model, and Table 4 provides an analytical understanding of the role and relationships of these framework components. Together, the figure and the table offer conceptual clarity, internal coherence, and analytical transparency, making the framework more powerful for explanation and use.

Table 4. Components of the Integrative Leadership-Resistance Framework

Framework Component	Conceptual Role	Description	Related Sections
Leadership behaviours	Input	Observable leadership actions initiating change responses	4.1
Mediating mechanisms	Process	Psychological and relational channels translating leadership behaviours into resistance dynamics	4.2, 4.3
Cognitive resistance	Trajectory stage	Beliefs, interpretations, and sensemaking related to change	4.1, 4.2
Emotional resistance	Trajectory stage	Affective reactions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty	4.2, 4.3
Behavioural resistance	Trajectory stage	Observable responses including withdrawal or opposition	4.2, 4.3
Catalyst pathway	Outcome logic	Leadership attenuates resistance and fosters engagement	4.3
Constraint pathway	Outcome logic	Leadership amplifies resistance and impedes change	4.3
Change outcomes	Output	Engagement, adaptation, withdrawal, or opposition	4.3, 4.4

Overall, the Integrative Leadership-Roadmap to Resistance-common Framework provides a unifying theoretical lens that reconciles fragmented leadership and resistance literatures. By explicitly connecting leadership behaviours, mediating mechanisms, trajectories of resistance, and change outcomes, the framework has a role to play in fostering theory development, as well as serving as a template for future empirical testing across organisational contexts and change types.

V. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses the theoretical and practical implications stemming from the Integrative Leadership-Resistance Framework which was developed as a result of this study. By reconceptualizing the nature of leadership influence as a complex mechanism-driven process in the behaviour of trajectories of resistance, the framework provides novel insights for leadership theory and for the practice of organisational change.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The present study makes several important theoretical contributions to the leadership and organisational change literature. First, it develops a processual understanding of resistance by conceptualising resistance as not a static outcome variable but rather a process of dynamic trajectory moving through cognitive, emotional and behavioural stages. This trajectory-based view questions dominant models which view resistance as a binary construct (acceptance versus resistance) in favor of the temporal and developmental nature of employee responses to change.

Second, the study reframes leadership influence in a mediating-mechanism perspective, thus moving away from the assumptions of direct effect from leadership and prevalent in previous research. Foregrounding trust in leadership, communication quality, employee participation and psychological safety as key means of transmission, the framework describes how and why leadership behaviours result in different outcomes in terms

of resistance. This contribution combines different perspectives, including those from leadership theory, social exchange theory and sensemaking perspectives, and provides a more complete explanation of the dynamics of change leadership.

Third, the framework presents the catalyst - constraint duality of leadership as a core theoretical construct. Rather than placing leadership in its inherent capacity to enable or inhibit, the study shows that leadership simultaneously has the potential to attenuate or enhance resistance under the conditions of the context and process. This dual role conceptualisation resolves inconsistencies in earlier empirical studies of the effectiveness of leadership, as well as offering a nuanced explanation for why similar leadership styles may produce different outcomes in terms of change across organisations and time periods.

Fourth, the combination of leadership behaviours, mediating mechanisms, resistance trajectories and outcomes into a single model (Figure 5), contributes a unifying theoretical framework that will bridge fragmented streams of research. Leadership studies, resistance research and change management literature are easily studied in isolation; this framework provides a cohesive structure to link these domains and aids in accumulating theory. Importantly, the framework is analytically flexible, so that it enables future researchers to test specific pathways, mechanisms or stages empirically, without diminishing resistance to a simplistic construct.

5.2 Managerial Implications

Beyond its contribution to theory, the Integrative Leadership-Resistance Framework offers practical insights to managers and change leaders of complex organisational transformations. One important implication is that resistance should be diagnosed developmentally and not reactively. Leaders are encouraged to determine if resistance is mainly cognitive (misunderstanding or scepticism), if it's emotional (fear or anxiety), or if it's behavioural (withdrawal or opposition) and to address it differently rather than using one-size-fits-all change strategies.

The central role of the mediating mechanisms as managerial levers is also highlighted in this framework. Trust in leadership becomes a pre-requisite for change acceptance, and leaders must therefore focus on consistency, fairness and ethical behaviour to maintain credibility during times of uncertainty. Similarly, high quality communication (that is: characterised by transparency, timeliness, and bidirectionality) works to reduce ambiguity and prevent cognitive resistance from turning to emotional distress. Managers should not see communication as the simple process of disseminating information but as a continuous sensemaking process.

Employee participation and psychological safety are further found to be critical enabling factors in the constructive management of resistance. In doing so, by building safe spaces for conversations and encouraging the employee voice, leaders can help bring up concerns early, and turn resistance into learning and innovation. Suppressing, on the other hand, may lead to a temporary reduction in visible conflict, but in the long term leads to faster behavioural opposition. The framework thus warns managers against using coercive or exclusionary leadership practices that inadvertently position leadership as a constraint, rather than a catalyst.

Finally, the catalyst-constraint distinction can be used to provide concrete guidance for adaptive leadership in different change phases. Leaders should always be able to determine whether their behaviours are reinforcing or undermining mediating mechanisms and make appropriate adjustments. Effective change leadership is thus not a question of employing a particular leadership style, but of dynamically recalibrating behaviours in order to maintain engagement and prevent the escalation of resistance. By operationalising the processes of leadership influence (mechanisms and trajectories) the framework provides managers with a diagnostic and intervention-oriented tool for dealing with resistance more effectively.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

This study created an Integrative Leadership - Resistance Framework, which reconceptualises employee resistance to organisational change as a dynamic trajectory, which includes cognitive, emotional and behavioural stages. By synthesising prior empirical literature, the framework represents how leadership behaviours affect resistance in indirect ways through key mediating mechanisms - trust in leadership, communication quality, employee participation and psychological safety - making leadership both a catalyst and a constraint in change processes. The study is a theoretical contribution because it moves away from static and binary models of resistance, and a practical contribution, because it provides a lens for diagnosing resistance more effectively during change to manage it better.

Future research should include the empirical validation of the framework in different organisational settings through longitudinal and mixed-method research, investigate sectoral and cross-cultural differences, and develop measurement instruments/leadership diagnostics based on the framework in order to translate the framework's conceptual understanding into practical change management measures.

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