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When the show must go on: Investigating repeated organizational change in elite sport

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**To cite this article:** Wagstaff, C. R. D., Gilmore, S., & Thelwell, R. C. (2015). When the show must go on: Investigating repeated organizational change in elite sport, *Journal of Change Management*, DOI: [10.1080/14697017.2015.1062793](https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2015.1062793)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2015.1062793>

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**Abstract**

This study responded to recent calls for the investigation of employees' responses to repeated organizational change events. Data were collected in via 20 semi-structured interviews with 10 employees from two organizations competing in English football's Barclays Premier League. The results indicated that employees responded to recurring organizational change in positive and negative emotional, behavioural and attitudinal ways. The main positive response themes related to: resilience, learning, performance, challenge appraisals, and autonomy. The main negative response themes related to: trust, cynicism, organizational development, motivation, turnover, engagement, and commitment. The findings illustrate the value of exploring and monitoring employee responses to both single and repeated organizational change. Specifically, the data indicate increasingly deteriorating employee attitudes across change events, but also highlight the important role of cognitive appraisal for responses to each change event. The results are discussed in regard to implications for organizational change research and practice in dynamic contexts such as elite sport.

*Keywords:* managerial turnover, organizational change, emotion, responses, sport, organizational psychology in sport

## Introduction

Organizational change has become an increasingly prominent theme within change management and organizational behaviour. Whilst acknowledging approaches to organizational change that emphasize the benign, emergent and inherent modes of change occurring within organizations (e.g. Chia, 2014), such ‘unowned’ modes are not witnessed within the kinds of elite sports teams featured here. Hence, for the purpose of this article, organizational change is defined more normatively as “a deliberately planned change in an organization’s formal structure, systems, processes, or product-market domain intended to improve the attainment of one or more organizational objectives” (Lines, 2005, p. 9-10); reflecting the ownership of change by those occupying senior management positions in the organization. When change is initiated by owners and strategic-level managers, those that the change is aimed at influencing are the employees located at multiple levels of the organization’s hierarchy who are tasked with implementing and coping with the change (Porras & Robertson, 1992). Unsurprisingly, the emotional and attitudinal responses of those change recipients are perceived to influence their behaviour during that process, and thus, play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of the overall outcome of change (e.g., Liu & Perrewe, 2005; Paterson & Hartel, 2002).

## Responses to organizational change

According to Antonacopoulou and Gabriel (2001) organizational change often forces individuals to come face-to-face with their ignorance and vulnerability. Nevertheless, negative outcomes from experiences of change are uncertain and the process can stimulate innovation, personal and organizational growth, and creativity. Fineman (2006) argues that individual and group responses to change can vary widely with positive and negative emotions being continual and mutually informative within a change process, implying that several emotions can coexist with regards to any particular change at any given time. For example, change might be received with excitement and relief or pleasure as well as fear and it can trigger action intentions to support or resist change, turnover, or influence productivity (Eby Adams, Russell, & Gaby,

1 2000; Iacovini, 1993). Indeed, there is a body of evidence that points to a complex relationship  
2 between employees' attitudinal (e.g., Eby et al., 2000; Lines, 2005; Piderit, 2000; Vakola &  
3 Nikolaou, 2005) and emotional (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Bartunek, Rousseau,  
4 Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Huy, 1999; Mossholder, Settoon,  
5 Armenakis & Harris, 2000) responses to change and change outcomes. Whilst this body of  
6 work has advanced our understanding of how employees experience change – and in particular,  
7 a single change event – the literature has been relatively slow to consider how emotions,  
8 attitudes, and behaviours evolve during and across change events (e.g., Klarner, By, &  
9 Diefenbach, 2011; Liu & Perrewe, 2005). To elaborate, Klarner et al. outlined a research  
10 agenda for exploration of employee emotions during repeated organizational change events. In  
11 their review, the authors raised concerns with extant static and linear perspectives of change  
12 responses. For example, such linear perspectives are surprising given that it has long been stated  
13 that, over time, organizations are confronted with multiple changes that can occur sequentially  
14 or simultaneously (e.g., Webb & Pettigrew, 1999). Further, it could be argued that stage-based  
15 models of change are out of sync with contemporary conceptualisations of stress (e.g., Lazarus  
16 & Folkman, 1984) and emotions (e.g. Gross, 2002), which are widely viewed as processes that  
17 unfold over time as individuals continually appraise their fit with their environment. To  
18 elaborate, it is likely that the extent to which employees' responses to organizational change are  
19 positive and negative will be largely determined by their cognitive appraisals of such events.  
20 That is, appraisals are considered the pivotal component of the transactional theory of stress and  
21 coping (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to this theory, stressful experiences are  
22 construed as person-environment transactions. These transactions depend on the influence of a  
23 demand or stressor and are mediated by the person's appraisal of the stressor and secondly on  
24 the social and cultural resources at his or her disposal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Cohen 1984).  
25 When faced with change, an employee will make *primary appraisals* or judgments about the  
26 significance of the event as threatening, harmful, or challenging, or irrelevant to their goals,

1 morals, and values. In turn, a process of *secondary appraisal* follows, which is an assessment of  
2 people's coping resources and options and might include judgments of control or hopelessness  
3 (Cohen, 1984). One implication of such observations is the lack of clarity concerning how  
4 employees' emotions and attitudes evolve during repeated cycles of change (see Klarner et al.,  
5 2011; Liu & Perrewe, 2005). We focus on these repeated modes of change in this paper and  
6 therefore now turn our attention to the domain of elite sport as an appealing setting for such  
7 research endeavours.

### 8 **Organizational change in elite sport**

9 A growing body of recent research indicates that elite sport offers a fruitful context for  
10 investigating employees' responses to repeated organizational change. Indeed, elite sport  
11 presents a volatile professional domain characterised by high levels of intentional, managerially  
12 owned change due to stakeholder demands for sustained success (see Fletcher & Wagstaff,  
13 2009; Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2015). This requirement for sustained performance is the  
14 main reason for the high degree of managerial turnover within the English football leagues. The  
15 League Managers Association (LMA: 2013) estimated that the average tenure of a football  
16 manager as 1.55 years. It is common for departing and arriving managers to take or bring a  
17 small team with them often consisting of an Assistant Manager and First Team Coach who will  
18 work closely with players and sports science and medicine staff daily. Managerial departure and  
19 arrival is therefore consequential for established work philosophies, practices and routines. For  
20 example, in a study of an English Premier League football club Gilmore and Sillince (2014)  
21 illustrated how rapidly previously embedded practices can be deinstitutionalised following  
22 managerial change. More recently Wagstaff et al. (2015) studied the change experiences of  
23 individuals employed within elite sport organizations using a two-year longitudinal design.  
24 Specifically, data were collected in three temporally-defined phases via 49 semi-structured  
25 interviews with 20 sport medics and scientists employed by three organizations competing in  
26 the top tiers of English football and cricket. The findings indicated that change occurred over

1 four distinct stages; anticipation and uncertainty, upheaval and realisation, integration and  
2 experimentation, normalization and learning. In their conclusion, Wagstaff et al. drew attention  
3 to salient emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal employee experiences, the existence of poor  
4 employment practices, and direct and indirect implications for on-field performance associated  
5 with organizational change.

6 Although the recent organizational change research in sport has begun to contribute to  
7 the general change literature, it remains that little is known about how employees respond to  
8 recurrent change events. For example, Wagstaff et al.'s (2015) examined employee responses to  
9 a single managerial change event in each of the three participating organizations. Hence, the  
10 aim of the present study was to investigate employees' experiences of repeated organizational  
11 change (e.g., Klarner et al., 2011; Lui & Perrewé, 2005). Given the infancy of repeated change  
12 research we adopted an exploratory approach to address this aim and remained open to potential  
13 response themes. To elaborate, we did not limit our focus to emotions or attitudes *per se*, as is  
14 often the manner in organizational change research, but aimed to explore a full range of  
15 employee cognitions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviours. This inclusive approach is in line  
16 with recent research showing that individuals respond to stressors in sport organizations (e.g.,  
17 change) in emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal ways (see Fletcher, Hanton, Wagstaff, 2012).

## 18 **Methods**

### 19 **Participants**

20 Data were collected via 20 semi-structured interviews with male full time employees  
21 located in two elite sport organizations. Both organizations competed in the top domestic league  
22 in English football, namely the Barclays English Premier League. Elite sport organizations are  
23 typically male-dominated and the gender imbalance in this sample is typical of employment in  
24 this professional domain. A two-step sampling approach was employed to account for  
25 organizational and individual sampling criteria. First, organizations were considered for  
26 inclusion if they had encountered at least two managerial changes in the previous 18 months.

1 Second, at the individual level, prospective participants had to have been employed by the  
2 organization for the duration of these managerial changes, thus encountering repeated  
3 managerial change within the past 18 months. The two-step process was necessary to remove  
4 any employees who had not experienced recurring change within their current role. At the time  
5 of data collection, the organizations from which the participants were sampled had both made 5  
6 managerial changes in the within the preceding four year period ( $M^{\text{tenure}} = 12.28$  months,  $SD =$   
7  $9.27$ ). These figures were comparable to the English football league average managerial tenure  
8 of 1.4 years (i.e., 18.8 months; cf. LMA, 2013). Indeed, in many ways these organizations were  
9 representative of the majority of teams within the Barclays Premier League in that they have  
10 had mixed historical success, are resource constrained, and commonly use managerial change as  
11 a means to competitive advantage.

12 Ten employees from each organization were sampled. All of the participants were paid  
13 employees of their respective organization and fulfilled roles as medical practitioners (e.g.,  
14 doctor, physiotherapist), sport scientists (e.g., psychologist, performance analyst), coaches  
15 whose work was densely infused by sport science activities (e.g., strength and conditioning) or  
16 training practices (e.g., technical coaches), and athletes (e.g., players). The participants had  
17 encountered an average of 4.2 ( $SD = .89$ ) managerial changes in their current position.

18 Participants were fully informed of the research question, requirements of participation, and  
19 provided voluntary written informed consent prior to data collection. The research received  
20 ethics approval from the authors' institution.

## 21 **Procedure**

22 Participants were recruited following an introduction via a gatekeeper at the respective  
23 organizations. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private room by the same  
24 researcher who was trained in qualitative techniques. Each interview lasted between 47 and 72  
25 min ( $M = 59.4$ ,  $SD = 7.03$ ). All interviews were recorded in their entirety and transcribed  
26 verbatim.



1           **Interview guide.** A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interview  
2 process. The guide provided a consistent structure for interviews whilst allowing for a point of  
3 deviation when salient topics arose. The structure of the guide emanated from a review of extant  
4 theory and change management literature. For example, the interview guide used in similar  
5 organizational change research (e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2015) provided the rationale for many  
6 basic, open-ended questions (e.g., “what can you tell me about your experiences of several  
7 managerial changes over a short space of time?”). The guide was piloted with 3 employees of  
8 one of the organizations sampled who had experienced only one change event in their current  
9 role. Feedback led to minor structural and content refinements to enhance the clarity and  
10 comprehensiveness of the guide.

11           The guide consisted of three sections. Section 1 intended to build rapport and set the  
12 context and asked participants to discuss the thoughts and feelings that they associated with  
13 each of the organizational change events they had encountered. This section was intended to  
14 highlight any general feelings and responses to the individual change events and set the scene  
15 for exploring the participant’s overall experience. Section 2 invited participants to discuss the  
16 perceived influence of each change on their own and others’ emotions, behaviours, attitudes,  
17 and performance. This section was intended to understand the participants’ evaluations of and  
18 responses to *each* change event. Section 3 invited participants to discuss the influence of their  
19 collective change experience on their own and others’ emotions, behaviours, attitudes, and  
20 performance. This section was intended to understand the participants’ evaluations of and  
21 responses to *repeated* change event over time and across change events. Where necessary, the  
22 interviewer departed from the guide to gain more in-depth descriptions of the participants’  
23 attitudes and experience. When this occurred, the interviewer attempted to avoid biasing or  
24 subtly directing the athlete’s responses by using neutral non-directional probes.

25           **Data Analysis**

1           We adopted a content analysis procedure to analyse and represent participants’  
2 responses in a coherent form (see Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tesch, 2013). The goal of content  
3 analysis is to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomena under study by  
4 representing participants’ responses in a coherent form (Tesch, 2013). The advantage of  
5 traditional content analysis lies in gaining direct information from participants without  
6 imposing preconceived theoretical perspectives. Content analysis has also been employed in  
7 similar research exploring organizational behaviour and change (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2012;  
8 Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012; Wagstaff et al.,  
9 2015) in sport. The analysis process began with the researchers independently reading all data  
10 on several occasions to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole (Tesch, 2013).  
11 Immersion within the data was facilitated by adopting a reflexive “indwelling” stance: listening  
12 to the interview tapes, reading transcripts several times, jotting notes and thoughts. In line with  
13 the procedure reported by Wagstaff et al. (2012), the researchers read through transcripts and  
14 attached memos to each segment of narrative, indicating preliminary, tentative connections.  
15 Extracted segments of potential importance allowed initial themes and meanings to emerge  
16 regarding participants’ experiences at each phase of data collection. Subsequent comparison of  
17 initial themes and debate between the research team gave rise to a range of concepts and was, in  
18 part, inevitably influenced by extant organizational change theory and literature. A process of  
19 social validation was also undertaken via the presentation of themes to participants and where  
20 feedback assisted the co-construction and interpretation of findings.

21           Tracy (2010) proposed eight criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research; (a)  
22 worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant  
23 contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. Attempts to satisfy many of these  
24 criteria have been made in the preceding sections (i.e., the worthiness of topic, rich  
25 rigorousness, sincerity, and ethicality), leaving four criteria for further attention; credibility,  
26 resonance, significant contribution, and meaningful coherence. Attempts to establish credibility

1 were made through the use of a reflexive diary, “critical friends,” member checking, and  
2 multivocality of participant quotations. Content analysis procedures also provide emergent  
3 themes that can be logically traced back to raw data. In an attempt to promote resonance data  
4 are presented using rich quotations in the hope of allowing participants’ complex experiences to  
5 vividly emerge. It is for the reader to decide the extent to which the content overlaps with their  
6 own experiences. In evaluating the significance of contribution of the research, one might  
7 consider the theoretical (e.g., implications for conceptual understanding), heuristic (e.g.,  
8 stimulation of curiosity, discourse, and further exploration), and practical (e.g., utility of  
9 knowledge for practitioners) significance of the findings. In attempt to achieve a meaningful  
10 coherence, we feel that the study achieved its stated purpose, used methods and representation  
11 practices that matched the domain and research paradigm, and attentively interconnected extant  
12 literature with research foci, methods, and findings.

### 13 **Results**

14 The results derived from the data analysis procedures represent the collated interview  
15 responses from all 20 participants. That is, the findings present emotional, attitudinal, and  
16 behavioural responses reported by participants who had experienced repeated organizational  
17 change. These data illustrate differences in participants’ responses across several change events  
18 at their club and are presented here according to their positive or negative valence. Results are  
19 presented as a narrative using rich quotations to illustrate themes. Pseudonyms have been used  
20 throughout.

#### 21 **Positive responses to repeated organizational change**

22 The main positive responses to repeated change were: resilience, learning, performance,  
23 challenge appraisals, and autonomy.

24 **Resilience.** Participants generally reported a largely negative experience of change due  
25 to periods of uncertainty at the outset of change. Nevertheless, many of the participants who  
26 had experienced repeated change accepted such phenomena as an inherent characteristic of

1 working in high performance domains. That is, although participants commonly reported a  
2 largely negative perception of change events, they stated that they were developing more  
3 positive responses to subsequent change events than their first experience of such phenomena:

4       The show must go on. I have seen three managers in as many years and coaches, backroom,  
5       and sports medicine and science staff change each time. I have started to get used to the initial  
6       period of uncertainty... I think it's the nature of the sport industry; you have got to be prepared  
7       for the changes and the personalities you will have to manage. To have that positive reaction to  
8       change, you have got to monitor and understand these things and how they evolve.

9       **Learning.** Another positive response reported by employees related to perceptions of  
10      learning from successive change events. This learning was typically associated with familiarity  
11      with change – reducing experiences of it as a novelty and seeing it as something that was an  
12      accepted part of organizational life. This response to change appeared to be enhanced by  
13      employees individually engaging in a process of reflection during and across change events as  
14      to its meaning and its personal benefits. One participant stated that although change was  
15      undesirable, when compared with previous change events, the most recent managerial change  
16      seemed to have personal benefit for them, thus ameliorating their negative response:

17         I'm relieved if I'm honest. It'll take time to adjust to a new regime, it does each time and  
18         no one really likes change – especially not another change of manager because of that  
19         initial discomfort everyone goes through; you never really know what each new  
20         manager will bring, but overall, I am happier that this change has happened because in  
21         the long-term it's better for me personally. I felt the same when [first manager] left.

22         Another participant reported having “a more predictable emotional reaction” to recurrent  
23      change, learning to use such events to one's advantage, and perceiving growth across such cycles:

24         I think I can learn a lot from this latest change; I've found that I've kind of moved on  
25         mentally, but that I can still do my job without that real passion for the club. I didn't  
26         think I could do that before. I've grown from each change and it's changed *me* for the

1 better; I know what “the game” is now; don’t commit emotionally and you’ll be fine.  
2 I’ve managed to create a slightly different role for myself. I saw an opportunity and took  
3 it, but the opportunity has come from the changes that have occurred over the last few  
4 seasons. I’ve learnt and taken my chance to protect myself and my role where I saw it.

5 It should be noted that despite the learning reported by the participant in the quotation  
6 above, he also experienced undesired, negative responses to repeated change as witnessed in a  
7 decline in emotional attachment to the organization and poor psychological contract. Such  
8 themes will be elaborated on later in the results section.

9 **Performance.** One phrase mentioned by several participants was the perception of a  
10 “honeymoon period” following managerial change, which was characterised by a short-term  
11 performance improvement, but masked more pervasive, unaddressed issues resulting from  
12 change. One participant outlined his concerns about the interpretation of this “honeymoon  
13 period”:

14 Currently we are in the “honeymoon period”. There is a bit of nervous excitement, a bit  
15 of jostling and flexing of muscles to demonstrate worth, some players are trying to  
16 prove that they should be kept or given more game-time by whoever comes in. It’s no  
17 wonder that performances are a little better, but that’s not necessarily because we have  
18 got rid of the manager and his assistants, it’s because of people’s responses to that  
19 change. People are behaving differently, not because of the removal of something bad,  
20 but the beginning of something good... it’s just short-term and structure is needed to  
21 sustain that success. I’ve seen this happen here several times now, but the board doesn’t  
22 seem to recognise that there’s a honeymoon period after the manager goes and instead  
23 interpret performance improvements as justification for the change.

24 In line with the notion of a honeymoon period, the data indicated that the collective  
25 responses of employees to repeated organizational change could influence organization-wide  
26 performance. For many participants the “rebuilding process” following each change event

1 required the conjoint efforts of various stakeholder groups to both avoid deinstitutionalization  
2 of practices and enhance or maintain performance. Indeed, although rather negatively-framed,  
3 such responses shed light on short term performance improvements following, and “despite”,  
4 change. For example, the in following quotation one participant refers to the “chaos”  
5 experienced in light of repeated organizational change and the subsequent “need to rebuild, but  
6 from a less stable foundation”:

7 [sigh] more change! More loss of the practices and systems we’ve developed. It’ll be  
8 back to the drawing board again. There’s no stability in this organization, in football  
9 really, we’re in chaos again; we have to start again – the board just don’t see how these  
10 changes affect us. We might string some performances together, but we are pulling out  
11 all of the stops and overachieving *despite* the change.

12 **Challenge appraisals.** Participants reported positive responses to the most recent  
13 change events following comparison with their previous experiences. These positive  
14 evaluations encapsulate participants’ explanations of how they judged change as opportunities  
15 for growth, development and mastery. Generally, such evaluative processes were influenced by  
16 participants’ primary appraisal of the most recent change event and their previous change  
17 experiences:

18 I respected [previous manager] but personally I’m kind of glad he’s gone; it’ll give me  
19 an opportunity to get the recognition I deserve; I’ll have a greater opportunity to get  
20 noticed with a new manager, his new coaches, and his backroom staff. Now I can get the  
21 support I’ve needed. There was no way I would have got that under the old regime. So,  
22 for me at least, this is a good change compared to the others I’ve experienced. I haven’t  
23 felt happy about getting a new manager before; usually I’m quite scared about what  
24 might happen.

25 Other participants perceived change as opportunity for organizational improvement:

26 At last, we’ve got it right, we can get out of the rut, we’ll have the right sort of manager

1 coming in, we can do something different, hopefully something genuinely different; and  
2 then we might achieve something and move up the league.

3 **Autonomy.** In addition to evaluating to change as a challenge or opportunity, and in line  
4 with learning resilient responses, employees reported positive responses to events when they  
5 perceived greater autonomy or control over change. Such responses were usually influenced by  
6 reflections of previous change experiences:

7 I feel different this time around and for the better if I'm honest. Now [previous manager]  
8 has left, I feel like I've been liberated. I didn't get much of a look-in under his regime  
9 and now I feel like I'm going to get more freedom to operate in the way I feel I can best  
10 contribute to the team. I guess I'm a more senior figure within the team during this  
11 change than previously and I think that will mean I have more input when the new  
12 manager comes in.

13 Other participants viewed change as liberating, where they could take control in shaping  
14 their own future and that of the organization by influencing culture in a bottom-up manner:

15 It's a breath of fresh air. Sometimes you have to clear the decks, cut the deadwood and  
16 start over. I think it can help. Right now, I feel immediately that I can leave behind what  
17 has mostly been a bad experience for me; I can take some control again; bring back old  
18 ways of doing things that we developed under [previous manager]. It's kind of a relief...  
19 and hopefully as players we can take a lead on cutting out all the crap things that [last  
20 manager] introduced... as long as our voices are heard.

### 21 **Negative responses to repeated organizational change**

22 Despite some participants' reporting positive responses such as resilience and learning  
23 across repeated cycles of change, employees generally indicated that their attitudes towards  
24 their employer and organization were negatively affected by such recurrent events. The main  
25 negative response themes were: trust, cynicism, organizational development, motivation,  
26 turnover, engagement, and commitment.

1           **Trust.** Participants largely reported a deteriorating, more brittle, and less trusting  
2 psychological contract between themselves and their employer/organization over recurring  
3 organizational change cycles. This theme was illustrated by the decline of trust and the erosion  
4 of employee identity with the organization. The following quotation provides an illustration of  
5 one employee's changing emotional and attitudinal response over time:

6           I've found myself becoming more battle-hardened with each change of manager. Every  
7 time it happens you get a little bit tougher – there's a quicker emotional bounce-back. It  
8 still sucks initially, but your attitude towards the job just becomes better informed – you  
9 'get' the job. Although, to be honest, I can't say my attitude towards the club has  
10 remained the same. Each time it happens, it takes a chip out of your trust in those  
11 running the organization, and a big chunk out of your loyalty and willingness to invest  
12 your efforts again. And that's why you get some more experienced people leaving; they  
13 love the job, but don't love the club, because they feel let down. When you're in your  
14 first job you don't know that you'll get another, so you don't take that risk of leaving;  
15 the more experienced guys have a network they can mobilise if they want out.

16           **Cynicism.** Many participants reported becoming cynical about their organization  
17 following repeated managerial change. In many instances, this cynicism led to further  
18 emotional, attitudinal and behavioural implications. For example, the following quotation  
19 illustrates one participant's feelings of hopelessness:

20           I've lost an ally in [previous manager]. I'm not sure I'll be able to fulfil that same role  
21 with [new manager] and I don't currently have his support. I do often wonder, "what's  
22 the point?" You can't control it, don't make the decisions, you can't do anything about  
23 it.

24           In line with employees' changing attitudes following repeated change, many participants  
25 reported perceptions of increasingly poor handling of subsequent change processes by  
26 organizational leaders, which led to increasingly cynical perceptions of leadership motives and



1 behaviour:

2 It seems to me that as time goes on the board has become less and less inclusive during  
3 the changeover of managers. I think they feel guilty and embarrassed about the long  
4 contracts they have given new managers and need to cover up the lies they have to tell  
5 us about stability. I think that's the reason they haven't communicated or supported us  
6 very well the last couple of times the manager has changed and that's why they have  
7 held everyone at arm's length during the recent change.

8 **Lack of organizational learning.** Participants reported being frustrated by repeated  
9 change with no apparent learning across change events, with one employee stating:

10 We aren't getting any better or wiser, there seems to be no learning here, it's senseless  
11 change; we just change from one philosophy to the next - you might say we go from one  
12 way of not achieving our goals to another - and because of the time it takes to recover  
13 and bed-in new ways - that upheaval each time - we are going backwards.

14 Further, the employees sampled here frequently referred to a lack of continuity as an  
15 unwanted consequence of change. Moreover, the pursuit of continuity was further complicated  
16 by the "hangover" of previous processes and philosophies:

17 The club has taken another punt on someone different with a good record in [foreign  
18 league]. The problem is that there are lots of people with good records in other countries  
19 and so few of them succeed in the Premier League. In the meantime, we are pushed and  
20 pulled from one managerial philosophy and approach to the next; different preferences  
21 for types of player, styles of play, strategy, formations, training regimes, coaching  
22 styles. It's that lack of continuity that I struggle to understand; the baby goes out with  
23 the bathwater each time a new manager comes in because they want to put their stamp  
24 on things and do things differently... so each time there is a hangover effect of previous  
25 philosophies and processes and it takes time to recover and find your feet again.

26 **Motivation.** Participants' also stated experiencing negative emotional responses to

1 managerial change due to the need to develop new personal relationships after change events:

2 I was happy with the last manager and that has influenced how I see this change; it's sad  
3 to see him go. We'd finally got the right culture and performances would follow... it's  
4 sad and frustrating when you work hard to build a relationship and make progress  
5 towards instilling the culture that will bring success, and then because there is no instant  
6 success, those relationships – and the work you did - are gone in a flash, and you have to  
7 start the process again.

8 For some participants their negative emotional responses to repeated change had a  
9 cumulative effect on their willingness to invest effort following recurrent change:

10 I feel stuck, I'm completely unmotivated to invest my efforts again only to see them  
11 start to take hold and then be undone by more change; another new manager who you  
12 have to explain everything to only for them to decide whether you offer what they want.

13 Another participant reported that the repeated uncertainty experienced during repeated  
14 change had impact on their and morale, motivation, and commitment to the organization:

15 I'm fairly demoralised after all the change in recent years. I feel apathetic towards my  
16 role here now, I just don't feel like this is the same organization I joined. The only thing  
17 that keeps me here are the pay slips; I used to work here as much out of enjoyment.

18 **Intention to Leave.** One participant stated, "I exist in a persistent state of uncertainty  
19 and insecurity" due to persistent organizational change. The following quotation illustrates one  
20 employee's intention to leave their organization after repeated of uncertainty:

21 I'm looking for the next thing. I like the club but there's clearly no long-term vision or  
22 they wouldn't have changed manager again... and it could be me out the door if the next  
23 manager doesn't want me and I have to look after myself – I'm not getting any younger.

24 Others indicated that repeated change was the reason for seeking a new profession:

25 I don't feel secure in my role at all. The changes put everyone at risk, we feel that risk  
26 and we have to work even harder to perform while that is going on. It is stressful and

1 will be when it happens again – I think I've had my fill of uncertainty and I might look  
2 to move on before it happens again as the insecurity is difficult with a family.

3 **Engagement.** All of the participants referred to attitudinal responses that have  
4 collectively been labeled under the theme engagement and had implications for their behaviour  
5 within their organization. For example, several employees described how their attitudinal  
6 responses to repeated change reduced creativity and citizenship behaviours:

7 I don't bother trying anything new anymore; I just do what I'm told to. I stopped trying  
8 to be creative about 3 managers back when my trust was shattered. I have no faith in the  
9 owners now, they are self-serving and don't see the consequences of their actions. I still  
10 do my job, I just won't go the extra mile anymore. The passion and excitement I had  
11 when I started has gone.

12 Several participants also stated using protective behaviours in response to the persistent  
13 threat and instability they perceived in light of experiencing repeated change. From the  
14 organization's perspective, these behaviours might be considered "deviant" and obstruct  
15 prosocial and citizenship behaviours, but for the individuals involved they were seen as an  
16 essential means of maintaining their employment:

17 Because of the instability over the years, I've moved more and more towards a role in  
18 the academy to protect myself. I've found myself a niche here in the academy and that's  
19 where I intend to stay. If I was with the first team, I'd have lost my job in one of the  
20 managerial changes. Here I don't stick my head above the parapet, I keep things the  
21 same and just get on with my job. You won't catch me offering my services with the  
22 first team.

23 **Commitment.** Many participants learned to cope with repeated change by reducing  
24 their emotional commitment to their manager, employer, and organization, given the likely  
25 transient nature of the manager's employment tenure and in response to those leading change:

26 It's not very clear. The owner is devious and tells you there will be stability, while

1 searching for [manager's] replacement and pulling the strings to sack the manager...  
2 directly undermining the stability promised. Even if there is a replacement ready, it's us  
3 who suffer and have to adjust each time. It's just political, there's a lot of manipulating  
4 and maneuvering by [owner], and less openness and transparency because of the need to  
5 cover up the fact that the board have broken their promises. [owner] is playing the same  
6 "broken record" of mixed messages... I don't trust [owner] and I'd quite happily not  
7 work under this, I have no emotional ties to the club anymore, I feel like a free agent.

8 The negative attitudinal response illustrated above was common among participants who  
9 no longer appraised change as an opportunity or as a challenge and such responses appeared to  
10 be influenced by perceptions of fairness and politicking:

11 It's tough for the managers these days. It's like they are on a ticking clock as soon as  
12 they start; do or die. Since I've been here, all 4 managers have all done ok with what  
13 they had. One manager got fired after getting us our highest league position – I guess he  
14 did, but still died! In that sense, I don't think the latest managerial merry-go-round has  
15 been fair. It's been political. With the others, I could understand that more was wanted  
16 from them, but the unfairness in this change has made me realise that you just bide your  
17 time with each manager, enjoy good ones, suffer the bad ones, they'll probably be on  
18 their way in a year or so.

19 One participant described decreasing commitment to their organization and increasingly  
20 pessimistic attitude to new change initiatives following repeated negative change experiences:

21 There isn't much keeping me here, but this club has served me well, I'll serve out my  
22 contract, but I've lost any belief in the likelihood of future changes bringing anything  
23 new now.

## 24 **Discussion**

25 This study investigated employees' responses to repeated organizational change in two  
26 Barclays Premier League football clubs. The findings indicate that employees responded to

1 recurrent managerial change events in positive and negative ways. Specifically, participants in  
2 the present study reported developing resilience, learning, short-term performance  
3 enhancements, challenge appraisals, and enhanced autonomy following repeated experiences of  
4 managerial team change. Despite these findings, participants reported many more negative  
5 responses to recurrent change events relating to receding trust, and declining motivation,  
6 engagement, and commitment, lack of organizational learning, heightened cynicism and  
7 intentions to look for employment elsewhere. Collectively, these data indicate increasingly  
8 deteriorating employee attitudes towards their club across change events, but also highlight the  
9 important role of cognitive appraisal for individual responses to singular change events. That is,  
10 employees' positive or negative emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural responses seemed to be  
11 generally influenced by the extent to which individuals were able to see opportunities for  
12 personal or organizational growth or mastery. Moreover, the worsening employee responses to  
13 repetitive change seem to be mediated by threat and harm (i.e., primary appraisals) with limited  
14 control or autonomy (i.e., secondary appraisal). Similarly, challenge appraisals with greater  
15 levels of perceived autonomy seemed to be related with positive emotional, attitudinal, and  
16 behavioural responses to change. Such findings illustrate the value of investigating employee  
17 responses during and across cycles of organizational change and highlight the value of using  
18 transactional stress theory as a conceptual perspective for such investigations.

19 To our knowledge, this was the first study to investigate employees' responses to  
20 repeated cycles of organizational change within elite sport. This study therefore goes some way  
21 to addressing recent calls for such explorations (see Klärner et al., 2011; Liu & Perrewé, 2005)  
22 and offers important insights into how employees' experiences evolved across recurrent change  
23 events. Specifically, in the present study, employees exposed to organizational change reported  
24 being stimulated by opportunity and development, even when this was framed within a largely  
25 discomfiting process. These individuals felt hope and anticipated opportunities for personal or  
26 organizational growth and adaption. Indeed, the learning and resilient responses reported by

1 participants in light of change adversity aligns with contemporary stress theory (see Lazarus &  
2 Folkman, 1984). That is, according to Lazarus' transactional stress theory, one's appraisal of  
3 the demands or stressors encountered in the work environment will determine responses to that  
4 stimuli. Indeed, challenge and a locus of control are appraisal properties commonly associated  
5 with positive responses to organizational stressors (cf. Hanton et al., 2012). Hence, the positive  
6 responses relating to challenge appraisals and autonomy found here align with contemporary  
7 stress theory. Moreover, the value of such findings for organizational change theory lies in part  
8 with observations that much of work in this field has overlooked the diverse experiences and  
9 meanings of change in favour of negative emotional and attitudinal responses to such events  
10 (cf., Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001).

11 Despite the identification of positive responses to repeated change, it should be noted  
12 that the frequency of challenge appraisals and autonomy appeared to ebb across recurrent  
13 cycles, particularly for those participants who perceived repeated waves of uncertainty. For  
14 these participants it was more common for them to respond with increasingly fragile  
15 commitment and engagement attitudes, while presenting symptoms commonly associated with  
16 burnout (e.g., cynicism, depersonalisation, a reduced sense of accomplishment). It would appear  
17 that repeated organizational change has significant negative consequences for employees'  
18 attitudes to their employer, organization and their expectations for future change initiatives. For  
19 example, repeated organizational change was reported to weaken emotional ties between the  
20 employee and their organization, in addition to reducing commitment to, and engagement or  
21 identification with one's organization. Moreover, the findings indicate the decline, if not the  
22 dissolution, of the psychological contract across recurrent cycles of organizational change as  
23 employee trust recedes and cynicism toward change leaders and change advances.

24 The present findings support recent suggestions that stage-based models might not be  
25 sufficient for explaining the complexity of the human side of change events (cf., Klarner et al.,  
26 2011; Mack et al., 1998). For example, the present findings indicate that linear and static

1 models of change such as Lewin's (1947) unfreezing-moving-refreezing might not fully  
2 explicate the change experience of those employed in domains such as elite sport organizations  
3 who found themselves in a constant state of uncertainty and had seemingly rarely reached the  
4 'refreezing' state (cf., Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). Moreover, for the participants sampled here,  
5 there was a substantial "hangover" of previous practices and philosophies, as well as  
6 misinterpreted "honeymoon periods" which served to further shape attitudes and emotions  
7 about subsequent change events. It is possible that stage-based models have greater utility for  
8 understanding the general phases of singular change cycles whereas our respondents had  
9 experienced forms of open-ended, persistent change. Nevertheless, we would add that change  
10 responses reported by participants in the present study appeared to be determined by appraisals  
11 of change as a stressor and were likely influenced by individual and situational differences.

12       There are implications for organizational behaviour and change management in light of the  
13 present findings. To elaborate, it would appear that change leaders and consultants might take steps to  
14 maximise the resilience of employees, whilst attempting to facilitate challenge appraisals and  
15 perceptions of autonomy across repeated change events. Such steps might be pursued proactively via  
16 educational workshops aimed at managing expectations for change in performance domains and could  
17 be included within professional formation programmes such as sports science degrees. Our data  
18 indicates that sports scientists learn about the influence of change on the job with little or no  
19 preparation for it. Failures here could be consequential for careers. It is ironic that within a team-based  
20 context, our respondents were left to face change as individuals with a noticeable lack of references to  
21 line manager support. Additionally, initiatives that promote the sharing of ideas for and experiences of  
22 learning and development opportunities following change might increase the likelihood of such  
23 responses. In addition to interventions aimed at managing change appraisals, it is possible that change  
24 leaders or owners could use emotions, attitudes and behaviours as signals for the impact of change on  
25 recipients. To elaborate, while the present findings indicate the potential benefits of positive change  
26 emotions, negative emotions prevailed during and across change. Besides their potential detrimental

1 effects, negative emotions can function as warnings and may be valuable for worklife (Elfenbein,  
2 2007). For example, they signal that action needs to be taken and stimulate quick and full individual  
3 responses (Spoor & Kelly, 2004). Thus, the deterministic view of many studies that describe positive  
4 emotions as beneficial to change and negative emotions as detrimental might not fully capture the role  
5 of emotions during change (cf. Klarner et al., 2011).

6 We believe that the use of a multi-stakeholder, multi-organization sample is a strength  
7 of the study. We also believe that the examining repeated cycles of change to the same  
8 departments of the participating organizations allowed for greater comparison across change  
9 cycles. We would also add that the domain of elite sport offered a very fruitful context for us to  
10 examine repeated organizational change given the frequency of managerial departures/arrivals.  
11 Despite the perceived strengths of the present study alluded to above, as with all studies, there  
12 are limitations. One such caveat relates to our sampling of individuals who had remained in  
13 their respective organizations following repeated change. Necessarily, employees who had  
14 experienced the same recurrent change and left the organization would likely have valuable  
15 insights which are absent here. Therefore, future research should seek to expand the sampling of  
16 current and previous employees exposed to repeated change. Additionally, the topics of  
17 resistance and change outcomes, which have been empirically associated with positive and  
18 negative responses to change (see Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993), were not examined  
19 in the present study. Hence, researchers might better incorporate these variables into future  
20 similar investigations. Finally, to tease out the experiences of multiple feelings towards change  
21 and how these evolve over time, we would argue that more fine-grained, ethnographic  
22 approaches towards research in this area are needed – both within elite sports organizations and  
23 outside this domain. Whilst the interview process used within this case yielded rich data, an  
24 embedded researcher carrying out more frequent analyses would have provided a greater sense  
25 of this emotional multiplicity and its evolution across this time-frame. Such approaches might  
26 allow for further insight into which “change” is most disruptive and offer further insight into the



1 mediating factors, such as individual differences in resilience or coping styles, which might  
2 influence employee's responses to change. Another potential benefit of adopting ethnographic  
3 approaches in future similar research is the exploration of what *actually* changes when one  
4 manager leaves and another joins. This might provide further insight into how the tremors of  
5 organizational change travel quaquaversally when one manager leaves and another joins.

#### 6 **Conclusion**

7 To conclude, it would appear that repeated organizational change can lead to both  
8 positive and negative employee responses. Nevertheless, the experience of such events appears  
9 to have largely negative implications for employee attitudes. Where possible, organizations and  
10 change leaders in high performance domains should take proactive action to develop a resilient  
11 workforce, while managing employees' expectations for, and attitudes to change.

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