EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: CAUSES AND STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality industry in Nigeria is undergoing rapid transformation driven by technological advancement, shifting consumer preferences, and increased competition. While organizational change has become essential for operational efficiency and market relevance, it is frequently met with resistance from employees the key implementers of such change. This study explores the underlying causes of employee resistance to organizational change and evaluates strategic interventions within Nigeria's hospitality sector. Grounded in Lewin's Change Management Theory (Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze), the research adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 20 employees across various hospitality organizations. The findings reveal that resistance stems from factors such as fear of job loss, inadequate communication, lack of employee involvement, and poor leadership engagement. Strategic responses, including inclusive communication, participatory decision-making, and targeted training, were found to mitigate resistance and enhance change readiness. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on change resistance within the Nigerian hospitality context and offers practical insights for managers and policymakers aiming to implement sustainable change initiatives. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are also discussed.

Keywords:

Change Management, Employee Resistance, Hospitality Industry, Organizational Change.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry stands as one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving sectors of the global economy. Globally, it contributes significantly to employment, foreign exchange earnings, and socio-cultural integration (Costa et al., 2023). In Africa, the hospitality and tourism sectors are recognized as pivotal drivers of economic development, attracting investments and fostering regional integration. In the Nigeria terrain particularly, the industry has been observed to contribute substantially to GDP and employment, with its growth largely driven by urbanization, rising middle-class income, and increased domestic and international travel (Ohunakin et al., 2019). However, the industry is highly sensitive to changes—including economic fluctuations, technological innovations, health crises, and evolving consumer preferences—making adaptation critical for sustainability. Over the years, Nigerian hospitality firms have adopted various innovations such as digital booking systems, automation, and enhanced customer service models (Buhalis et al., 2019). While these changes are essential for competitiveness and relevance, they also place significant pressure on internal operations and workforce alignment (Dutta, 2024).

Amidst these transformations, organizational change has become an operational imperative, but one that is frequently met with resistance—particularly from employees who are often the executors of change. This resistance is often rooted in uncertainty, loss of control, perceived threats to job security, or inadequate communication from management (Amjad & Rehman, 2018). The phenomenon of resistance, therefore, intersects deeply with change management strategies, highlighting the need for organizations to adopt proactive, inclusive, and strategic approaches. In dissecting employee resistance, it becomes vital to explore its dimensions—including cognitive resistance, emotional resistance, and behavioral resistance (Kulkarni, 2016). Employee resistance to change is influenced by several organizational factors, including organizational culture, leadership style, employee involvement in decision-making, and negative perceptions of change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). These dimensions are not only interconnected but also play a significant role in determining the success or failure of organizational change initiatives, especially in sectors as people-centered as hospitality (Bagnaresi et al., 2021).

The scholarly discourse on resistance to change has expanded over time. Several studies have explored its antecedents, forms, and implications across diverse industries and contexts (Amarantou et al., 2018; Appelbaum et al., 2015). Consequently, Pihlak and Alas (2012) emphasized the role of leadership style in influencing employee openness to change. In the tourism and hospitality context, Radwan (2022) examined employee engagement as a mediator in successful change implementation. Similarly, Dibia (2017) investigated strategies for overcoming resistance in Nigeria's telecommunications sector, drawing attention to leadership and communication dynamics. Yet, despite these advances, empirical studies specifically focusing on the Nigerian hospitality industry remain limited. This gap underscores the need for context-specific inquiry. While themes of employee resistance and organizational change have been studied in various industries and countries (Amjad & Rehman, 2018; Radwan, 2022), there is a paucity of empirical work that focuses on how

these dynamics play out in Nigeria's hospitality landscape. The current study seeks to bridge this gap by contextualizing known theoretical insights within the operational realities of Nigeria's hospitality industry. By doing so, the research aims to offer nuanced, actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

Employee resistance is a critical issue that can undermine change initiatives, hinder innovation, and strain organizational resources. In the hospitality sector, employee resistance carries symptoms such as decline in service quality, high turnover rates, and decreased customer satisfaction (Buhalis et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2017). These symptoms are often accompanied by organizational inertia, conflict, and failure to adopt best practices, which collectively compromise organizational growth and innovation. It is widely acknowledged that resistance can manifest in passive forms such as reduced productivity or in active forms such as conflict and turnover (Bateh et al., 2013). Given the labor-intensive nature of hospitality work, where frontline employees significantly shape customer experiences, resistance becomes particularly consequential. Understanding this resistance, therefore, becomes indispensable for driving effective change, sustaining employee morale, and enhancing organizational adaptability in the face of market shifts (Equenot, 2024). In light of the foregoing, this study aims to explore the causes of employee resistance to change and evaluate the strategies used to overcome such resistance within the Nigerian hospitality industry. The core objective is to generate empirically grounded insights that illuminate the contextual drivers of resistance and offer practical interventions. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to a better theoretical and practical understanding of change dynamics in an industry that must continually evolve to meet emerging global standards and customer expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

KURT LEWIN'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT THEORY

One of the most enduring and widely adopted models for understanding organizational change is Kurt Lewin's Change Management Theory, commonly referred to as the Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze Model. Developed by Lewin (1951), the theory proposed that change within organizations occurs in three distinct but interrelated stages: unfreezing the current state, changing or moving toward a new state, and refreezing to stabilize the new state (Amjad & Rehman, 2018). The model emphasizes the importance of preparing individuals for change, effectively implementing the change process, and reinforcing the new behaviors to ensure sustainability. It underscores the role of leadership, communication, and employee engagement in facilitating successful organizational transformation. This theory has become foundational in change management literature and provides a structured lens through which to assess both the psychological and organizational aspects of change (Cameron & Green, 2019; Juneja, 2020).

The relevance of Lewin's theory becomes particularly significant in the context of the Nigerian hospitality industry, where organizations are increasingly pressured to adapt to economic fluctuations, technological advancement, and shifting customer expectations. As highlighted by Benhadda and Chibili (2019), the hospitality sector is especially vulnerable to

operational disruptions and employee pushback during change initiatives due to its high dependence on human capital. Applying Lewin's model to this study allows for a systematic examination of how Nigerian hospitality organizations prepare their employees for change (unfreeze), implement organizational shifts (change), and institutionalize these changes (refreeze), while managing resistance at each stage (Amjad & Rehman, 2018).

During the unfreeze stage, employee resistance often stems from fear of the unknown, perceived threats to job security, lack of trust in management, or poor communication The change stage on another hand, refers to the actual transition process where new behaviors, systems, or structures are introduced. In the hospitality context, this might involve adopting new service technologies, restructuring departments, or implementing new customer engagement strategies. Finally, the refreeze stage seeks to reinforce and institutionalize the new changes to ensure long-term sustainability (Benhadda and Chibili, 2019; Chandler, 2010; Juneja, 2020). Anchoring on Lewin's framework enables a comprehensive examination of employee resistance across all phases of organizational transformation, offering insights into effective strategies for fostering adaptability in Nigeria's hospitality sector. This theory serves as a foundational guide for balancing operational demands with employee engagement, ensuring sustainable change in a dynamic service-driven environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES WITHIN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

The hospitality industry is characterized by rapid and continuous transformation driven by internal and external forces such as technology, consumer behavior, globalization, and crises like pandemics or economic downturns. As a service-intensive sector, hospitality organizations are frequently required to adapt their structures, processes, and employee roles to remain competitive and responsive to shifting market demands (Bagnaresi et al., 2021; Dutta, 2024). According to Bateh et al. (2013), organizational change in service-oriented sectors like hospitality is not merely about structural alterations but encompasses cultural, technological, and behavioral modifications that require a synchronized effort from all organizational tiers.

Organizational change within the hospitality industry is driven by various factors, including globalization, digitalization, sustainability, market deregulation, and shifting customer expectations, all of which necessitate continuous adaptation in business operations. These forces often lead to departmental restructuring, the adoption of smart technologies, and the redesign of service delivery processes to enhance efficiency and meet evolving consumer demands (Bagnaresi et al., 2021). However, the complexity of these changes presents significant challenges for managers, requiring them to balance operational efficiency with employee engagement while ensuring seamless transitions. Modern change management within the hospitality sector must integrate both tangible innovations, such as AI-powered customer service and smart room technologies, and intangible elements, including cultural agility and emotional labor, to create a more adaptable workforce. Consequently, businesses are increasingly shifting from rigid hierarchical structures to agile, cross-functional team models that foster innovation and responsiveness in a rapidly evolving market (Costa et al., 2023; Equenot, 2024).

Furthermore, technological disruption has emerged as a defining force shaping the hospitality industry's evolution, introducing innovations such as mobile check-ins, AI-driven guest personalization, and automation. While these advancements enhance customer experiences and operational efficiency, they also provoke anxiety among employees, who may fear redundancy, struggle with digital skill gaps, or lament the decline of interpersonal interactions in service delivery (Alkhoori, 2022; Buhalis et al., 2019). If not managed proactively, these concerns can contribute to resistance to change, hampering the smooth integration of new systems and processes. Beyond the technological aspect, successful change implementation in hospitality organizations is deeply tied to employee perceptions, engagement, and communication effectiveness (Ramos-Maçães& Román-Portas, 2022). Radwan (2022) on large-scale hotel operations highlight how employee engagement mediates the relationship between change initiatives and organizational outcomes, with transparent communication and transformational leadership playing a crucial role in reducing uncertainty and fostering trust.

Despite the potential benefits of organizational change, its implementation remains complex and is frequently met with resistance, particularly in people-centered industries like hospitality, where front-line employees directly influence customer satisfaction and brand reputation (Equenot, 2024). Managing change in this sector requires a delicate balance between operational efficiency and human dynamics, as poorly executed initiatives can lead to disengagement, diminished service quality, and reputational damage. Given the industry's dependence on human capital, a misalignment between employees and change efforts can result in far-reaching consequences (Sawagvudcharee&Limpabandhu, 2019). Therefore, addressing employee resistance through strategic interventions is essential for sustaining growth and ensuring that organizations remain agile in a rapidly transforming business environment, particularly in unique and under-researched contexts like Nigeria.

EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE

Employee resistance is a significant challenge in the successful implementation of organizational change, particularly in labor-intensive industries such as hospitality, where human interaction is central to service delivery (Radwan, 2022). Resistance to change is commonly defined as a psychological or behavioral reaction exhibited by employees when confronted with new methods, structures, or expectations that disrupt their established routines. This resistance is often not rooted in defiance but in uncertainty, fear of the unknown, perceived threats to job security, or distrust in management (Bateh et al., 2013). Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue that resistance is frequently a socially constructed label applied by leaders to describe behaviors they struggle to interpret or control, highlighting that miscommunication, rather than outright opposition, is often the underlying cause. Within Nigeria's hospitality industry, such resistance manifests in various ways, including passive resistance, active protests, reduced performance, absenteeism, and turnover intentions, all of which can significantly impact organizational outcomes (Amjad & Rehman, 2018).

Within Nigeria's service economy, resistance is exacerbated when employees perceive change as externally imposed, rather than as an inclusive process with employee participation

(Dibia, 2017). Without properly managing resistance, employee adaptability to change remains low, affecting how quickly employees adjust to new processes and operational shifts. A lack of adaptability can create prolonged disruptions in service delivery and organizational cohesion (Kim et al., 2023). The antecedents of resistance can be categorized into three dimensions: individual factors (fear of failure, job insecurity, personality traits), organizational factors (poor communication, leadership style), and environmental factors (economic instability) (Amarantou et al., 2018; Fugate, 2012). These factors are particularly relevant in Nigeria's hospitality industry, where economic fluctuations and structural instability heighten employee anxieties regarding job security and operational changes. Additionally, assessing resistance levels through employee perceptions is crucial, emphasizing the need for industry-specific frameworks that capture resistance dynamics within service-driven organizations (Belias &Trihas, 2022).

Employee resistance often manifests as passive resistance, active protests, reduced performance, absenteeism, or even turnover intentions. Resistance occurs when employees perceive change as a threat to their established routines, job security, or professional identity (Bateh et al., 2013). To effectively manage resistance, organizations must adopt proactive strategies that foster employee engagement, transparent communication, and adequate support systems. By addressing the root causes of resistance—whether through leadership involvement, phased implementation, or cultural alignment—organizations can enhance employee morale and job satisfaction, ultimately leading to successful change adoption and improved organizational outcomes (Benhadda&Chibili, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Philosophy of Research

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, which posits that individuals construct their own understanding and interpretation of reality based on personal experiences and interactions (Charmaz, 2006). Given the subjective nature of resistance to organizational change—especially within people-centric service environments like the hospitality industry—the constructivist lens is well-suited. Employees' responses to change are not merely observable behaviors but embedded in their experiences, meanings, and organizational relationships.

The research also applies an inductive reasoning approach, wherein patterns, themes, and categories are derived from participant narratives and perspectives rather than being imposed by predetermined hypotheses (Creswell, 2012). This allows for a grounded understanding of how employees in Nigerian hospitality organizations experience, rationalize, and respond to organizational changes.

Population and Sample Size

The target population for this research comprises employees and managers working in medium- to large-scale hotels in Nigeria, particularly those located in key hospitality hubs such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. These regions are known for their dynamic service environments and are frequently subject to operational, technological, and structural changes.

A total of twenty (20) participants were engaged for the qualitative inquiry. This sample size aligns with established qualitative norms, as Dworkin (2012) suggests that data saturation in qualitative studies typically occurs between 5 and 50 participants, depending on the scope and depth of inquiry.

Sampling Technique

This study employed a purposive convenience sampling strategy. Participants were selected based on their direct exposure to organizational changes and willingness to participate, ensuring both relevance and accessibility. While convenience sampling may introduce certain limitations in generalizability, it offers practical advantages, particularly in terms of time, cost, and access to real-time experiences of change resistance within busy hotel operations. By focusing on accessible and information-rich participants, the study ensures a depth of insight into the lived experiences and coping strategies related to organizational change.

Data Collection Tool

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for guided yet flexible exploration of participants' experiences with change and resistance. The interview guide was developed based on insights from previous studies such as Amjad and Rehman (2018) and Amarantou et al. (2018), with questions covering themes such as: Nature and drivers of organizational changes experienced; Personal and group reactions to those changes; Perceived reasons for resistance; and Strategies employed to manage or mitigate resistance

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, and consent was obtained from participants for audio recording. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details, enhancing the richness of data.

To ensure consistency and reliability, the interview guide served as the primary data collection tool. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to articulate their views in their own terms, while still allowing the researcher to probe specific areas of interest.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim post-collection to maintain fidelity to participants' narratives. Transcription was guided by the recommendation of Oliver et al. (2005 as cited in Amjad & Rehman, 2018), emphasizing that transcription is not just a mechanical task but a representational process that shapes how data is interpreted.

Thematic analysis was carried out using QSR NVivo 12 software. Thematic coding allowed the identification of patterns, categories, and emerging themes around the causes of resistance and the strategic interventions deployed. This approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, involved: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo's query and visualization tools further enhanced analytical rigor by helping validate emergent themes and compare participant responses across roles and organizations (Welsh, 2002).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Participants were given an informed consent form, assuring them of their anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. The researcher maintained neutrality and avoided influencing responses, ensuring that participants' perspectives were authentically represented.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

A total of 20 employees participated in the study. Participants were drawn from a range of roles within the hospitality sector, including front desk staff, housekeeping, food and beverage services, middle managers, and senior supervisors. The participants had between 2 to 15 years of industry experience. This diversity provided rich insights into organizational change dynamics and the causes of resistance.

Emerging Themes from Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts using NVivo software yielded five major themes and several subthemes related to employee resistance to change and organizational responses.

Theme 1: Fear of Job Loss and Increased Workload

Many participants expressed anxiety about the impact of organizational changes on job security and role expectations.

"*Every time a change is announced, we worry it means someone will be laid off, or we'll have to start doing more with no increase in pay.*" (Participant 3, Hotel Receptionist)

Subthemes:

- Perceived redundancy due to automation.
- Increased multitasking without training.

This finding aligns with the work of Bateh et al. (2013) and Amjad & Rehman (2018), who identified job insecurity as a core antecedent of resistance to change.

Theme 2: Poor Communication and Lack of Inclusion

Participants consistently reported that organizational changes were typically communicated abruptly or with insufficient detail, fostering confusion and distrust.

"*Management just says 'we are changing this system next week.' No one explains why or even asks us what we think.*" (Participant 11, Food Service Supervisor)

Subthemes:

- Top-down change communication.
- Absence of consultative forums.

This supports Ramos-Maçães& Román-Portas (2022), who emphasized the need for transparent communication in reducing resistance.

Theme 3: Inadequate Training and Change Readiness

Employees frequently cited lack of training and preparedness as key reasons for their resistance.

"*The last time they changed the booking software, they didn't train us. We had to figure it out ourselves, and guests were angry at us.*" (Participant 6, Reservations Officer)

Subthemes:

- Absence of structured onboarding for new systems.
- Knowledge gaps creating anxiety.

This reinforces findings by Radwan (2022) and Kim et al. (2023) that highlight the importance of training in hospitality change management.

Theme 4: Leadership Style and Trust Deficit

The perceived authoritarian leadership approach during change initiatives discouraged employee engagement.

"*They act like we are robots. Just give instructions and expect us to follow.*" (Participant 17, Housekeeping Lead)

Subthemes:

- Command-style leadership.
- Limited emotional intelligence and support.

This echoes Appelbaum et al. (2015) and Fugate (2012), who demonstrated how leadership behavior influences employee reactions during transitions.

Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms and Strategic Interventions

Some employees described positive experiences with change, particularly where participatory strategies were employed.

"*One time they involved us in redesigning the restaurant workflow. That change went smoothly because we helped shape it.*" (Participant 9, Restaurant Team Lead)

Subthemes:

- Participatory decision-making.
- Peer mentoring and phased implementation.

This aligns with Dibia (2017) and Benhadda&Chibili (2019), who found that inclusive strategies such as phased change, training, and dialogue reduce resistance.
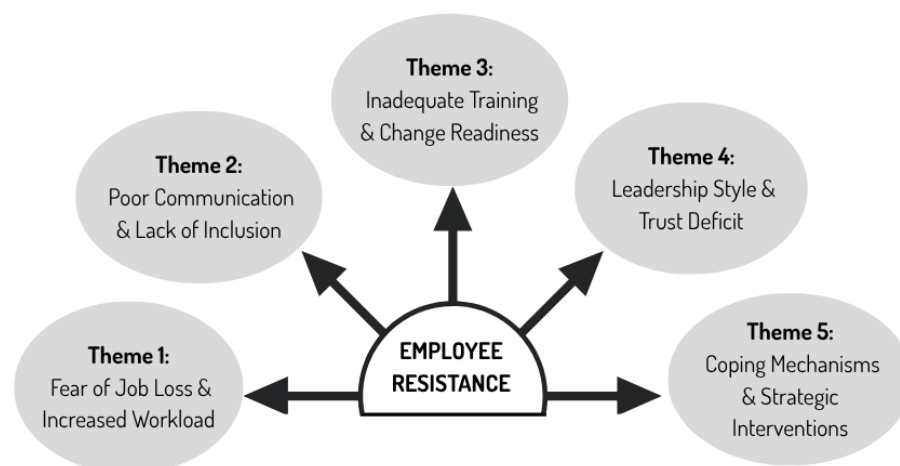
Fig 1: Concept Map of Employee Resistance

Summary Interpretation

The results reveal that employee resistance to change in Nigeria's hospitality industry is multifaceted, driven by fear, poor communication, inadequate support, and authoritarian leadership. Conversely, resistance is mitigated when interventions focus on participation, communication, leadership empathy, and training.

These findings provide empirical backing for Lewin's Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze model. The lack of an "unfreezing" phase (awareness and readiness) led to emotional pushback, while the absence of adequate support in the "change" phase undermined implementation. Successful experiences show that when the model is properly applied—especially the unfreezing and refreezing stages—employee buy-in improves significantly.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study provides several practical and theoretical implications for stakeholders in the Nigerian hospitality industry and beyond.

Practical Implications

- Human Resource and Change Management Strategy: The study highlights the need for hospitality organizations in Nigeria to adopt employee-centric change models. Tailoring communication and training programs to employee needs can reduce uncertainty and build resilience to change.

- Leadership Development: Findings indicate that authoritarian leadership styles contribute to resistance. This suggests a need for leadership development programs that emphasize empathy, participatory management, and emotional intelligence, especially during transitions.

- Technology and Innovation Adoption: As technological upgrades are a major source of employee resistance, hospitality organizations should invest in incremental technology implementation with strong training and feedback mechanisms.

- Policy Formulation: Policymakers and industry regulators may use this study to recommend minimum standards for employee engagement and change communication protocols, especially in tourism and hotel management.

Theoretical Implications

This research validates Lewin's Change Management Theory within the context of the Nigerian hospitality sector, confirming that failure to adequately "unfreeze" employees contributes to pushback. The study also enriches existing literature by applying Western change models to a developing economy with culturally distinct work environments, offering a comparative lens.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the causes of employee resistance to organizational change and identified effective strategic interventions in Nigeria's hospitality industry. The findings revealed that poor communication, fear of job loss, inadequate training, and rigid leadership are key drivers of resistance. In contrast, inclusive decision-making, timely communication, and proper training were associated with smoother change adoption.

By applying Lewin's Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze model as a theoretical framework, the study demonstrates the value of preparing employees emotionally and cognitively before change, supporting them during transitions, and stabilizing behaviors post-change.

Ultimately, organizations that fail to consider employee perspectives risk undermining the success of their change initiatives. Therefore, employee engagement is not optional—it is a prerequisite for sustainable transformation in Nigeria's dynamic hospitality landscape.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sample Size and Scope: This study involved only 20 participants from selected hospitality firms in Nigeria. While rich in qualitative insight, the findings may not be statistically generalizable to the entire industry.

- Single Data Collection Method: Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, which might be subject to response bias or social desirability effects.

- Cross-sectional Approach: The study was conducted over a limited time frame, which does not capture the long-term evolution of resistance or the full implementation cycle of organizational change.

Future Recommendations

- Expand Sample and Geography: Future studies should include a larger and more geographically diverse sample across Nigeria or other Sub-Saharan countries to enhance the breadth of insights.

- Mixed Methods Approach: Employing quantitative surveys alongside qualitative interviews could validate and deepen the findings, allowing for hypothesis testing and broader generalizability.

- Comparative Sectoral Studies: It would also be valuable to compare hospitality with other sectors like banking or healthcare to explore whether resistance factors are industry-specific or universal.

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