Leading Organisational Change: The Case of Tokenism

Abstract

This paper examines the effects of tokenism on leading organisational changes. In particular, the paper focuses on the case when change leaders are appointed in a 'token role' in change management initiatives and how the experience of tokenism shapes their behaviours and actions. Based upon Kanter's theory of tokenism, we employ the three perceptual tendencies (visibility, contrast, and assimilation) domains of the theory to understand the possible consequences of change leaders being token. We postulate that token change leaders are likely to experience challenges to perform actions such as building teams, communication, motivation, negotiation, and coercion. Consequently, change leaders may possess poor credibility, misperceived information, desperation to communicate, and inability to exert force on others.

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Introduction

Due to a growing interest in diversity, tokenism in organisations is increasingly receiving the attention of researchers (Watkins et al. 2019). Tokenism has been investigated in many contexts such as policing (Stichman et al. 2010), academia (Hewstone et al. 2006), and public sector (Nielsen and Madsen. 2019). These studies assert that token employees had negative experiences in workplaces in relation to non-token employees. However, this research seeks to explore how tokenism experience shapes change leaders' behaviours.

In organisational change setting, it is not sufficient for change leaders to have the right skills and competences to initiate and manage changes. The context in which they operate is equally important as it shapes their behaviours and actions. This is asserted by Buchanan and Boddy (1992) who state '…context is not regarded as part of the agenda which the change agent is required to manage, but instead as the milieu in which the change agent functions, and which generates opportunities and constraints' (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992, p. 71). This paper sheds lights on the consequences of being considered a token on actions change leaders are expected to perform when they manage change in organisations.

This paper is structured as follows. Immediately after this introduction is a discussion of the literature on tokenism in organisations. Next, is an examination of the organisation change literature. These two bodies are synthesised into a conceptual model of tokenism in change management. The paper closes with some concluding remarks.

Tokenism in Organisations

The notion of tokenisms is not new. Tokenism theory was introduced by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) four decades ago who asserts that tokens are likely to have negative experience at work due to their low representation. Kanter defines tokens as those minority (15% or less) of a workgroup. (Kanter, 1977). Others such as Elstad and Ladegard (2012) define tokens as having less than 25% representation in a group. Stichman et al. (2010) argue that tokenism is socially perceived, and it is hard to associate it with a range of percentages. Although scholars seem not to agree on the percentages that tokens represent, they agree that tokens are the minority of a group.

Although most of the studies on tokenism found women as tokens in their groups, although men can also be tokens and experience tokenism (Wingfield and Wingfield, 2014). Tokens are distinguished by antecedents such as gender, race, age and status. Recent research on tokenism in organisation has systematically reviewed 80 studies by Watkins et al. (2019). The main findings indicate that token employees have higher levels of depression and stress than others. Also, the findings reveal that tokens are more likely than others to show less satisfaction and less commitment at work.

Kanter (1977) identifies three aspects that tokens are likely to have perceptual tendencies about namely visibility, contrast, and assimilation. Visibility refers to peoples' experience of tokenism because they are highly obvious or visible in the group due to their differences to other members. Contrast occurs when dominant members of the group exaggerate the differences between them and the token member(s) within the group. Assimilation is the process that 'the token person's characteristics are distorted to fit a stereotypical role perceived to be appropriate by dominant members of the group' (Kanter, 1977, p. 211).

Having the work by Kanter (1977) as a basis, Watkins et al. (2019) identify negative consequences that might result of being token. Since tokens are visible in their group, they are likely to perceive that they are being observed by others and hence have a fear of making mistakes. This can cause stress and underperformance. Also, the overgeneralisation of dominant members of a group (i.e. contrast) causes a tightening of group boundaries, as the majority assert their culture and style of work which ultimately fosters differences between tokens and the rest of the group. Therefore, tokens are likely to experience a sense of isolation both from formal and informal networks at their workplace. A further consequence is caused by experiencing assimilation. As Kanter noted, '…tokens become encapsulated in limited roles that give them the security of a 'place' but constrain their areas of permissible or rewarded action' (Kanter, 1977, p. 231). This indicates that tokens might participate in actions that are aligned with others' expectations rather than actions that are consistent with their own preferences.

Organisational Change

Environmental forces such as technological, legal, growth, and economic constitute challenges for organisations and therefore organisational change is inevitable (Van de Ven and Sun, 2011). Organisational change is 'an empirical observation of difference in form, quality, or state overtime in an organisational entity' (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995, p. 512). The success of a planned change depends on the ability of change leaders to drive the change and the willingness of change recipients to comply.

Organisational change is brought about change leaders and employed by change recipients. Caldwell (2003) defines change agents/leaders as 'an internal or external individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing a specific change initiative, project or complete change program' (2003, p. 139). Change recipients are defined in the literature as an individual or group of people who the organisation must influence to bring about change (Jick, 1990). Jick reports that change recipients can be affected by change in their job description, change in the people or colleagues they work with, and/or change in the way they perform their work.

In general, change leaders are involved in five areas of activities namely setting the project goals, specifying agents and recipients roles (e.g. team building and networking), communication, negotiation, and managing political issues (Buchanan and Body, 1992). However, there are specific activities (Hayes, 2018; Kotter, 2008) that often require dealing and interacting with people that this research focuses on. First, change leaders need to build teams and participate in networking activities with key stakeholders to establish effective working groups, delegate responsibilities, and maintain appropriate contacts within and outside their organisations. Second, communication and interpersonal skills are critical for change leaders to transmit appropriate information to others and identify their concerns. Third, motivating others to buy-in and to mitigate resistance is a vital activity for change leaders to pursue. This does not only involve explaining the potential benefits and rewards to employees, but also the enthusiasm change leaders exhibit to their teams throughout the change process. Fourth, change leaders require some negotiation activities with others to sell ideas and resolve conflict using some tactics such as participation, conscious manipulation of information, and

to offer incentives to potential resistors of change. Lastly, change leaders sometimes end up employing coercive strategies to deal with others especially in the occasion of resistance.

As discussed in the following section, these activities, although crucial, are likely to be challenging for change leaders to employ when they experience tokenism in their organisations.

Change Leaders as Tokens

The consequences of being token discussed earlier are likely to shape the behaviours of token change leaders outlined in the previous section as demonstrated in Figure 1. These consequences might affect change leaders' behaviours that lead to outcomes such as poor credibility, misperceived information, desperation to communicate, and inability to exert force on change recipients.
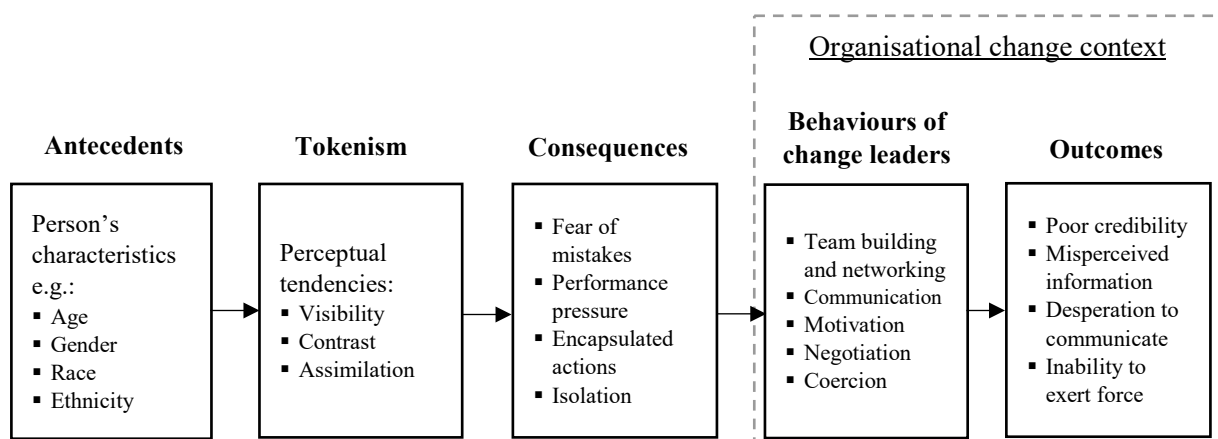
Figure 1: A conceptual model of effects of tokenism on change leaders' behaviours (Source: Authors)

Fear of making mistakes and performance pressure experienced by change leaders of being token are likely to harm self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989) of change leaders when interacting with their teams and the rest of employees in their organisations. Previous studies (e.g. Kim and Kankanhalli, 2009) emphasis the presence of self-efficacy for adopting to a changing environment not only for change recipients but also change leaders. Therefore, low self-efficacy may affect change leaders' behaviours such as team building, motivation, and communication which could result in poor credibility perceived by change recipients. Also,

change recipients are likely to misperceive information communicated by token change leaders who are perceived to be in pressure to meet their performance objectives.

Token change leaders are also likely to `be anxious when communicating with others. Such anxiety is likely to emerge from tokenism experience especially when token change leaders' actions are encapsulated by others. In this case, change leaders may not be able to perform certain behaviours that are expected by others. This could hinder change leaders' behaviours that are significant during change initiatives, for example, to communicate and negotiate during organisational change and importantly to enable sense-giving (Ancona et al. 2007). Since sense-giving is when change agents interact directly with others to convey key messages that facilitate change. The feeling of desperation to communicate could also be fostered by the experience of isolation. Token change leaders may feel alienated and may not perceive that they are permittable to communicate with others in some forms (formal vs. informal) or using some communication channels. Perceived encapsulated actions by change leaders may also affect their behaviours in terms of exerting pressure on change recipients, which hinders their ability to employ coercion strategies. Since token change leaders represent the minority in their groups, unexpected actions from them are likely to include the employment of force on the dominant members of their groups.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to bring together two bodies of literature: tokenism and change management for the first time. It highlights potential negative outcomes resulting from consequences of experiencing tokenism by change leaders that affect their behaviours to bring about change in their organisations. The next step is to develop and finalise the framework depicted in Figure 1 establish hypotheses of the effects of tokenism on change leaders' behaviours during change initiatives.

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