

Addressing Resistance to Change and Reformative Transformation within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service

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ABSTRACT

Resistance to change is a central organisational phenomenon affecting the implementation and sustainability of institutional reform within public sector organisations. In correctional institutions transitioning from punitive to rehabilitation-oriented models, resistance to change often emerges as both a barrier to reform and a reflection of institutional adaptation processes. This paper examines the effects of addressing resistance to change on the reformative change management process within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS). The findings reveal that resistance to change demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with reformative change ($\beta = 0.298, p = 0.013$), contrary to conventional expectations. The study further demonstrates that resistance within ZPCS is primarily driven by uncertainty, fear, inadequate communication, institutional tension, and concerns regarding implementation rather than deliberate opposition to reform. The paper concludes that sustainable reformative change within correctional institutions requires participatory communication systems, inclusive leadership, continuous capacity-building, and adaptive organisational learning mechanisms capable of transforming resistance into constructive institutional dialogue.

Keywords: resistance to change, reformative change, correctional reform, Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, organisational transformation, institutional resistance, change management.

1. Introduction

Organisational change remains one of the most complex and contested processes within public sector institutions. Although institutional reform is frequently presented as necessary for improving organisational effectiveness, service delivery, accountability, and institutional legitimacy, reform initiatives often encounter varying forms of organisational resistance [1] [2]. Resistance to change is particularly significant within highly structured institutions such as correctional systems, where institutional traditions, occupational cultures, hierarchical structures, and security priorities shape employee behaviour and organisational norms.

In Zimbabwe, the transformation of the ZPCS under the 2013 Constitution reflected a significant institutional shift from punitive imprisonment toward rehabilitation-oriented correctional governance [3]. Resistance to change therefore becomes an important organisational dynamic within correctional reform processes. Traditional correctional cultures characterised by hierarchy, discipline, security orientation, and institutional rigidity may conflict with rehabilitation-oriented reforms emphasising participation, reintegration, communication, and behavioural transformation.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that resistance may also represent institutional feedback, organisational learning, employee engagement, and critical reflection regarding reform implementation processes [4]. This paper examines the effects of addressing resistance to change on the reformative change management process within ZPCS.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Anchors

Organisational change is conceptualised as a three-stage model involving unfreezing existing behaviours, implementing change, and refreezing new institutional practices [5]. Resistance often emerges during the unfreezing stage because employees experience uncertainty, fear of loss, disruption of routines, and concerns regarding new institutional expectations.

Resistance is argued to arise from factors such as self-interest, misunderstanding, low trust, fear of incompetence, and differing assessments regarding organisational change [6]. Institutional theory explains resistance as a consequence of entrenched organisational norms, routines, traditions, and institutional identities [7]. Contemporary organisational learning theory recognises that resistance may contribute positively toward organisational adaptation by identifying implementation weaknesses and communication gaps [8].

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods convergent parallel design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires across ZPCS facilities, with SEM used to assess the relationship between resistance to change management and reformative outcomes. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews examining officer perceptions, sources of institutional resistance, and change management experiences. Thematic analysis and triangulation were applied.

4. Data Analysis

SEM analysis examined the direct relationship between addressing resistance to change and reformative change outcomes, computing path coefficients and significance levels. Qualitative thematic analysis identified themes including sources of resistance, communication gaps, fear and uncertainty, occupational culture tensions, and resistance management strategies. Triangulation integrated quantitative and qualitative findings to develop a contextually nuanced interpretation of resistance dynamics within ZPCS.

5. Findings

Resistance to Change

Path / Relationship	Standardized Beta (β)	p-value	Statistical Significance	Hypothesis Status
Resistance to Change $\rightarrow$ Reformative Change	0.298	0.013	Significant (Positive)	Supported (Directionally Inconsistent)

Statistical Result: Beta (β) = 0.298, $p = 0.013$ (Statistically Significant)

Application Narrative: Structural Equation Modelling indicates that Contrary to traditional change management assumptions where resistance is viewed as a negative barrier, the model reveals a statistically significant *positive* relationship with reformative change. This indicates that resistance within ZPCS functions as an active mechanism for institutional dialogue, critical thinking, and feedback. It flags implementation gaps and communication deficiencies, allowing management to constructively resolve underlying staff concerns through targeted capacity building rather than suppression.

Qualitative findings reveal that resistance within ZPCS is primarily driven by uncertainty, inadequate communication, fear regarding role changes, concerns about resource adequacy, and tensions between traditional punitive occupational cultures and rehabilitation-oriented reform expectations. Participants reported that reform-related uncertainty generates institutional anxiety and occupational discomfort among officers who feel inadequately prepared for changing institutional expectations.

The triangulated findings conclude that resistance should be interpreted as a diagnostic indicator of reform pressure and institutional engagement rather than merely obstruction. Where employees express resistance, they are actively processing institutional change rather than passively ignoring it. This distinction has significant implications for how institutional leaders interpret and respond to resistance during reform implementation.

6. Discussion

The statistically significant positive relationship between resistance and reformative change is theoretically significant. It suggests that resistance, when constructively managed, may paradoxically strengthen institutional engagement with reform processes by generating critical dialogue, exposing implementation gaps, and motivating leadership response. This finding aligns with organisational learning theory's proposition that resistance serves as valuable institutional feedback capable of improving reform design and implementation.

Institutional theory further explains this paradox. In correctional institutions characterised by entrenched institutional cultures, resistance reflects the depth of institutional identity investment rather than necessarily rejection of reform objectives. Correctional officers may simultaneously support rehabilitation-oriented reform aspirations while resisting specific implementation approaches perceived as threatening to professional identity, occupational routines, or institutional security.

This finding underscores the importance of participatory change management approaches capable of channelling resistance productively rather than suppressing it administratively. Where leadership engages constructively with resistance through inclusive communication, participatory decision-making, and responsive institutional adaptation, resistance may become a source of institutional innovation and reform resilience.

7. Policy Recommendations

First, ZPCS leadership should establish formal resistance management frameworks that create structured channels for employees to voice reform concerns, raise implementation challenges, and contribute to reform refinement without fear of institutional reprisal.

Second, institutional communication systems should be improved to reduce uncertainty, clarify reform expectations, and provide regular updates on reform progress. Transparent and inclusive communication reduces anxiety-driven resistance and builds institutional trust.

Third, leadership training programmes should incorporate resistance management competencies enabling institutional leaders to interpret and respond to resistance constructively rather than defensively.

Fourth, continuous capacity-building and support systems should be established to equip officers with the competencies, resources, and institutional support necessary for navigating reform-related changes in professional roles and operational expectations.

Fifth, institutional monitoring systems should track resistance patterns as diagnostic indicators of reform implementation quality, enabling leadership to identify systemic challenges and adapt reform strategies responsively.

8. Conclusions

This paper examined the effects of addressing resistance to change on the reformative change management process within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. The findings demonstrate that resistance to change exhibits a statistically significant positive relationship with reformative change, suggesting that institutional resistance reflects active engagement with reform processes rather than simple obstruction. Resistance within ZPCS is primarily driven by uncertainty, communication gaps, and occupational identity tensions rather than fundamental opposition to rehabilitation-oriented reform.

Sustainable reformatory change requires constructive resistance management strategies capable of transforming institutional anxiety and uncertainty into productive reform dialogue. Participatory communication, inclusive leadership, continuous capacity-building, and adaptive organisational learning are essential for enabling ZPCS to harness resistance as a catalyst for institutional improvement and reform sustainability.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service or any government institution. This paper is intended for academic and policy discourse purposes only.

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