

## WHY DO EMPLOYEES RESIST TEAMS? EXAMINING THE “RESISTANCE BARRIER” TO WORK TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

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*Conflict and resistance on the part of employees assigned to teams have accompanied the recent increase in the use of work teams in organizations. Previous empirical research identified several sources of employee resistance including violations of fairness, increased workload concerns, uncertain manager support, unclear role definitions, and lack of team member social support. From a literature review, we identified additional sources of employee resistance including trust, cultural values, and low tolerance for change. Empirically, we conducted a content analysis of 1,060 open-ended comments of employees in two Fortune 50 organizations who were newly assigned to self-managing work teams (SMWTs). The results suggest that employees' concerns did reflect issues of trust and low tolerance for change, but not cultural values. We discuss the implications of our findings for conflict management scholars as well as managers who are charged with handling increased conflict due to employee resistance to teams.*

Self-managing work teams (SMWTs) have been identified increasingly since the early 1990s as a common means of getting work done in organizations (Manz & Sims, 1993; Osterman, 1994; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998). These teams differ from traditional work teams in the extent to which their members assume responsibilities traditionally reserved for higher-level managers. Specifically, SMWT members typically manage themselves, assign jobs, plan and schedule work, make production- or service-related decisions, and take action on problems (Wellins et al.,

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1990). The proliferation of SMWTs has resulted, in part, from the elimination of middle management (Gibson & Kirkman, 1999) and, possibly also, from the widespread belief that SMWTs are beneficial to organizations and team members (Manz & Sims, 1993; Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995; Wageman, 1997).

The effectiveness of SMWTs is typically measured in terms of productivity and member attitudes and behaviors; and mixed findings abound. For example, SMWTs have been linked strongly with both job satisfaction (Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Wall, Kemp, Jackson, & Clegg, 1986) and organizational commitment (Cordery, Mueller, & Smith, 1991; Pearson, 1992). The findings for productivity have been less strong (Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Goodman, Devadas, & Griffith-Hughson, 1988) or, sometimes, no effects for productivity have been found (Pearson, 1992; Wall et al., 1986). Conversely, SMWTs have been linked to higher incidences of employee absenteeism and turnover (Cordery et al., 1991; Wall et al., 1986). Cumulatively, the mixed results of SMWTs have caused researchers as well as practitioners to question why these teams (and teams in general) do not always enhance organizational productivity and employee behavior.

One possible explanation is that employees resist the change to SMWTs (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997; Kirkman, Shapiro, Novelli, & Brett, 1996; Novelli, Kirkman, & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999), since employees tend to resist organizational change in general (cf. Judson, 1991; Odiorne, 1981; Strebler, 1996). In turn, employee resistance to management initiatives is generally associated with negative organizational outcomes, including those associated with conflict such as job dissatisfaction and expressed grievances (Hultman, 1979; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Resistance to change is defined as "any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in face of pressure to alter the status quo" (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

The purpose of this study is to explore why employees resist SMWTs by examining open-ended employee comments about their top concerns in the transition to teams in two Fortune 50 organizations. This understanding is needed for two reasons: (1) there are virtually no studies regarding how employees (as opposed to managers) feel about SMWTs; and (2) managers' ability to implement SMWTs without resistance and conflict should be eased by their being sensitive to why employees may resist SMWT-related assignments.

### Literature Review and Hypotheses

Earlier, we noted that organizations' adoption of SMWTs has been linked with negative (not only positive) outcomes, namely: higher incidences of absenteeism and turnover. The latter consequences are often seen as symptomatic of organizational dysfunctionality or conflict (cf. Thomas, 1992). Conflict following organizational changes has generally been linked to employee resistance; and this is why understanding the sources of employee resistance can be fruitful for managing change-related conflict. Recent findings that employee resistance to SMWTs, in particular, is linked to lower levels of employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment (cf. Kirkman & Shapiro, in press) further reinforce the possi-

bility that an understanding of why employees resist SMWTs can help managers manage the conflict that often accompanies these teams' implementation.

Although previous research has speculated on why employees might resist SMWT-assignments (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Manz & Sims, 1993; Orsburn, Moran, Musselwhite, & Zenger, 1990), as noted above, we know of only two studies that have empirically examined why such resistance may occur (i.e., Jones & Lindley, 1998; Kirkman et al., 1996). Jones and Lindley extensively content analyzed individual and focus group interviews in a large insurance company. The content analysis yielded a list of twenty-five specific issues. These issues were then translated into a 49-item survey, and responses to this survey were factor analyzed, revealing four general factors of concern in the transition to teams. The results suggested that employees were primarily concerned about (1) managerial support, (2) role clarity, (3) workload distribution issues, and (4) team social support.

Some of the latter findings were also seen in the study of Kirkman et al. (1996), namely workload issues (i.e., what the authors described as "distributive justice" concerns). However, findings that were unique to Kirkman et al.'s study included concerns about the fairness of the criteria used to make decisions about teams (i.e., procedural justice) and the fairness of the interpersonal treatment received during the transition to teams (i.e., interactional justice). The fairness of interpersonal treatment would include sensitivity, sincerity, honesty, candidness, and supportiveness (Bies & Moag, 1986). One possible explanation for why the two studies' findings were not completely identical regards their methodological differences. Unlike Jones and Lindley (1998), Kirkman et al. used only three a priori categories (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional justice) and did not analyze any of the non-fairness comments (coded as "Other"), which comprised slightly less than two-thirds of their data. In contrast, Jones and Lindley used focus groups to develop categories inductively with team members.

In the present study, we hope to extend the conclusions made by Jones and Lindley (1998) and by Kirkman et al. (1996) by examining all of the comments (including those omitted) in Kirkman et al.'s data set and using a wider array of pre-existing categories. Thus, we broaden the data analysis in each of these previous studies. More specifically, the question driving the present study is: When the entire set of the employee comments ( $N = 1,060$ ) available in Kirkman et al.'s study are analyzed, to what extent will the SMWT-related concerns identified previously by them and by Jones and Lindley be observed?

In addition to the categories previously exposed in the two prior studies, we expect to find SMWT-related concerns relating to: (1) team members' perceptions of trust; (2) team members' cultural values; and (3) team members' tolerance for change. We expect these additional categories due to findings specific to each (which we review in the next section) and, more generally, to the volume of work that identifies these variables as potential sources of employee-organization conflict and the related resistance to management initiatives (e.g., Hultman, 1979; Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Odiorne, 1981; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Rather than restrict our methodology to just these categories, we allow our coders to develop their own categories in accordance with established qualitative data analytic techniques (Strauss, 1987; Weber, 1990). Since our pur-

pose is to potentially *extend* the conclusions made in the earlier studies by Jones and Lindley (1998) and Kirkman et al. (1996) regarding why employees resist SMWTs, we focus next on the variables unexplored in those studies (just noted above) that may also relate to SMWT-resistance.

### Potential Concerns Related to SMWT Resistance Unexamined in Previous Research

**Trust.** Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), in their integrative model of organizational trust, define trust as follows: "The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Inherent in their definition is the idea of reciprocity. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), people will support a social exchange partner in proportion to the perceived benefits provided by the partner (i.e., a manager or an organization). Reciprocity norms underscore the dynamic nature of trust. Trust must be earned and trust can be lost. Once trust is violated, however, there are significant barriers to re-earning it (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Rotter, 1980; Zand, 1972).

With regard to teams and trust, Manz and Sims (1993) point out that due to the history of management-induced fads and poor management of industrial relations, some companies have no immediate credibility with front-line employees (especially unionized employees). Some employees may see teams as another way to co-opt them to management's views. Manz and Sims also state that many stories of team success come from "threatened companies or industries, where [employees] and management were forced to confront and discard traditional distrust in favor of teams" (p. 18). Fisher (1993) points out that employees may see SMWTs as a union-busting strategy or a method for eliminating seniority and protective job rules and classifications.

Change management scholars include trust as an important facilitator of change and a necessary precursor to reducing employee resistance to change (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Hultman, 1979; Judson, 1991; Novelli et al., 1995; Odiorne, 1981; Strebel, 1996; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). For example, Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) describe an incident when the president of a small midwestern company announced that he would implement flexible working schedules, anticipating that this would evoke a positive response from employees; but instead he discovered that many employees thought, as a result of the rampant distrust in the organization, that this change would require them to work whenever their supervisors asked them to—including evenings and weekends. The employee union quickly met and then presented management with a nonnegotiable demand that the flexible hours concept be dropped, and the president complied. This example demonstrates that employee distrust of management in general (*as opposed to anticipation of distributive injustice, or concern about specific change-related outcomes*) can lead to heightened concerns about, and resistance to, new management initiatives. When the initiative is teams, the same dynamic should thus occur.

**Cultural Values.** Cultural values are defined as explicitly or implicitly desirable end states of existence or modes of conduct that reflect relatively general beliefs of what is right or wrong in specific societies (Adler, 1997). Values are developed at a very early age and are assumed to remain relatively stable throughout one's life (Rokeach, 1973). Cultural values that are inconsistent with management initiatives are difficult to suppress. For example, rather than weakening cultural values through the imposition of organizational culture, researchers have found that employee cultural values actually strengthen in the face of incompatible organizational values (Laurent, 1983). Researchers have also argued that cultural values that are incompatible with management initiatives will likely lead to resistance (Adler, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Scarborough, 1998; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

While Hofstede (1980) found that there was more variation on the cultural values between countries rather than within countries (and thus conceptualized cultural values at the societal-level), researchers have frequently studied values such as individualism–collectivism at the individual level of analysis (Bochner, 1994; Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991; Earley, 1989, 1993; Hui, Triandis, & Yee, 1991; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2000b, in press; Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Thomas, 1999; Wagner, 1995). The findings of these studies demonstrate that enough variation occurs at the individual level of analysis to demonstrate that *individuals' personally held* cultural values influence their work attitudes and behavior. In our study, we test to see if this individual-level relationship occurs when the work attitude pertains to SMWT assignments.

Some researchers have argued that SMWTs may be incompatible with the cultural values of employees (Gibson & Kirkman, 1999; Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997, in press; Manz & Sims, 1993). For example, Manz and Sims (1993) point out that working collectively in teams may run counter to the strong political and individual freedom beliefs prevalent in the United States. Kirkman and Shapiro (1997) theorized that employees' cultural values might influence the extent to which they resist the *team* aspect and/or the *self-management* aspect of SMWTs. Like Manz and Sims, Kirkman and Shapiro propose that employees high in individualism (i.e., the tendency to promote one's self-interest over the interests of one's family, groups, or organizations) will resist working in teams. They also point out that employees will resist a high degree of self-management when they are also high in power distance (i.e., the tendency to place an emphasis on power and status differences in organizations), being orientation (i.e., the tendency to emphasize non-work activities rather than work activities), and determinism (i.e., the belief that one's outcomes are controlled by forces outside of oneself). Kirkman and Shapiro also suggest that employee resistance (to either teams or self-management) will likely result in lower overall individual and team effectiveness.

Recent tests of Kirkman and Shapiro's (1997) propositions at the individual level of analysis have found that, indeed, employees who are individualistic tend to resist the team aspect of SMWTs more so than employees who are collectivistic; and employees who are higher, rather than lower, in power distance, being orientation and determinism tend to resist the self-management aspect of SMWTs more (Kirkman & Shapiro, in press). In addition, employees who expressed either type

of resistance were also less satisfied with their jobs and less committed to their organizations than those who reported lower levels of resistance, outcomes that will inevitably hurt the overall performance of SMWTs (Manz & Sims, 1993). Indeed, at the team level of analysis, Kirkman and Shapiro (2000a) also found that lower levels of cooperation, empowerment, and productivity were generally associated with SMWTs whose members' resistance was higher. Kirkman and Shapiro (2000b) also found that employees were more receptive to team-based rewards when they were more, rather than less, collectivistic. For these reasons we include cultural values as likely potential sources of employee resistance.

**Low Tolerance for Change.** Low tolerance for change is defined as the fear that one will not be able to develop new skills and behaviors that are required in a new work setting (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Like the cultural values, low tolerance for change is a dispositional predictor of employee resistance (Watson, 1969). In general, if an employee has a low tolerance for change, he or she will likely resist moving to a management system that exponentially increases the amount of change required to perform tasks and carry out job responsibilities (i.e., increased ambiguity). Even if an employee intellectually understands the need for change, he or she may be emotionally unable to make the transition and resist the change for reasons he or she may not consciously understand (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

In an example of the effects of low tolerance for change, one employee, when told his company was moving to SMWTs, "banged his fist on a table and demanded his right to have a boss tell him what to do" (Manz & Sims, 1993, p. 18). Another employee, in an expression of low tolerance for change, stated, "I liked it better when the director just told me what to do. That was quicker and simpler" (Fisher, 1993, p. 212). Low tolerance for change is more likely to be a source of concern for employees when they experience higher levels of ambiguity on the job. For example, Jones and Lindley (1998) include "role clarity" as a top employee concern about transitioning to teams. Items loading on this factor included: "I know exactly what is expected of me on the job."; "There are standards in place which help people decide what to do in most cases."; and "Documentation about how to do things is readily available to my team." Individuals characterized by low tolerance for change will likely resist changes that decrease role clarity (i.e., such as the increased responsibility and autonomy characteristic of SMWTs).

In summary, our review of the literature has identified three individual-level variables that previous researchers have not empirically found to be sources of resistance to SMWTs (i.e., trust, cultural values, and low tolerance for change). It is likely that all three of these variables must be attended to by managers charged with implementing SMWTs. While the cultural values and low tolerance for change represent relatively stable dispositional explanations for employee resistance, trust represents a more dynamic source that may ebb and flow depending on employee interactions with the target of trust. Thus, employee resistance is likely to be caused by a complex set of factors, some of which are likely to be difficult to change.

Not only are the factors themselves important, but making matters more complicated is the potential interrelationships between the constructs. For example,

employees who have low tolerance for change may be especially intolerant if they also experience role ambiguity as part of the change (as noted above). As another example, individuals who are high in individualism may feel less trust in management than employees who are low in individualism (i.e., high in collectivism) (Hofstede, 1980). Collectivists, in general, promote the welfare of their groups or organizations over their own interests (Adler, 1997). Thus, collectivists will be more likely to trust that management has their best interests in mind when making changes and decisions regarding their welfare (Earley & Gibson, 1998). In support of this belief, collectivists, compared to individualists, have been found to be more satisfied with their jobs (Hui, Yee, & Eastman, 1995) and more committed to their organizations (Palich, Hom, & Griffeth, 1995). Similarly, the cultural value uncertainty avoidance, or the desire to avoid risk and seek certainty (Hofstede, 1980), would likely be related to low tolerance for change. Finally, perhaps trust and low tolerance for change could be inversely related.

The interrelationships between the constructs make their identification important to both researchers and practitioners but also difficult methodologically. Rather than empirically assess the potential relationships between the factors, our study is the first step in determining whether these factors emerge *at all* from employees making the transition to SMWTs—in addition to the concern-factors previously identified in the Kirkman et al. (1996) and Jones and Lindley (1998) studies.

## Method

### Sample and Content-Analysis Procedure

Comments from the Kirkman et al. (1996) data included all of the 1,060 comments provided by the 370 employees who provided responses to the first question posed in the original open-ended questionnaire. This question asked, "What were your top three concerns when you first began working in the team environment?" Employees provided up to three comments regarding the transition. Most responses were provided as short sentences, with a few longer responses (up to a short paragraph in length). These employees had recently undergone organizationally prescribed transitions to team structures in two large Fortune 50 organizations. See Kirkman et al. for further details of this sample.

All comments were evaluated by six first-year graduate students in I/O psychology in several steps following generally accepted guidelines for content analysis (Strauss, 1987; Weber, 1990). First, students familiarized themselves with all of the comments independently, taking notes as needed. Second, all coders engaged in a two-hour meeting to share their notes and general observations about the comments. Third, the coders then discussed what categories should be used to parsimoniously cover all comments (Strauss, 1987). This discussion was nominally facilitated by one of the authors, who provided the constraint that the coders reach consensus regarding up to ten categories that would be relatively exhaustive. Coders deliberated for approximately three hours before deciding on the categories. These were limited to ten in order to increase the likelihood of accuracy in categorization. Specifically, it has been shown that requiring raters to use more than about six

dimensions leads to problems in rating discrimination (Gaugler & Thornton, 1989). Finally, prior to the actual categorization, all raters agreed upon the content categories. None of the raters were aware of the content categories used in either Kirkman et al. (1996) or Jones and Lindley (1998); all content categories were developed and defined by this group. Eight categories were derived in this discussion.

Regarding the actual categorization, each comment was included in only one category, based on coder judgments about which category the comment best fit (Weber, 1990). Coders were instructed to let the comments drive the categorization rather than rely on their beliefs about what the comments might mean or may imply. The level of analysis of the coding was the individual respondent. The entire length of an individual's comment, be this a sentence or a paragraph, was treated as one thought-unit. The most categories represented by a given employee's response was three (i.e., because employees were asked to list at least three different concerns). After a first round of independent rating, in which all comments were categorized according to the eight categories, there was substantial disagreement in categorizations concerning one category. This led to the dropping of this category and re-coding all of the comments originally categorized under it into the remaining categories.

After this second round of independent coding, majority-agreement occurred 74% of the time. The percentage of agreement among five or more raters was 57%, and complete agreement was reached by independent ratings on 41% of the comments. A final consensus discussion was held to categorize the 189 (26%) of comments not agreed upon by the majority (four or more) of the raters.

The definitions of the seven content categories used in the final content analysis (created by the content-raters with minimal facilitation by one of the authors) and their associated examples are shown in Table 1. Importantly, our coders' judgments—not the judgments of the researchers or of any social scientists—determined category-labels and comment-placements. And therefore, we have to assume that the comments they categorized as relating to “fairness” are indeed related to those issues, and the comments they categorized as relating to “equity” are indeed related to those issues.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some of the comments that our coders chose to categorize as “fairness-related” might instead have been placed in other seemingly similar categories. For example, comments that our coders placed in the category of “interpersonal fairness” might have, according to Jones and Lindley's (1998) coders, gone instead in the category of “managerial support.” Surely, the latter two categories are very similar (since both include actions that managers can take that are supportive of employee concerns). Although one reviewer suggested that “equity” concerns could equally have been labeled “social loafing” concerns, we believe the equity-categorization is more accurate. This is because respondents' general fear about having to work harder *for less money* is a (distributive) justice concern. Had the comment stopped at work harder, perhaps social loafing might be a better descriptor. However, once the respondent commented on both inputs and outcomes in relation to others, distributive fairness appeared to describe the comment better (at least to the coders).

**Table 1**  
**Content Categories Used to Sort Employee Comments**  
 (including representative comments from each category)

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**Fairness:** Includes all *input and process issues* that lead to differences in distribution of organizational outcomes. Some of the subjects likely to be addressed in this category include performance appraisal and other processes through which valued rewards are distributed.

Example comments:

“Will peer reviews be fair and objective?”

“Who will fairly judge my contribution to the business?”

“How would a manager be able to appraise me without being involved in technical issues?”

“I hate peer ratings because it is a personality contest and not a question of merit.”

“How was job performance going to be objectively evaluated.”

“Will I be appraised fairly for the work performed?”

“Will I have a voice in team decisions?”

“I want fairness in evaluating and being evaluated by peers.”

**Equity:** This category includes such outcomes as promotion, distribution of rewards (pay), and recognition for work. Thus *distributions and outcomes* of work are the foci of this category.

Example comments:

“I might work harder than other people on the same job.”

“Will I work more than others for the same money?”

“Will a fair wage be maintained?”

“Will the team get credit for what I do?”

“In this type of environment, will experience levels be rewarded/recognized?”

“How will promotions/salary increases be handled?”

“Equal compensation for contribution.”

“Individual achievement won't count anymore.”

**Accountability:** Comments in this category include issues regarding “who is responsible for what,” as well as comments relating to “who does what.” Thus, role definition, autonomy, leadership, work distribution, time management, and decision-making control are subjects likely to fall under this heading.

Example comments:

“Who will lead our team?”

“How will team decisions get made?”

“Now the buck stops here – it never did before!”

“What are the boundaries of a team's authority?”

“Lost focus on who is running the project. Sense of control and a lost feeling, brought out lots of confusion.”

“Who is going to be in charge of work prioritization and staffing?”

“Reporting structure.”

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Table 1 (contd.)

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**Trust:** This category includes issues related to interpersonal relations, cliques, sharing of information and other forms of helping.

Example comments:

“Trust and confidence.”

“Trusting each other.”

“How will teams work together?”

“How to get others to actually be a team player.”

“Everyone getting along.”

“Can I work with these people?”

**Organizational outlook:** Career development/tracking, organizational direction/vision, and power structures in the larger organization are issues that fall under this category.

Example comments:

“Direction.”

“Loss of focal business direction.”

“Where will direction for the ‘big picture’ come from?”

“Lack of concrete transition plan. What was presented changed often.”

“To what extent will protected areas grow?”

“Job security.”

“Transfer opportunities.”

**Individual ability/confidence:** This relates to people’s comments about their own ability to competently do their jobs. Comments about workload might fit under this category if they reflect doubts about people’s ability to accomplish required work in allotted time.

Example comments:

“Ability to get work done.”

“Changing to something new after doing what I was doing for so many years.”

“Could I lead them to success?”

“Will I fit on the team?”

“Having to make performance and take home pay for nine other people.”

“Am I fast enough?”

**Other:** This includes comments that are difficult to interpret or understand, or that do not fit into any of the other categories at all.

Example comments:

“Not only could dump action not be dictated, but neither could smart ones.”

“Escalation process.”

“No real changes.”

“Waste of time.”

“Health.”

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Prior to beginning work on content coding, raters received a sheet containing these categories and the brief definitions included in Table 1. Content categorization following the receipt of this coding sheet led to moderate agreement among raters (Cohen's Kappa = .57,  $p < .05$ ). Consensus discussion leading to final disposition of ratings clarified sources of disagreement, few of which were substantive. More will be said about these categories later.

### Results

Concerns expressed by employees involved in team transitions fell fairly well into categories used in the two previous studies (i.e., Jones & Lindley, 1998; Kirkman et al., 1996). This point is illustrated in Table 2, which shows the categories used by raters in this study and raters in Kirkman et al.'s (1996) study, and revealed by the factor analytic procedures used by Jones and Lindley (1998) to describe team members' concerns. Importantly, the categories across these studies were nearly synonymous. For example, Table 2 reveals that justice concerns (procedural and distributive) were well represented by the first two categories used by our raters. Given the existence of other available categories, the combined percentage of comments in these two categories (30%) was somewhat less than in Kirkman et al.'s (1996) categorization of these comments. However, the difference was minimal (30% versus 35% in the original study). The category entitled "accountability" corresponded closely with role definition issues previously identified, and was the most heavily represented category (25% of comments). Team support issues appear to have fit well within the "trust" category identified in the current findings. This was the next-most commonly used category (23% of total comments). Our findings suggest that trust, which had received no previous empirical support regarding resistance to teams, was indeed a powerful concern among employees making the transition to teams.

Where differences were found between categories in the current and previous studies, they appear to have resulted from the current categories subsuming categories identified in previous studies. For example, unlike Kirkman et al. (1996), our raters categorized concerns relating to either procedural or interactional justice under the single rubric of "procedural justice." The common theme of these two categories has caused other justice researchers to suggest combining them (cf. Greenberg & Alge, 1998). This was also the case for comments related to managerial support; these appear to have fallen under the interactional justice category. This tendency of categories to subsume earlier categories may have been the result of the constraint we placed on raters to identify no more than ten categories. The codings also suggest some hierarchical groupings based on combinations of specific categories into broader categories, as depicted in Table 2.

Content raters also identified two new categories. These were "organizational outlook" (13% of comments) and "individual ability/confidence" (7% of comments), both of which were represented by relatively few comments. Because raters believed that employee concerns about workload reflected their lack of confidence, some workload concerns also comprised a few of the comments in the latter category (see examples in Table 1). However, this was not the case in the Jones

and Lindley (1998) analysis. Workload-related comments in Jones and Lindley's factor-analytic study instead reflected more procedural-justice-related concerns, not concerns about confidence or ability. This is because many of the specific comments under this heading in their study dealt with employees' worries about how their individual workload would be factored into decisions about compensation and other outcomes. Our coders' categorizing workload concerns under what they called "individual ability/confidence" issues suggests that employees' expressed concerns about workload may reflect, in addition to (or instead of) procedural justice concerns, employee doubts about their *ability* to make necessary changes. This aspect of workload-concerns and organizational outlook-related concerns were not identified in Jones and Lindley nor Kirkman et al.'s (1996) studies. Individual ability/confidence concerns also confirm that another of the categories identified in our literature review, low tolerance for change, was reflected in the present study's findings. None of the results, however, supported our theoretical inclusion of individualism-collectivism as a source of employee resistance to SMWTs.

**Table 2**  
**Study Comparison of Categories and Percentage of**  
**Comments Classified Under Each Category**

Current Study Category	Percentage of Comments	Kirkman et al. (1996) Categories	Jones & Lindley (1998) Categories
Fairness	17%	Procedural justice	Workload
Equity	13%	Interactional justice	Manager support
Accountability	25%	Distributive justice	Role definition
Trust	23%		Team support
Organizational outlook	12%		
Individual ability/confidence	7%		
Other	3%		

### Discussion

Even though there were exceptions, results of this study generally support the findings of previous research (Jones & Lindley, 1998; Kirkman et al., 1996) regarding the employee concerns that arise during team transitions. Issues concerning procedural and distributive justice, changes in roles and workloads, and social support all recurred in this study. Three additional issues of concern to the

employees in our sample (with all but the first being ones we predicted) regarded the degree to which the employees: (1) saw a positive organizational outlook, (2) trusted management, and (3) had confidence in their own ability to change. Surprisingly, none of the content-categories identified by our raters reflected employees' cultural values such as individualism, which we expected to emerge in U.S. employee descriptions of their SMWT-related concerns.

It is notable that some of the more specific issues identified in the previous research were subsumed under larger groupings in this study. These included interactional justice being subsumed under procedural justice (see Greenberg & Alge, 1998), identified as "fairness" concerns in Table 1, and manager support also falling under the rubric of procedural justice concerns. Similarly, work and role definition concerns identified as separate issues in previous research fell under a single heading, entitled "accountabilities." Comments under this category tended to reflect problems with "who does what" and "why am I now responsible" for work previously assigned to management. Taken together, our findings show that, although fairness issues constitute nearly one-third of employees' SMWT-related concerns, *issues other than fairness* dominate these concerns. Next we discuss implications for both research and practice.

### Implications of Findings and Future Research Needs

Our finding that employees' SMWT-related concerns consist of a significant amount of fairness issues, as reported by Kirkman et al. (1996), reinforces the importance of behaving justly when implementing organizational change. However, our finding, also, that employees' SMWT-related concerns are dominated by *non-fairness* issues suggests that it is too simplistic to manage change by "behaving justly," as recent change management theorists have suggested (cf. Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Novelli et al., 1995). In addition to this, our findings suggest that managers will need to behave in ways that address employees' concerns regarding trust, accountability, and organizational outlook—the latter three issues constituting 60 percent of the concerns content-analyzed in this study. Increasing attention has recently been given to the actions needed to build trust amongst organizational members (Mayer et al., 1995), evidenced by an entire special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* (1998, Vol. 23, No. 3) devoted to trust. Conversely, and in that same special issue, attention has been given to understanding what causes organizational members to choose behaviors that betray others' trust (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). We refer readers to the latter sources for trust-building action-recommendations.

With regard to the accountability category that our raters identified as a repeated "theme" amongst the employees' comments that they coded, the examples shown in Table 1 suggest that actions relating to this issue would require managers to simply clarify new roles and work-related expectations of employees being asked to adopt SMWT (or other) changes—an action that is identified as essential for good leadership in general (Hackman & Walton, 1986). The examples shown in Table 1 regarding the organizational outlook category that emerged in our study (represented by nearly 10 percent of the 1,060 comments analyzed), suggest that managers and management scholars interested in factors that ease change transi-

tions need to provide clarity about other things too. Specifically, clarity is needed about: (1) "who will do what" *with regard to the organization's leadership*; (2) how the changes being asked for fit with the organization's overall direction (i.e., vision); and (3) what career development (including transfer) opportunities exist that will help ensure that employees grow with or outside their current organization.

Actions relating to the latter issues have been neglected in the more "micro" (intra- or inter-personal) analysis given to issues of overcoming employee resistance to team-related change (e.g., Kirkman et al., 1996; Jones & Lindley, 1998) and in the literature that has focused more exclusively on managerial resistance (Fisher, 1993; Manz, Keating, & Donnellon, 1990). While change theorists have identified the importance of some of the latter issues (e.g., vision, cf. Beer et al., 1990), we know of no empirical studies regarding the relationship between the actions just noted and employee resistance to SMWTs or other organizational change.

Our raters' identification of an "individual ability/confidence" category and the examples of comments characterizing this category (shown in Table 1), leads us to believe that employee workload concerns are related to questions they have about: (1) their own competence to handle increased workload and/or (2) the fairness with which new work assignments will be made or evaluated. This finding suggests that further study is needed to determine the most appropriate way to categorize workload concerns. Understanding how to best categorize these concerns is important, since the "label" given to these will influence the "remedy" that is suggested. If workload concerns regard ability issues, then the appropriate intervention is to make training for skills relating to the new work assignments available to the employees undergoing workload changes. If instead the workload concerns regard primarily or exclusively issues of procedural justice, then actions that maximize perceptions of procedural justice (see Novelli et al., 1995, for examples) may constitute a more effective intervention.

One surprising finding of this study was the absence of the mention of cultural values such as individualism in light of the growing research linking cultural values to resistance to teams (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997; Manz & Sims, 1993). Employees may have been unable to articulate their cultural values in open-ended comments because such values are deeply held and seem transparent to individuals within each culture (Adler, 1997). Alternatively, employees may articulate their cultural values, but their expression of these may take the form of fairness-related comments. For example, an individualist's tendency to promote his or her own welfare over the welfare of the group or organization (Hofstede, 1980) may lead that person to say: "It is unfair to put the team's welfare first." Our raters would have categorized this comment in the fairness category. Therefore, we cannot conclude that cultural values such as individualism do not lead to employee resistance; rather, we conclude that employees may not couch their concerns about teams in their cultural value orientation.

An important need for future research that emerges from the results of our study and the comparison of our results to previous studies is the need for an integrative theoretical framework regarding employee resistance to team implementa-

tion. Even though we collected data only at the individual level of analysis, employee comments reflected constructs that are normally conceptualized at the individual level of analysis (i.e., individual ability/confidence), the group level of analysis (i.e., trust, accountability issues, and fairness concerns), and the organizational level of analysis (i.e., organizational outlook, career development/tracking, organizational direction/vision, and power structures). These three levels of analysis are in contrast to other research on resistance to change implementation that focuses only on the individual level of analysis (i.e., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Although cultural values did not emerge in our study as an influence on employee resistance, it is important to note that others have identified cultural values as likely to influence employees' reaction to organizational change initiatives (Adler, 1997; Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997; Scarborough, 1998). Perhaps a fourth level of analysis, culture or society, will have to be added to theoretical frameworks of resistance. In any event, a *multi-level* theoretical framework may be useful for guiding future research regarding the potential forces acting on employee resistance to management initiatives (i.e., Zaltman & Duncan, 1977), such as SMWTs.

### Limitations

The content analysis methodology is best suited for illuminating themes and patterns in open-ended data (which was our study's purpose), not for determining cause and effect relationships. Now that we have identified a handful of employees' SMWT-related concerns, some of which are consistent with those identified in two previous content-analysis studies (cf. Jones & Lindley, 1998; Kirkman et al., 1996), empirical research is needed that links the elements identified by the comments in this study to actual employee resistance (i.e., Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999). Such measurement may help managers see which concerns are most strongly predictive of employees' behavioral acts of resistance (e.g., sabotage, tardiness, absenteeism, turnover). As a result, the latter research will enable management scholars as well as managers to understand the extent to which SMWT-related concerns (and which ones especially) may be linked to conflict-related outcomes (of varying severity) in organizations.

A second limitation, also relating to our methodology, is that we cannot empirically assess the interrelationships among the sources of resistance that our content analysis suggests are of greatest significance to employees. Research that does this, via quantitative-based survey-measures of the resistance-sources revealed here, will help managers and management scholars further identify the employee concerns that are most versus least predictive of organizational conflict-related outcomes.

### Conclusion

This study identifies, via an analysis of comments made by employees, what employees' concerns are when told they will be assigned to SMWTs. Ample findings demonstrate that employees' concerns about change generally result in resistance, and this in turn results in many negative organizational outcomes, including conflict. The incessant changes in technology, and the conflict and resistance that

are typically associated with change, suggests that the time is ripe for organizational disaster (or minimally, dysfunctionality). Such a potential for disaster further illustrates why the issues raised by the change-perspective guiding our study are important to conflict-managers and scholars.

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