

# Employees' experiences of change management in the implementation of a performance management system



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**Orientation:** Success in the implementation of a performance management system in an organisation is underpinned by the way a strategic change initiative is effectively managed across all organisational levels.

**Research purpose:** This study explored how employees experienced change management in the implementation of a performance management system.

**Motivation for the study:** Research on the impact of change management on employees in the implementation of performance management systems in organisations is limited, particularly in the South African context, which served as motivation for this study.

**Research approach, design and method:** A qualitative study was employed using semi-structured interviews to collect data from nine participants, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed by thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** The study confirmed that the implementation of organisational change affects both employees (cognitively, emotionally and somatically) and leaders (leadership style as defence against change anxiety). Therefore, the preparation, participation and empowerment of and communication with employees, over the entire change process value chain, are crucial for effective implementation of a performance management system.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The study highlights factors that leadership teams and change managers need to consider when introducing change initiatives.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study adds to the knowledge base about the impact of the management of change during the implementation of a performance management system. It thereby highlights the importance of working with participants' lived, authentic change experiences towards ensuring that change management serves as an anchor and container during system implementation.

**Keywords:** change; organisational change; organisational readiness; performance management; performance management systems.

## Introduction

In our current, virtual world, leaders are often preoccupied with the extent to which employees actually *perform*, as they work from home without direct supervision. Recently, the South African president, Mr Ramaphosa also had to reassure men by diverting from a prepared speech that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccine would not adversely impact their (sexual) *performance* (Ramaphosa, 2021). Similarly, one of the focal points of the local government (municipal) elections in South Africa was to what extent political parties would be able to deliver (*perform*) on their campaign promises of clean governance and effective delivery of services. It is therefore always about performance or the perception of performance. Considering the global and volatile business landscape, it is evident that in the relentless pursuit for development, the emphasis on high-performance standards and a culture of high performance continues in organisations (Montiel, Radziszewski, Prilleltensky, & Houle, 2021; Singh, 2019; Sterna & Zibrek, 2021). The necessity to measure performance in organisations often culminates in the implementation of formal systems for managing performance in order to ensure alignment of employee and team performance to the strategic objectives of organisations (Grobler, Hyra, & Bezuidenhout, 2013). The introduction of robust performance management systems often yields tangible outputs for organisations, in terms of ensuring maintenance of competitive advantage and sustainability (Adom, Boateng, & Gnankob, 2019; Veldsman & Veldsman, 2020). A performance management system is a strategic initiative

and its implementation involves changes in the processes of an organisation. Therefore, the implementation of a performance management system needs to be underpinned by effective change management practices (Van Der Voet & Vermeeren, 2017).

Change is defined as a shift from an old to a new state of things (French & Bell, 1999; Martins & Geldenhuys, 2020). Within an organisational context, change implies a change in organisational work activities or tasks, including roles, processes, structures and values to reach a clearly defined purpose (Errida & Lotfi, 2021). Critical components of change management include the application of behavioural science knowledge, resources and tools to manage change in a systematic way (Naslund & Norrman, 2019), and the execution of appropriate leadership practices and directing of organisation-wide processes in the interest of organisational transformation (Attaran, Attaran, & Kirkland, 2019; Fincham & Rhodes, 2005). Change management, therefore, entails the application of tools, processes and techniques to scope, resource and direct system-wide activities to implement change (Cummings, Worley, & Donovan, 2020). It is evident from the above that change management could be a daunting task if participants are not ready for the change. Change readiness reflects the organisation's motivation (drive), willingness (disposition) and commitment (action) (Martins & Geldenhuys, 2020) to the change process as an integrated and connected system. If the purpose of the change exercise is not clear and convincing, it is unlikely that the system is going to invest in the process by taking consistent accountability for the effective implementation of the change initiative.

The challenge of effective implementation of change initiatives in organisations has not been addressed adequately in the literature on change management, although there is consensus among researchers about a high failure rate (Govender & Bussin, 2020). A study that explores the lived experiences of employees, in a multinational tourism agency in South Africa, during the implementation of performance management has also not been explored. Part of the challenge that makes managing change in organisations problematic is the perception that there is little consensus on key factors that influence proposed change efforts. This is attributable to the notion that organisations are dynamic and unique open systems (Wetzel & Van Gorp, 2014). This study seeks to explore change management by describing employees' experiences of change management during the implementation of a performance management system. It is argued that employees' authentic, lived, phenomenological change experiences are key to unlocking effective change management initiatives and, in the context of this study, the implementation of a performance management system.

## Theoretical perspectives

### Organisational change and its triggers

Diedericks, Cilliers and Bezuidenhout (2019) postulate that organisational change can be planned or unplanned and

involves an organisation's shift from its current state to a desired future state. This shift is intended at enhancing competitiveness and maintaining sustainability; however, it is not an easy journey to embark on. Cummings et al. (2020) assert that organisational change is a multifaceted process with unpredictable negative or positive outcomes. Organisational change projects must be paid careful attention to ensure effective implementation of change initiatives in order to avert wasteful expenditure, because of failed change initiatives (Rebeka & Indradevi, 2015). To facilitate success, Nissen (2014) asserts that organisational change initiatives should actively involve employees and take into consideration their job satisfaction and productivity in an organisation. Lin, Chen and Su (2017) support this sentiment by stating that effective management of organisational change can yield greater productivity, as well as improved readiness for adopting and embracing future changes.

According to Smollan (2015), organisational change is necessitated and driven by strategic considerations that include the need to revamp business processes and adopt new ways of working. Furthermore, organisational change initiatives can be brought about by an organisation's response to specific challenges, which could be internally or externally necessitated by an organisation's environment (Magano & Thomas, 2017). Such changes may be triggered by changes in the operational, cultural, strategic and political environment (Vasiliki, Stergiani, Dimitrios, & Prodromos, 2018). An additional reality is that competition is increasingly becoming a permanent feature in the global business environment, resulting in organisations having more competitors, which compels them to change constantly, to ensure that they maintain their competitiveness (Oliver, 2018). This constant change in the business environment is not easy for employees. Employers must ensure that employees feel safe and supported. Social exchange theory (Cek & Eyupoglu, 2020) suggests that when employees feel supported and satisfied, they will be inclined to reciprocate by displaying positive attitudes towards others and even the change process (Murray, 2019), which enhances generosity, cooperation and performance. However, the opposite could also be true. An unsupportive work environment may result in employees feeling psychologically unsafe, less supportive and unlikely to be psychologically available to what is required (Janik & Rothmann, 2015; Mukherjee, 2020).

### Change readiness and resistance to change

The present business environment is dominated by competition and rapid changes, and most organisations that embrace change are likely to maintain their sustainability (Kirrane, Lennon, O'Connor, & Fu, 2017). According to Vakola (2013), the literature on change has confirmed that the main reasons for unsuccessful change initiatives often include inadequate attention to employees' concerns and a lack of preparation of employees to change. Rafferty and Restubog (2017) support this sentiment by suggesting that one of the key people management practices for organisations is to

prepare employees to deal with the change. It is reasonable to assert that prepared employees are more likely to embrace the proposed changes and identify the possibility of a learning opportunity brought about by the proposed change initiative (Adil, 2016).

Matthysen and Harris (2018) hold a different view. They claim that it is not guaranteed that employees' readiness to embrace change would culminate in the effective implementation of change initiatives. In contrast, several scholars, such as Brown, Kulik, Cregan and Metz (2017) and Ochurub, Bussin and Goosen (2012), argue that employees' readiness to embrace change would augment effective implementation of organisational change initiatives. Adil (2016) further supports this assertion by pointing out that literature corroborates the need for the prioritisation of readiness as an essential factor in the realisation of effective implementation of organisational change.

According to Vasiliki et al. (2018), any change initiative is faced with numerous obstacles, given that all change projects affect employees directly or indirectly. Employees' tendency to resist change has been identified as the most common challenge during the change implementation process (McKay, Kuntz, & Näswall, 2013). Riley (2012) is of the view that most employees become accustomed to business processes and, as a result, they are unwilling to adjust their familiar ways of working. Jones and Van De Ven (2016) elaborate on this discomfort by explaining that major changes can disrupt employees' familiarity with processes, unintentionally and inadvertently leading to them becoming disgruntled with the proposed change initiative. Finally, Diedericks et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of communicating with employees, by informing them, in advance, about the proposed change. This change practice could avert unnecessary speculation and rumours among employees and, possibly, even initiate active support for the new change initiatives.

### **Performance management and performance management systems**

The goal of managing performance is to unleash employees' ability to function beyond set expectations and to realise their potential (Madlabana & Petersen, 2020). Govender and Bussin (2020) explain that managing performance is crucial in setting clear goals and performance standards, identifying and harnessing the requisite skills and competencies, and reinforcing appropriate behaviour. Managing the performance of individuals and teams should be a continuous process that strives to align performance with the strategic goals of an organisation (Aguinis, 2013). However, managing performance in an organisation must also form part of the culture of the organisation (Ndevu & Muller, 2018).

Madlabana and Petersen (2020) argue that the most critical task, when managing people, is to make sure that employees perform optimally in executing tasks in their respective job roles. Hence, organisations that align and

measure performance, across all organisational levels, often achieve tangible results in terms of their strategic imperatives (Modipane, Botha, & Blom, 2019). When these strategic imperatives are met, performance management has direct benefits for employees and organisations, which include the improvement of strategic two-way communication, the strengthening of relationships, and the enhancement of employees' personal and career development (Maleka, Paul-Dachapalli, Ragadu, Schultz, & Van Hoek, 2020).

Govender and Bussin (2020) suggest that a performance management system comprises interlocking elements that are designed to inculcate high performance standards, which comprise the process of setting objectives, and regular review and feedback, as well as coaching, to avert poor performance. In addition, Modipane et al. (2019) argue that an effective performance management system should also be able to compare individual and team results against predetermined targets, with the goal of guiding, encouraging and enhancing decision making. Thus, an appropriately configured performance management system plays a pivotal role in maintaining and enhancing quality on the set performance standards (Karim, 2015). However, employee experiences and perceptions of the system could also play a significant role. The effectiveness of performance management is often determined by employees' perceptions thereof, particularly pertaining to fairness as well as accuracy (Govender & Bussin, 2020). Nothing should be left to chance. Performance management systems have been shrouded in controversy, ranging from it being seen as a punitive measure to it being condemned as a western management philosophy that could result in organisational injustice (Caza, Caza, & Lind, 2011; Coovadia, Jewkes, Barron, Sanders, & McIntyre, 2009; Modipane et al., 2019). A lot is therefore at stake because, it allows managers to 'identify those who qualify for a salary increment and promotion, identify training and development needs, place employees according to their ability and formally document reasons for any punitive measures' (Nxumalo et al., 2018, p. 2). Ochurub et al. (2012) argue that a performance management system that has not been properly implemented may culminate in unpleasant outcomes, such as low engagement levels, burnout among employees, high employee turnover and poor working relationships. Finally, Govender and Bussin (2020) point out that performance management systems in organisations are still highly contested, as they are perceived to be biased and to lack transparency and accountability.

### **Literature overview of the relationship between change management and the implementation of performance management systems**

Literature indicates that there is a clear association between change management and the introduction of performance management systems. For example, Kirrane et al. (2017) caution that an organisation should develop a change management plan, prior to the introduction of a performance

management system. Performance management systems play a significant role in the introduction of strategic change, by ensuring alignment of employees' behaviour with set organisational objectives (Khumalo, Ejoke, Oppong Asante, & Rugira, 2021; Sachane, Bezuidenhout, & Botha, 2018). Introducing a performance management system has an impact on the vision, mission and strategy of an organisation, and it is pivotal for change management to be considered prior to the actual implementation process (Ochurub et al., 2012). Change management should be initiated upfront to facilitate synergy between the employer and the employee and to ensure that both understand the strategic intent of a performance management system (Ndevu & Muller, 2018). Change readiness, in particular, should be ensured through the leadership team, who should be translating the change vision across all organisational levels (Jacobs & Mafini, 2019). Change management could add decisive value. This has been confirmed in a study by Kirrane et al. (2017), who reported a 28% decline in the failure rate of performance management system implementation ascribed to organisations ensuring that there is change management during the successful implementation process. Considering the above theoretical base, the conclusion can be made that there is some evidence for a reciprocal relationship between change management and the implementation of a performance management system.

## An integrated view of current literature

Considering the above discussion, the following integrated view may be drawn from the literature:

- The introduction of a performance management system results in organisational change, which is a dynamic, multifaceted process, with unpredictable outcomes (Cummings et al., 2020; Martins & Geldenhuys, 2020; Wetzels & Van Gorp, 2014).
- Change is anxiety-provoking and it is therefore not surprising that unsuccessful change initiatives often emanate from inadequate attention to employees' concerns, accentuated by inadequate preparation (Diedericks et al., 2019; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017).
- Change involves loss – the loss of what the employee has become accustomed to and will defend through resistance or an unwillingness to adjust his/her familiar ways of working (Rafferty & Restubog, 2017).
- The introduction of a performance management system appears to have a management as well as a leadership component (Kirrane et al., 2017; Madlabana & Petersen, 2020).
- Finally, perhaps one of the most critical considerations is to always pay close attention to the employee's lived, human experience of the change process (Nissen, 2014; Vakola, 2013).

## Research problem and objectives

The participating multinational tourism agency, where participants were employed, introduced a performance

management system, with the strategic intent of shaping the behaviour of employees to be in line with the organisational strategy. Limited studies have been conducted to explore the change management experiences and assess the after-effect of change initiatives on employees, when organisations have revamped their performance management systems. Thus, the objective of the study was to explore how employees experienced change management on the implementation of a performance management system. In line with the objective of the study, the research question was formulated as follows: 'What were the lived, change management experiences of employees during the implementation of a performance management system at a multinational tourism agency?'

## Research design

### Research approach

A qualitative and descriptive approach was adopted for this study, as the main focus was on understanding and interpreting the study phenomena from the participants' point of view (Polit & Beck, 2012; Smith, 2004). The study sought to gather insights into how individuals experienced a particular phenomenon, namely change management, during the implementation of a performance management system in a multinational tourism agency. This approach was adopted, because its value lies in exploring the meanings people attach to a phenomenon, developing an understanding about the perspectives of participants, or observing the process in depth (Creswell, 2014).

### Research strategy

The primary strategy for this study was to conduct qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Participants were interviewed with the objective of exploring and understanding how they experienced change management during the implementation of a performance management system (Parahoo, 2006). The unit of analysis was the individual participant.

## Research method

### Research setting

The study was conducted at a multinational tourism agency that is located in the Gauteng province, in South Africa. The entity provides support to the national Department of Tourism, by marketing South Africa as a tourist destination. The entity has a total number of 215 staff members – ranging from the clerical and administration level to the CEO level – and the employees are spread over nine business units.

### Entrée and establishment of the researcher's role

The first researcher had to obtain permission to conduct the study from the top management of the organisation to gain access to participants. Participants were sent an invitation to participate in the study by an e-mail. The e-mail provided a brief description of the research study,

including its benefits. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and their right to withdraw from participating in the study, at any time. Interviews were scheduled subsequent to participants signing forms giving informed consent to participate in the study. The first author was a master's student at the time when the study was conducted and the second author his supervisor. The first author is also a registered psychologist (IOP) and academic, and works as a consulting psychologist.

### Sampling and research participants

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling strategy for this study (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). For this study, a potential participant was an individual who met the following criteria: was in the employment of the agency when the performance management system was implemented; a permanent employee of the agency; had been employed for 5 years and longer in the organisation; was an administrative or clerical officer, junior or middle manager; and prepared to share their lived change experiences with the researchers. Eventually, nine employees participated in the study. The participants included four men and five women, comprising the following ethnic groups: black (B) people (5), coloured (C) people (2), Indian (I) people (1) and white (W) people (1). Their ages ranged from 23 to 46. Nine participants proved to be enough, as the study had reached saturation point (Patton, 2002; Polit & Beck, 2008).

### Data collection and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method, to enable participants to share their experiences of change management following the introduction of a performance management system. The main interview question was 'please tell me about your experiences regarding the recent implementation of the new performance management system?' Follow-up, open-ended questions were asked, to enable the participants to describe and further share their change management experiences in the form of stories, examples, emotions experienced, narratives, and so forth. Private meeting rooms, free from external distractions, were used to conduct the interviews. The average time for these individual interviews was 45 min.

### Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed and the following steps were followed, as suggested by Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006): (1) familiarisation and immersion of the data were formed by reviewing and listening to audio recordings and reading the interview field notes; (2) this was followed by all preconceived experiences bracketed and every statement relevant to the topic listed, breaking the protocols down into naturally occurring units; (3) these statements were clustered into emerging themes or meaning units; (4) subsequently, different colour codes were used to segment similar statements in terms of content; (5) the common and major themes were then integrated to describe

the participants' experiences of the study phenomenon; and finally, (6) the findings were reported by discussing the themes and providing verbatim quotes from the data.

### Strategies employed to ensure quality of data and integrity

Scientific rigour and trustworthiness were ensured by following the prescripts forwarded by Creswell (2014) and Thorne (2016). Firstly, dependability was ensured by rigorous planning and ensuring that the research method was consistently applied throughout the study. A record was also kept of all decisions taken, as well as all the procedures and methodologies, which contributed to the rigour of this qualitative study. Secondly, credibility was ensured by authentically engaging participants, to gain verification of shared experiences, and reporting on areas of potential disagreement (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). However, the most useful indicator is when readers view the findings of the study as meaningful and relatable to their own experience (Elo et al., 2014). Thirdly, confirmability was ensured by 'member checking' (Thorne, 2016) between researchers. Data transcripts and interview recordings were also kept in a safe and secure environment.

### Reporting style

The findings are presented by drawing on the verbatim responses of the interviewees. This ensures the richness of the data and the descriptive nature of the study. This way of reporting also ensured that the authors remained as authentic as possible to the manifested lived experiences of the participants. The data are therefore presented in a rich narrative format.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology's Ethics Review Committee, under the auspices of the College of Economic and Management Sciences. The reference number is: 2019\_CEMS/IOP\_011. Individual participants also had to sign an informed consent form to participate in the study. Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent and no harm to participants were upheld by reporting on the data in a narrative, collective and thematic manner (Flotman, 2021).

### Findings

Five major themes were constructed from the data analysed, which describe participants' lived experiences of the change management process. These experiences are reflected through the following themes: (1) employee disengagement, (2) the adoption of autocratic leadership styles, (3) inadequate assessment of change initiative effectiveness, (4) enthusiastic employee support for change vision, and (5) training for effective participation in the performance management system.

## Employee disengagement – Limited employee involvement, inadequate preparation and poor communication practices

Participants were asked to share how they had experienced the recent change initiative from their personal perspectives. This theme emerged as participants gave insight into the extent of the consultation process of employees towards making a joint decision on the change initiative. The responses were similar, with most participants expressing the view that employees were not consulted in the decision-making process of the change initiative. This was confirmed by participants who remarked as follows:

'I don't know about fellow colleagues, when it pertains to decision making, there was no involvement of employees at all; this is something that we have to deal with as an organisation, this is not fair because, at the end of the day, such decisions affect all of us.' (Participant 6, Male, 30 years old)

'Our voices should have been heard before a decision was taken. I mean, we are the ones that are going to be stuck with this system.' (Participant 8, Female, 46 years old)

Two other participants shared their experience of involvement by responding as follows:

'What was surprising was that there was no process to involve staff members. EXCO should have first sought our inputs, because we are the ones who will be interfacing with this system more than them. I mean, this came completely as a surprise when we were told that ... will be implementing a new performance system, this was not so on.' (Participant 7, Male, 33 years old)

'A blanket approach was used when making decisions around the new system. Why I say this, everyone has specific requirements in terms of how they expect the system to be configured, every business unit should have been consulted to identify their specific system needs.' (Participant 9, Male, 36 years old)

A participant expressed the concern that international office staff members should have been involved as well:

'I think our international office colleagues should have been involved, particularly to hear their views around this new system. I mean, they have a general feeling that we are working for two companies; we are a diverse organisation and EXCO should be cognisant of the complexity of the organisation when it comes to making such critical decisions.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

Finally, a participant shared her views on what participants' involvement means:

'Employee involvement, to me, means equal participation of everyone on all key decisions, irrespective of your occupational level. In simple terms, everyone must be heard.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

It is clear from participants' responses that the management team did not see the need to involve or consult employees regarding the introduced change. Employees wanted their different views to be considered, given the complexity of the organisation and because the introduction of a change initiative directly affects them.

Pertaining to employee preparation for the change project, participants reported that they were not formally prepared for the change initiative, as indicated below:

'This was a major change ... our feelings and emotions should have been gauged to say, "What do you think if we replace the current system?" It's easy to change by talking, but it's difficult with actions. So, we should have been given time to process this.' (Participant 6, Male, 30 years old)

'People often panic when it comes to changes; so, we should have been prepared about the upcoming change, if you get what I am saying.' (Participant 1, Female, 22 years old)

A participant highlighted the importance of preparing employees:

'Change always brings fear to people and that's a natural people reaction. I mean, you never know the outcomes of what is being implemented: what if this system was going to make us lose our jobs in future? So, preparation is important to deal with uncertainties.' (Participant 9, Male, 36 years old)

Another participant shared the experience of how people were poorly prepared:

'This thing was going to change how we used to do things; maybe they thought calling us into a boardroom and giving us instructions was preparing us. They should have engaged us at a personal level, to allay our fears and anxiety. [The] preparation was not there at all. How do you drop a bombshell like that without warning people?.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

A participant suggested that a tool, such as a survey, could have been administered to assess employees' preparedness for the change initiative:

'I understand that there was pressure coming from above, but we should have been warned. A small survey, to assess our feelings, would have not done damage to prepare us.' (Participant 2, Female, 25 years old)

Another participant expressed a similar view on the importance of preparing employees for change:

'[For] me, checking on my personal feelings means a lot, it shows that you care about me, that really shows that you are not only concerned about me delivering on your expectations. The funny thing with organisations is that they care about your performance; [however, should you] get incapacitated today, they will replace you before close of business.' (Participant 4, Female, 31 years old)

Participants' responses, therefore, denote that the emotional well-being of employees was not adequately considered (inadequate personal preparation) during the introduction of the performance management system.

Employee disengagement also emanated from how poorly employees were informed of the change initiative. All the participants were of the view that there was a total lack of communication in regard to keeping employees informed of the status of the implementation process:

'As an organisation, we are bad at communicating ... [the] communication was not enough at all. It was not very clear as

to what is the status during the course of implementation stages.' (Participant 8, Female, 46 years old)

Similarly, another participant, responded:

'We were not kept posted at all; you had to rely on the IT guys to know what was happening. Honestly, communication was extremely weak.' (Participant 2, Female, 25 years old)

These sentiments were captured by another participants:

'We were simply left wondering what is happening.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

A participant argued that sharing information is a powerful tool that could enhance the momentum of change by responding as follows:

'Disseminating the information helps in duly informing people about this whole process and it also keeps the momentum going. Why that did not happen? I don't know.' (Participant 6, Male, 30 years old)

However, it was noted that there were some poorly reactive efforts from the communications team:

'The PR and Comms team tried, although their communiqués were reactive and not enticing. They also tried to write blogs. Nevertheless, the change status was not proactively reported regularly.' (Participant 4, Female, 31 years old)

Finally, a participant felt that an effort was not made to communicate with employees on lower occupational levels and the international office staff:

'Given the complexity of our business, you cannot communicate with our India and China office the same way you communicate with head office. I really think more effort should have been put around having different communication channels that are effective for each office.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

Participants' responses suggest that communication of change in the participating organisation was not congruent with the persuasive communication strategy, and it was not targeted at different audiences.

### **The adoption of autocratic leadership styles – Asserting control**

On further reflection on their change management experiences, participants expressed strong, lived encounters regarding the management team's leadership style. Perceptions of autocratic leadership styles emerged as the project unfolded, as reflected below:

'When it comes to how we are managed, it's always like, this is the direction that we are following and please proceed to implement what we have decided on as the executive team.' (Participant 4, Female, 31 years old)

'Our EXCO likes shoving things down our throats. I mean, that's not how to lead people. We want them to think with us, instead of them thinking for us. We are not robots; we have to engage and, if need be, also vote on things.' (Participant 9, Male, 36 years old)

Other participants further elaborated on how these autocratic styles made them feel:

'You know what, EXCO has a habit of thinking for us. I mean, we're just told to do things. Anyway what can you say? They are management ... you don't want to see yourself losing your job, because of being targeted for insubordination. I mean, we are compelled to toe the line.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

'They don't recognise us at all. They just say jump and [you] don't even ask how high. The way things are done in this organisation is not total right. It's always like ... "the board took a resolution". I mean, how do you make a resolution without consulting us?.' (Participant 2, Female, 25 years old)

A participant added to the above views on leadership in the organisation by stating that leadership takes decisions without consulting relevant structures:

'They continue to ignore the employee committee. I mean, the terms of references for the employee committee are clear around the fact that this committee should be consulted for soliciting of employee inputs, but this committee continues to be undermined. This dictatorship style is ruining the organisation.' (Participant 8, Female, 46 years old)

Finally, it was pointed out that the leadership team had been made aware of this leadership style:

'We have made the CEO aware of the way [*we are managed and that*] we don't like how they dictate things to us. We always raise this at the employee committee meetings, when we were given board meetings feedback.' (Participant 7, Male, 33 years old)

Participants' comments suggest that an autocratic leadership style was adopted to coerce employees to support the change initiative. Their responses further suggested that the adoption of these perceived autocratic leadership styles was ineffective, in that, instead of supporting the change initiative, it led to resistance and, ultimately, the rejection of accountability for the outcomes of the change project.

### **Inadequate assessment of change initiative effectiveness – Where are we now?**

This theme was constructed as participants responded to how they experienced change management during the implementation of a performance management system. Participants were of the view that an assessment should have been done to confirm that the introduced change had realised its intended outcomes, as reported below:

'That was not done at all ... for me. They're just saying to me that [*I should*] just jump and don't even ask how high, we don't care to review whether this system works or not.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

'I strongly believe that after the roll-out, there should have been some sort of review, involving everyone, ... you know, ... just to assess at how we are feeling and also check if there are any challenges that we are experiencing with the new system.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

Two participants recommended effective interventions that could have been used to solicit employees' feedback on the effectiveness of the change initiative:

'It seems as if they did not want to create time for us, so a mini staff survey could have been conducted and, in that way, they would do analysis and send us overall feedback.' (Participant 4, Female, 31 years old)

'They could have engaged us at the end by doing focus group workshops, specifically starting with [the] senior management team, then, the line managers and their respective teams.' (Participant 7, Male, 33 years old)

Participants' responses indicate that conducting assessments of change effectiveness is crucial to ensure a review of aspects that are working and identification of possible improvement opportunities concerning the new system, without assuming that everything is in order with the implementation.

### **Enthusiastic employee support for change vision – Let's do this!**

Evidence for this theme emerged as participants gave their general perception of the benefits of the change initiative, when they were probed to describe how they personally felt about it. They were of the view that the organisation had long been ready for the change initiative, which implies that they accepted the appropriateness of the new performance management system, as reflected in the following views:

'Look, we needed a system that will enable us to align performance on the individual, team and organisational levels and this would ensure that our performance is managed fairly and objectively, because there is misalignment: we get average performance ratings of 4, but we are told that the organisation did not perform.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

'I fully understand the idea behind this performance management system. We were battling with the current PMS, it was supported by a software provider, which is very flipping expensive, to be honest, [but] it was not giving us value for money. How do you pay millions of rand for something and don't get [a] return?' (Participant 2, Female, 25 years old)

A participant concurred with the appropriateness of the change initiative by responding as follows:

'The new PMS was implemented to ensure alignment with the mission, vision and objectives of ... and I think that the new system is a silver bullet to performance challenges and problems we were facing.' (Participant 8, Female, 46 years old)

The following participants highlighted challenges related to the current performance management system. They clearly supported the change vision:

'Everyone was frustrated by the previous performance management system, it created a lot of admin for us. I mean, you load your performance objectives and, come review time, they are lost and you had to reload.' (Participant 7, Male, 33 years old)

'The writing was clearly on the wall ... the current system was not talking to our context, the system was production-oriented, whereas we are service-oriented.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

All the participants expressed concern about the previous performance management system. It was remarkable to note that most of the participants were quick to point out the intended outcomes and appropriateness of the new performance management system to the organisation as they responded to the questions posed.

### **Training for effective participation in the performance management system – This is not so bad, after all!**

This theme evolved as participants responded to questions on the approach that the organisation adopted to capacitate employees on the new performance management system. Many positive experiences were shared. The narratives confirmed that all staff members were empowered to use the new system effectively – this also included colleagues in international offices:

'System training sessions were properly scheduled, you know, over and above, ... additional training sessions were also scheduled closer to the go-live date of the new system, for those who wanted to refresh, but I am not so sure about the attendance levels. They did a lot of hand holding in empowering us.' (Participant 2, Female, 25 years old)

For the next participant, implementation timelines of the training are essential in the execution stage of the change initiative, and the participant reported that training was rolled out before the implementation of the system:

'I like the approach that was adopted, because we were given different dates to choose from and confirmation of your attendance was based on first come basis. I like the fact that this was not done per business unit and I think that they wanted to accommodate everyone, based on availability, but, overall, the training was top notch and everyone was trained before the system went live.' (Participant 4, Female, 31 years old)

Further corroborated, there was adequate provision of training:

'All I can say is, big ups to the training team! Everything was properly organised, if requested. I was empowered and I can confidently train my fellow colleagues, who missed the training.' (Participant 5, Female, 34 years old)

Mentioned in addition to the practical training sessions, employees were given training manuals to inculcate a more realistic understanding of the system:

'Often, with new systems, you forget what you have learned if you don't use the system often, but I must say, there was a huge commitment to empower us. I was able to navigate the system using the training manual that we were given.' (Participant 7, Male, 33 years old)

However, expressed concern around the training venue:

'Although, the training was excellent, I think we should have done it externally. Why I say this ... there were a lot of distractions, as people will be literally going in and out every five minutes, as they were called by their managers and colleagues. So, for me, that was unprofessional and, yet, the trainer would allow that.' (Participant 3, Male, 29 years old)

It is evident that efforts were made, and the resources were provided in order to ensure that employees acquainted themselves with the newly introduced performance management system through the provision of training opportunities.

## Discussion

The main objective of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of employees' experiences of change management in the implementation of a performance management system in a multinational tourism agency. The findings reveal both negative and positive lived change management experiences. Undesirable change management experiences were evident in employees reporting disengagement from the change process, a continuation but also a deepening in autocratic leadership style to assert control of the change initiative, and not regularly checking, both cognitively and emotionally, with participants in the form of adequate assessment of change initiative effectiveness. Desirable change management experiences were evident in the form of enthusiastic employee support for the change vision and positive employee empowerment through capacity-building initiatives.

The study revealed that employees were not actively involved, particularly in the decision-making process of the change initiative. This is in line with Girma and Matebe's (2018) finding that implementation of change initiatives directly affects employees in one way or another; thus, change initiatives might not be successful without involving employees when making decisions on such change initiatives. Furthermore, Vakola (2013) advocates that employees must fully understand the change initiative, as this is crucial in ensuring that they are committed to the entire change initiative implementation process. Shared responsibility, between an employer and employees, is promoted when employees are fully included and allowed to contribute to decision-making processes on change. Ochurub et al. (2012) further contend that if employees are not involved in making decisions on change and how the system will be introduced, the result could be a lack of shared responsibility by management and employees. This is corroborated by Henricks, Young, and Kehoe (2020), who assert that obtaining employees' inputs on the proposed change initiative, prior to decision making, enhances employee commitment and contributes to building relationships of mutual trust.

In terms of the consequences of a lack of involvement, Ochurub et al. (2012) point out that sidelining employees during decision making on a change initiative can lead to resistance to change, as employees might not support the change initiative. Ochurub et al. (2012) further assert that the change initiative might turn out to be impractical, if employees on all occupational levels are not involved in the planning, particularly in deciding on the system to be implemented. Employees are system users and have a better understanding of what they require; hence, their inputs

should be solicited before any decision can be taken to introduce a new system (Blom, 2018).

Strong views were raised on the lack of preparation of employees to ensure readiness for embracing the introduced change initiative. Miller (2012) asserts that common failures in the inception of change initiatives are often a result of inadequate attention to personal concerns and neglecting to prepare employees for change. This is in line with Kotter's model, which highlights the importance of employees' preparation to ensure acceptance of the proposed change before its actual implementation (Kotter, 2007). Oakland and Tanner (2007) support this notion and assert that planned change makes it easier for an organisation to identify hindrances proactively to ensure the seamless introduction of change initiatives.

Preparing employees for change often leads to high readiness levels and, if this is done, employees are more likely to take ownership of the change, attempt to support it and exhibit greater persistence, regardless of the obstacles hindering introduction of the change initiative (Kirrane et al., 2017). Irrespective of the notion of understanding the need for change, the level of preparing employees for change is strongly regarded as an influential factor in making any change initiative implementation successful (Karim, 2015). Furthermore, clear, consistent communication is crucial in anchoring the implementation of change initiatives (Rafferty, Jimmieson, & Armenakis, 2013). Poor communication practices of any change initiative often culminate in misunderstanding of the intentions of the implemented change initiative, thus creating resistance that could be avoided if proper communication had taken place. Thus, proactive and engaging communication should keep employees abreast of the status of the change initiative to ensure that the change initiative does not lose momentum (Diedericks et al., 2019).

The study also revealed that leaders often adopt an autocratic leadership style to ensure the success of the change process. An autocratic leadership style is characterised by followers' lack of control over all decision-making processes and non-solicitation of input from followers (Buch, Thompson, & Kuvaas, 2016). This form of interaction could evoke a negative response from employees, which was corroborated in this study. Joubert and Feldman (2017) argue that an autocratic leadership style can be destructive, in that it is linked to low engagement levels among employees. In line with good change practices, Girma and Matebe (2018) propose that organisations require change leadership that will continuously embed change adaptation cultures, to ensure employee adoption of future change initiatives, particularly considering the current uncertain global business environment. New change initiatives should prioritise the provision of coping mechanisms and support for those directly affected by the change that is introduced. This is also corroborated by Khalid and Rehman (2011), who assert that dealing with employees' feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, after

change implementation, creates feelings of appreciation among employees, and this can influence their levels of commitment to the change initiative.

The study also revealed positive engagement with the change task in the form of active support for the change vision. It involves the provision of a rationale justifying why the introduced change is viewed as the appropriate initiative to address what it is envisioned to enhance. This is in line with the assertion of Kirrane et al. (2017), which holds that it is crucial to show employees why the proposed change is the most appropriate solution to avert the current challenges. Thus, readiness to embrace change can be ignited when challenges between the current and desired future states are evident, irrespective of the magnitude of change (Matthysen & Harris, 2018). Employees, across all levels, need to approve the change initiative as appropriate to avert an undesirable state (Jones & Van De Ven, 2016).

The study affirmed that a considerable amount of work had been carried out to empower employees. This is in line with Henriksen and Andersen's (2008) assertion that efforts to build internal capacity for system usage are of significance, particularly if it is a new system, to ensure employees' seamless interaction with the new system. Thus, empowerment is at the crux of system implementation, as employees, across all levels, must understand the technical functioning of the new system and, in particular, how to utilise the new system in their respective job roles (Henriksen & Andersen, 2008). Noudoostbeni, Yasin and Jenatabadi (2009) further highlight that employees generally withhold their efforts when they do not feel appreciated and argue that empowering employees eliminates hindrances stemming from challenges posed by new skills and systems requirements. Courageous leadership should be provided during the introduction of change, by entrenching practices to support empowerment. Such interventions for empowerment are likely to promote learning and employee development (Andersen, 2018). This was the case in the participating organisation.

### Practical and managerial implications

The study findings offer novel insights into the lived change management experiences of participants negotiating the introduction of a new performance management system. Firstly, the findings hold practical and managerial implications for the custodians of change in the form of Organisation Development consultants, HR and change management practitioners. Change and change management programmes will become even more important, as organisations grapple with the following questions: 'What does performance look like in the new normal, hybrid and virtual world of work?', 'How should existing workplaces be reconfigured, as the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds?' As new change programmes are conceptualised, specific consideration should be given to the offering of emotional and systemic support to all stakeholders. When participants are adequately

supported, they will feel empowered and be prepared to make an emotional investment in the change vision, which could lead to enhanced psychological wellbeing and, ultimately, organisational flourishing. Secondly, leaders will also need to find a way to deal with employees' desire for certainty, while being constantly reminded of the promise of uncertainty by the ever-shifting world of work. Thus, the implementation of organisational change affects both employees (cognitively, emotionally and somatically) and leaders (leadership style, as a defence against change anxiety). Employees' preparation, participation, communication, engagement and empowerment, over the course of the entire change process value chain, will remain crucial for effective implementation of a performance management system.

### Limitations and recommendations

The first author was an employee of the participating organisation, and this could have had an impact on to what extent participants were able to freely share their authentic, lived change experiences of the study phenomena. Participants might have had doubts about the confidentiality of their identities and responses, and this could have compromised their openness as they responded to interview questions. Irrespective of that, data were collected and analysed with diligence, according to the tenets of thematic analysis, to ensure that no significant information was omitted. Sufficient information was gathered, which enabled the exploration of employees' lived experiences regarding the implementation of a performance management system.

Further research could consider utilising a quantitative and mixed methods research design to explore the findings further. A mixed methods research design could possibly identify, refine and enhance the predictive ability of critical factors for successful implementation of a performance management system.

### Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore employees' experiences of change management by describing employees' experiences of change management during the implementation of a performance management system in a multinational tourism organisation. During organisational change initiatives, change anxiety is often triggered when employees feel deauthorised in the form of limited involvement, inadequate preparation, ambiguous communication and inadequate assessment practices during implementation. When leaders are unable to access, contain or constructively work with employee experiences and anxieties, the tendency is to adopt a more autocratic leadership style, to regain control of the change process, and impose control measures, to create the impression that the change project is successful. However, change anxiety is alleviated and employee accountability restored, when employees are authorised by participative change leadership through adequate preparation (motivation), meaningful participation (willingness and commitment) and systemic

capacity building, which create feelings of certainty, competence, confidence and containment.

It is, therefore, imperative for the change leadership to involve employees, actively and meaningfully, at the initial planning phase, which involves collective decision making on the proposed change initiative. Employees' empowerment and involvement are pivotal in ensuring that they remain committed to the change vision. Effective communication also plays a major role in influencing employees' behaviour to enhance seamless implementation of change initiatives. The collection and scrutiny of employees' experiences regarding the process itself and the efficacy of the change initiative post-implementation are crucial in ascertaining if a change initiative achieved its intended outcomes. This study adds to the knowledge base about the impact of the management of change on employees during the implementation of a performance management system, thus, highlighting the importance of working with participants' lived, authentic change experiences and ensuring that change management serves as an anchor and container during system implementation.

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### Authors' contributions

T.D.M. was responsible for conceptualisation, formal analysis, project management, methodology and writing while A-P.F. contributed to the methodology, formal analysis, writing and supervision.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made available by the corresponding author, A-P.F., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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