The conclusions drawn from the article “Motivated to Adapt? The Role of Public Service Motivation as Employees Face Organizational Change,” by Bradley E. Wright, Robert K. Christensen, and Kimberley Roussin Isett, raise some exciting possibilities for both practitioners and researchers. Researchers might be eager to replicate the study with different populations to extend the authors’ line of inquiry. Practitioners will find an additional tool by which to better lead austerity-based changes. The authors conclude that individuals give less resistance to change when they are high on one dimension of motivation—self-sacrifice. This complements existing research showing that both the context and the implementation of change matter. While the authors posit a limited interpretation of the results, there may be cause for a more exuberant response to their findings when interpreted more broadly.

Previous research has shown that public service motivation (PSM) is correlated with commitment to change, especially when changes are positive and consistent with one’s value system. Therefore, when change could conceivably improve public services or better serve the greater good, many employees might be more supportive. By testing these ideas in a cost-cutting or unpleasant situation that had the potential to negatively impact individuals, PSM was investigated at a deeper level. The authors challenge the assumption that people will only support things that are in their perceived self-interest as opposed to things that might affect them badly.

The results provide some valuable insight into the general notion that individuals are less supportive of things that affect them negatively. While PSM did not increase one’s support of adversity-based changes, it did show a correlation with less resistance to change. This may be a keen insight into human behavior, and it is particularly important for practitioners like me.

The authors caution readers not to emphasize the impact of personal characteristics in the response to...
change over the larger impact of how change is put into place. However, the general insight is of far greater value than the specific finding. As the authors advise, leaders should place more emphasis on change management efforts such as effectively communicating the need for change and allowing employees to be active participants in change efforts. However, if leaders were keenly aware that regardless of how well they do their part, some individuals are predisposed to change differently, then leaders could adjust how they think about change and, ultimately, how they manage it. My first reaction to the results was to think about how I could communicate change to different audiences more effectively.

If the response to external stimuli is a factor in the study of motivation, then it is important to appreciate that characteristics such as self-sacrifice are more personal, potentially resilient, and less affected by the external environment. This observation might cause leaders to respect, and even draw on, an individual’s personal disposition to change efforts. For example, in communicating change, a leader might say that these are difficult times and that employees should help one another through the difficult period (compassion), that those who are willing and able to do more should step up to the challenge (self-sacrifice), or that the public still depends on them for quality services (public values) despite funding reductions and other changes. This more nuanced approach stands in contrast to simply communicating the facts in a clear, straightforward, and truthful manner. The former recognizes that two identically situated employees might respond differently, not because their job, pay, lifestyle, or other factors would be affected differently but because their predisposition to sacrifice or adversity might be different. The latter, however, expects that classes of employees would respond in a similar manner because of the impact of common changes.

Arguably, the authors’ most important finding is that public sector employees who are high in self-sacrifice show less resistance to adversity-based changes. However, the broader interpretation that individuals respond very differently to the same change because of their personal disposition is of significant value for practitioners. Researchers might scoff at the wider interpretation, as its empirical basis might not be as scientific as they would prefer. However, practitioners do not always need to know why a phenomenon occurs or require the same confidence interval for a conclusion to be actionable. Understanding a variable and appreciating that things are more likely than not to have an influence on a particular situation is, in and of itself, a valuable observation.

Managing change is one of the most important and challenging tasks that any leader ever undertakes. The article is a reminder of the complexity and difficulty of organizational change. Nonetheless, the findings underscore the idea that every change episode will likely affect each individual differently, even when many individuals have identical circumstances. Communicating the same message with different words, images, and ideas might be one way of addressing the variable of individual reaction. This observation shifts conventional wisdom about motivating change from “What’s in it for me?” to “How does it make me feel?” Those with higher PSM might show less resistance to change despite its impact on them.