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Emotional Compliance and Adaptive Fatigue During Continuous Organizational Change

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Abstract

Continuous organizational change does not only require employees to learn new routines, accept altered structures, and sustain performance. It may also require them to display confidence, enthusiasm, or alignment while privately experiencing uncertainty, disappointment, cynicism, or exhaustion. Existing change scholarship explains many affective reactions, yet visible cooperation is often treated as evidence of genuine endorsement, and cumulative adaptation is frequently reduced to resistance, burnout, or change fatigue. This original conceptual theory article develops a proposed Theory of Emotional Compliance to explain how internal evaluations and outward emotional enactment may diverge during successive change cycles. Emotional compliance is proposed as outward affective alignment with change despite unresolved or discrepant internal appraisal. Surface commitment is proposed as its visible behavioral manifestation, whereas adaptive fatigue describes the progressive economizing of emotional, cognitive, and discretionary investment after repeated demands to adapt and appear supportive. The theory links change saturation, appraisal, power, emotional-display expectations, defensive cynicism, resource conservation, and restricted corrective voice through a recursive process. It also distinguishes genuine change-supportive behavior from conduct whose emotional meaning remains indeterminate. The contribution is not a validated causal model or managerial prescription. Its mechanisms require discriminant construct development, repeated-wave and within-person tests, qualitative process evidence, and multilevel examination of leadership, networks, and collective display norms. The proposed synthesis clarifies why apparent alignment may coexist with deteriorating emotional investment and why organizations should not infer authentic support from behavioral visibility alone.

Keywords: Emotional behavior in change-saturated organizations, Emotional compliance, Surface commitment during repeated change, Theory of emotional compliance, Future research, Emotional

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Introduction

Organizational change is commonly described through implementation choices, recipient responses, and the temporal unfolding of transition. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that change is not an isolated managerial intervention but a recipient-centred, affective, and temporally embedded process [1-3]. Yet organizations increasingly ask employees to function across overlapping restructurings, digital transformations, role redesigns, efficiency programmes, and cultural initiatives. Under these conditions, the central problem is not simply whether employees support or resist one change. It is



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how they continue to regulate emotion, preserve legitimacy, and perform alignment when new demands arrive before earlier changes have been interpreted, absorbed, or evaluated.

Change saturation is more than the number of initiatives underway. Interference among initiatives can create incompatible priorities, inconsistent meanings, and implementation problems that are attributable to the relationship between changes rather than to any single programme [4]. Employees may therefore face simultaneous demands to learn, coordinate, reassure others, and display confidence while lacking a coherent account of what should be retained, abandoned, or prioritized. Apparent positivity in such settings may reflect genuine support, but it may also reflect role obligation, strategic caution, status deference, or an effort to protect working relationships. Behavioral visibility consequently offers an incomplete basis for judging emotional endorsement.

Strain during change also cannot be located solely within an employee's presumed adaptability. Organizational support and job control condition relationships between change exposure and burnout-related outcomes, indicating that work design and available resources matter alongside individual appraisal [5]. Nevertheless, prevailing accounts often separate emotional display from cumulative change exposure. Emotional-labor scholarship explains regulation of feeling and expression, whereas change research examines readiness, cynicism, resistance, fatigue, and supportive conduct. What remains underdeveloped is a theory explaining how repeated organizational demands may normalize outward emotional alignment while internal investment progressively weakens.

This article offers an original, non-empirical Theory of Emotional Compliance. It proposes emotional compliance as outward affective alignment despite unresolved, ambivalent, cynical, or fatigued internal appraisal. It further proposes surface commitment as visible participation whose emotional meaning remains indeterminate, and adaptive fatigue as the progressive economizing of emotional, cognitive, and discretionary investment across successive change cycles. The theory integrates established findings without claiming that these new constructs or relationships have been validated. Its purpose is to clarify conceptual boundaries, specify falsifiable mechanisms, and identify conditions under which apparent support may obscure rather than resolve organizational change problems.

Theoretical foundations of emotional compliance

Emotional compliance begins from the established observation that organizations regulate not only what employees do but also how they are expected to appear while doing it. Emotional labor involves managing felt and displayed emotion in relation to occupational expectations, and its consequences vary by strategy, actor, interaction, and context [6]. In change settings, display expectations may be explicit, such as requests to "champion" a transformation, or implicit, such as norms discouraging visible doubt during leadership meetings. Such expectations do not establish emotional compliance by themselves. They create a condition in which internal evaluation and outward display can become analytically separable.

A second foundation is the distinction between felt and enacted alignment. Organizational actors can perform conformity while retaining beliefs that diverge from the position they enact [7]. This possibility should not be interpreted automatically as deception. Employees may comply provisionally while gathering information, protect colleagues from uncertainty, preserve professional identity, or avoid penalties attached to dissent. Emotional compliance is therefore proposed as a relational condition rather than a stable personal tendency: it arises when perceived expectations, audience consequences, and change appraisal make outward affective alignment more viable than authentic expression.

Power supplies the third foundation. Ethnographic evidence shows that organizational emotion work is shaped by systemic power and that actors do not bear equal responsibility for maintaining emotional order [8]. In change-saturated organizations, lower-status employees, change recipients with limited mobility, and groups whose legitimacy is contested may face stronger pressures to appear constructive. Senior actors may also perform confidence to sustain coordination or protect the credibility of decisions. The theory consequently does not assign emotional compliance to one hierarchical level; it proposes that its form and cost depend on who controls interpretations, whose discomfort is treated as consequential, and what risks accompany emotional divergence.

These foundations distinguish emotional compliance from emotional labor, readiness, commitment, and behavioral obedience. Emotional labor is the broader regulation process; readiness concerns preparedness and favourable evaluation; commitment concerns attachment to a change; obedience concerns conduct. Emotional compliance instead denotes a proposed discrepancy between displayed affective alignment and unresolved internal appraisal. The discrepancy may be temporary, strategic, prosocial, or protective. It becomes theoretically consequential when repeated display demands limit authentic interpretation, consume resources, or prevent organizations from recognizing continuing implementation problems. The available evidence supports the component processes, not the complete construct or a universal claim that change necessarily produces such divergence.

Cynicism as interpretive and emotional defense

Change cynicism refers to pessimistic expectations, distrust, or doubt concerning organizational change or those responsible for it. It should not be reduced to a defective attitude residing solely within an employee. Multilevel evidence indicates that

change histories and human-resource practices can participate in reinforcing cycles of cynicism, meaning that scepticism may be partly organized by prior institutional experience [9]. Employees who have seen initiatives announced, abandoned, relabelled, or contradicted may use cynical interpretations to make recurring patterns intelligible. Their response may be inaccurate or excessive, but it can also encode organizational memory that formal change narratives omit.

Informational justice is especially relevant because employees evaluate not only what change brings but also how adverse information is communicated. Evidence indicates that poor informational justice can intensify cynicism, particularly among highly identified employees, and can connect adverse change experiences with intentions to leave [10]. Strong identification may therefore increase vulnerability when organizational conduct violates valued expectations. In the proposed theory, cynicism can become an interpretive defence: by lowering expectations of managerial consistency or benevolence, employees may reduce the emotional risk of renewed investment. This defensive function is an original interpretation and should not be mistaken for an established benefit of cynicism.

Cynicism and fatigue must also remain distinct. Empirical work treats change fatigue and change cynicism as related but separable constructs, while temporal direction remains uncertain [11]. Fatigue concerns diminished energy or capacity associated with sustained change demands. Cynicism concerns an evaluative and affective orientation toward the credibility or likely success of change. An employee may be tired without distrusting management, or cynical while retaining energy for opposition, voice, or alternative work. Conversely, repeated exhaustion may make cynical explanations more attractive, and cynical expectations may reduce willingness to invest effort. These reciprocal possibilities require longitudinal testing.

Within the proposed Theory of Emotional Compliance, cynicism matters because it may coexist with outward positivity. Employees can privately anticipate failure while publicly endorsing implementation, particularly when dissent appears futile, costly, or socially disruptive. Such conduct does not show that cynicism caused compliance, nor that cynical employees perform less effectively. Alternative explanations include professional discipline, temporary uncertainty, impression management, or genuine willingness to help despite scepticism. The article therefore treats defensive cynicism as one plausible interpretive mechanism that can reduce authentic emotional reinvestment while leaving visible participation intact.

Surface commitment during repeated change

Change-supportive behavior can arise from favourable beliefs and positive emotions, which contribute separately to readiness and supportive conduct [12]. This evidence is important because it establishes a genuine pathway from positive appraisal to visible support. It also clarifies an inferential limit: the presence of supportive behavior does not, by itself, reveal which emotional pathway produced it. Employees may participate enthusiastically because they endorse a change, or they may enact support while reserving judgment, protecting relationships, meeting role requirements, or anticipating negative consequences for visible doubt.

Surface commitment is proposed to describe this second possibility. It is visible participation, supportive language, ritual endorsement, or apparent cooperation whose underlying emotional meaning remains unresolved. The construct is narrower than impression management because it concerns change-specific alignment, and broader than surface acting because it includes behavior as well as emotional display. Longitudinal evidence that surface acting can undermine later satisfaction and engagement through reduced psychological-need fulfilment provides a plausible, but not change-specific, depletion mechanism [13]. Surface commitment should therefore not be presumed harmful; its effects are expected to depend on duration, autonomy, recoverability, and whether employees retain meaningful opportunities to revise or voice their appraisal. Hierarchy may make surface commitment more likely. Status differences in workplace meetings are associated with emotional display regulation, including apparent positivity toward higher-status participants [14]. During repeated change, meetings often become sites where leaders assess confidence, commitment, and readiness. Employees may consequently learn that emotionally acceptable participation is safer than expressing ambiguity. However, agreement in a meeting cannot be classified automatically as feigned. It may reflect genuine support, politeness, incomplete information, or a reasonable preference to discuss concerns elsewhere.

The theoretical importance of surface commitment lies in diagnostic ambiguity. When managers treat visible participation as evidence of genuine endorsement, unresolved concerns may disappear from the organization's interpretive field. The proposed construct therefore concerns the limits of inference, not the moral character of employees. It does not imply sabotage, deception, low commitment, or poor performance. It identifies a condition in which organizations may receive behavioral cooperation without reliable knowledge of emotional appraisal.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for emotional compliance and adaptive fatigue during continuous organizational change.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Emotional Compliance and Adaptive Fatigue During Continuous Organizational Change.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Change saturation	Accumulated frequency, overlap, incompatibility, valence, and temporal compression of change.	Simple initiative counts obscure interaction effects.	More than frequency or change magnitude alone.	Contextual antecedent.	Relative weight of dimensions is unknown.	Multiple changes are not inherently harmful.
Emotional labor	Regulation of felt or displayed emotion under work expectations.	Explains divergence between feeling and expression.	Broader than change-specific emotional compliance.	Foundational process.	Strategy and context alter consequences.	Regulation is not necessarily coercive or damaging.
Emotional compliance	Proposed: outward affective alignment despite unresolved internal appraisal.	Visible positivity may be misread as endorsement.	Not readiness, commitment, obedience, or surface acting alone.	Central proposed construct.	Measurement and prevalence are unestablished.	Does not imply deception or low performance.
Change cynicism	Doubt or pessimism about change or its agents.	Preserves organizational history and negative appraisal.	Distinct from fatigue and resistance.	Possible defensive interpretation.	Defensive function is proposed, not demonstrated universally.	Cynicism may be accurate, inaccurate, harmful, or protective.
Surface commitment	Proposed: visible change support whose emotional meaning remains indeterminate.	Cooperation may conceal ambivalence or scepticism.	Broader than emotional display; narrower than general impression management.	Behavioral manifestation of emotional compliance.	Motive cannot be inferred from conduct alone.	Apparent support is not evidence of insincerity.
Change fatigue	Diminished energy or capacity associated with sustained change demands.	Identifies depletion linked to repeated change.	Not identical to burnout, cynicism, or resistance.	Established adjacent outcome.	Temporal direction and context vary.	No universal threshold or diagnosis is implied.
Adaptive fatigue	Proposed: progressive economizing of emotional, cognitive, and discretionary investment across successive change cycles.	Existing concepts understate repeated adaptation and emotional discrepancy.	Adds temporal adaptation and conservation to change fatigue.	Proposed successive-cycle outcome.	Construct validity and causal pathway require testing.	Not a clinical category or validated syndrome.

Adaptive fatigue across successive change cycles

Change fatigue is evidenced as more than temporary dislike of a particular initiative. Across quantitative, organizational, and qualitative evidence, repeated change exposure has been associated with diminished job satisfaction, uncertainty, exhaustion, apathy, powerlessness, work intensification, and self-sacrifice, although direction and transferability remain context-dependent [15-17]. These findings justify attention to accumulated demands, but they do not establish that frequency alone produces fatigue. Change valence, workload, control, staffing, recovery, and prior experience may explain why similar portfolios are energizing for some employees and depleting for others.

Adaptive fatigue is proposed as a narrower temporal process: the progressive economizing of emotional, cognitive, and discretionary investment after successive requirements to adjust and display alignment. “Adaptive” does not mean desirable. It signals that reduced investment may initially conserve resources, protect identity, or preserve functioning. An employee may continue performing required tasks while becoming more selective about enthusiasm, voice, experimentation, or voluntary advocacy. The proposed construct therefore concerns altered allocation of adaptive effort, not incapacity, clinical illness, or a fixed unwillingness to change.

Adaptive fatigue also differs from successful routinization. Reduced emotional intensity may indicate that employees have learned a new system and no longer need to invest exceptional attention. The proposed construct applies only when economizing accompanies unresolved appraisal, diminished willingness to contribute discretionary effort, or continued performance under resource-protective restraint. It may coexist with competence and acceptable output, which makes performance visibility an insufficient indicator. Conversely, low enthusiasm without cumulative exposure should not be classified as adaptive fatigue. Establishing the construct therefore requires evidence of temporal accumulation, internal appraisal, and altered investment rather than a single fatigue score.

The pathway may begin when repeated surface commitment requires employees to monitor expression while maintaining performance. Surface-acting evidence provides a plausible link between regulated display and reduced psychological-need satisfaction [13]. Repetitive reorganization also connects fatigue with uncertainty and workload [16], while qualitative

accounts show that diminished agency can accompany continued professional functioning [17]. The proposed integration remains untested: workload may explain both emotional regulation and fatigue, and dissatisfied employees may report change more negatively. Adaptive fatigue must consequently be distinguished empirically from burnout, ordinary change fatigue, cynicism, silence, and disengagement.

Proposed theory of emotional compliance

The proposed theory treats change saturation as a qualitative configuration rather than a simple count. Multiple changes can differ in valence, timing, compatibility, and meaning, and employee reactions vary accordingly [18]. Saturation is expected when successive or overlapping initiatives create unresolved demands while the organization continues to require visible confidence. Emotional compliance becomes more plausible when employees perceive that authentic ambivalence is costly, ineffective, or inconsistent with role expectations.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for theory of emotional compliance, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

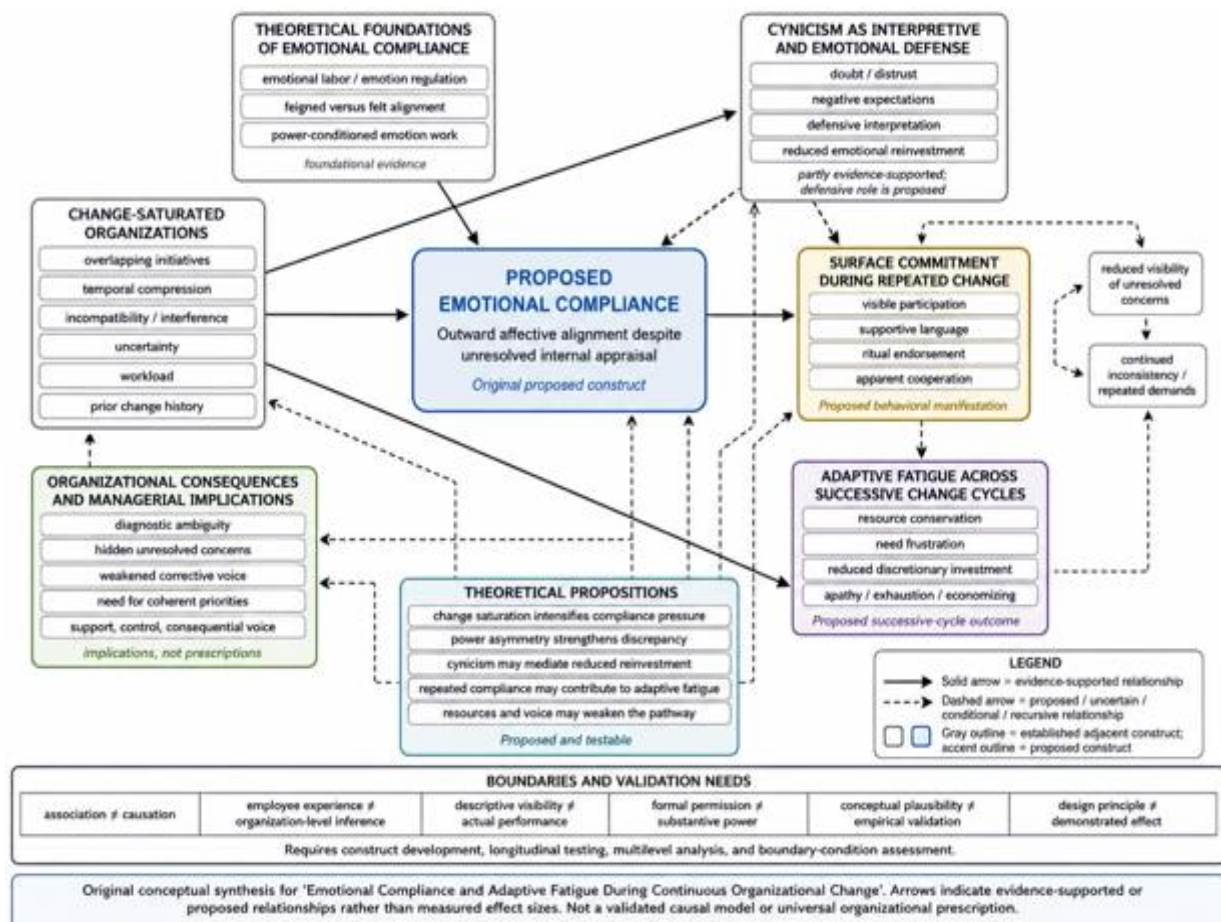


Figure 1. Theory of Emotional Compliance

The theory proceeds through five proposed movements. First, change saturation generates appraisal demands involving uncertainty, identity, workload, fairness, and initiative coherence. Second, status, power, and display expectations shape whether internal appraisal can be expressed. Third, employees may respond through genuine support, open concern, ambivalent participation, or emotional compliance. Fourth, emotional compliance may become visible as surface commitment, leaving managers unable to determine whether cooperation reflects endorsement or strategic adaptation. Fifth, repeated discrepancy may encourage defensive cynicism, resource conservation, and adaptive fatigue.

This sequence is recursive rather than linear. Longitudinal evidence shows that beliefs and engagement can deteriorate across a large-scale change and that individual differences condition those trajectories [19]. Resource theory further suggests that threatened or depleted resources can motivate protective conservation, making reduced discretionary investment conceptually plausible [20]. The proposed feedback loop arises when surface commitment hides unresolved problems, weakens corrective information, and permits inconsistent demands to continue. Yet recovery is also possible: credible explanation, job control, coherent priorities, and consequential voice may interrupt the cycle.

The levels of analysis must remain explicit. An employee may regulate emotion without a shared team norm, while a team may develop coordinated positivity through interaction even when members differ privately. Organizational emotional compliance would require more than widespread individual restraint; it would require policies, routines, incentives, and interpretive practices that systematically reward visible alignment and discount unresolved appraisal. Power-conditioned emotion work supports this possibility at the relational level [8], whereas initiative interference shows how organizational arrangements can generate the inconsistencies to which employees respond [4]. Neither source establishes an organization-level emotional-compliance construct, so cross-level emergence remains proposed.

The model does not claim that emotional compliance always precedes fatigue or that visible support is unreliable in every setting. Genuine endorsement, professional commitment, learning, and successful adaptation remain rival pathways. Relationships may also reverse: fatigue may increase display regulation, and cynicism may precede rather than follow emotional discrepancy. These alternatives make temporal and within-person tests essential.

Theoretical propositions

The propositions translate the synthesis into relationships that can be challenged. Subjective change perceptions are associated with resistance and well-being, supporting appraisal as a plausible link between change conditions and employee response [21]. Accordingly, Proposition 1 states that change exposure will be more strongly associated with emotional-compliance pressure when initiatives are perceived as incompatible, temporally compressed, uncertain, or inconsistent. Proposition 2 states that status and power asymmetry will strengthen the relationship between adverse private appraisal and outward affective alignment.

Job demands–resources theory supports the broader expectation that high demands and inadequate resources can activate impairment and reduce motivation, although it does not uniquely predict emotional compliance [22]. Proposition 3 therefore states that defensive cynicism will mediate the association of disappointing change histories or informational injustice with reduced genuine emotional reinvestment. Proposition 4 states that, as emotional compliance rises, visible supportive conduct will become a less valid indicator of authentic endorsement.

Proposition 5 states that repeated emotional compliance will be associated with adaptive fatigue through need frustration, perceived resource loss, and conservation of discretionary investment. Proposition 6 states that control, credible support, coherent change portfolios, and consequential voice will weaken this relationship. Such buffering cannot be presumed: teamwork did not provide the expected protection against change fatigue in one large-scale nursing context [23]. Proposition 7 states that surface commitment will reinforce future compliance pressure when it obscures implementation problems. Proposition 8 states that a collective pattern will require shared display expectations and interpersonal convergence rather than mere aggregation of individual scores.

Organizational consequences and managerial implications

The principal organizational consequence is diagnostic distortion. When visible positivity is interpreted as genuine endorsement, leaders may underestimate uncertainty, overload, or implementation inconsistency. Leadership research indicates that influence during change operates across levels and through multiple mechanisms, rather than through one universally effective behavior [24]. Managers should therefore treat emotional expressions as situated information: neither enthusiasm nor cynicism should be accepted uncritically as a complete account of change quality.

A second implication concerns the architecture of response. Experimental evidence suggests that task-oriented clarity and relation-oriented leadership may complement one another during digital transformation [25]. Within the proposed theory, clarity can reduce interpretive inconsistency, while relational conduct can lower the interpersonal cost of ambivalence. Neither is sufficient if employees have formal permission to speak but lack substantive influence. Consequential voice requires visible evidence that concerns are preserved, evaluated, answered, and capable of changing priorities.

A third implication is to avoid individualizing fatigue. Management practices can shape reform cynicism [26], while earlier evidence identifies workload, support, control, and initiative interference as organizational conditions. Resilience training or motivational messaging may be useful in some contexts, but they should not substitute for examining whether the change portfolio is coherent and recoverable. Practical use of the theory therefore consists of diagnostic questions, not a deployment formula: What emotions are rewarded? Which concerns alter decisions? What old demands remain active? Where does visible cooperation exceed genuine confidence? These questions cannot establish emotional compliance, but they can reduce premature inference from surface behavior.

Organizations should also separate visibility, performance, and influence. A person may deliver required outputs while withholding discretionary ideas, or voice concerns without possessing authority to alter the change portfolio. Status-related surface acting indicates why emotionally acceptable meetings may not reveal the full range of appraisal [14]. Initiative interference further suggests that problems can persist even when each project appears locally supported [4]. Useful monitoring would therefore compare formal endorsement with workload, unresolved dependencies, repeated exceptions,

turnover intentions, and the quality of response to dissent. These indicators remain diagnostic signals rather than proof of emotional compliance or demonstrated organizational harm.

Future research

Tests of emotional compliance must distinguish individual reactions from contextual, network, and genuinely collective processes [27-29]. Scale development should establish discriminant validity from surface acting, commitment to change, readiness, silence, cynicism, change fatigue, burnout, and impression management. Measures should capture both internal appraisal and outward enactment without defining discrepancy as dishonesty. Validation should combine self-report with diaries, behavioral observation, communication traces used with appropriate consent, and reports from interaction partners. Convergence would strengthen interpretation, whereas disagreement could itself reveal audience-specific enactment. Surface-acting measures offer an adjacent benchmark [13], but change-specific items must establish incremental explanatory value rather than relabel an existing construct.

Temporal evidence is essential. Repeated-wave and experience-sampling designs should examine whether emotional discrepancy fluctuates within persons and whether cumulative exposure predicts adaptive fatigue after baseline workload, health, affect, and prior change experience are controlled. Longitudinal change research cautions against treating one observation as a process [3]. Studies should also compare rival sequences: fatigue may precede compliance, cynicism may precede both, or genuine support may replace initial ambivalence.

Qualitative process research can identify how display rules, power, and consequential voice are enacted. Field experiments could test whether coherent prioritization or protected dissent alters expression and later investment, while recognizing that short interventions cannot validate a recursive theory. Social-network and multilevel designs should examine diffusion, agreement, subgroup divergence, and unit change magnitude. The theory should be rejected or revised if its constructs lack discriminant validity, if visible support closely tracks internal endorsement under strong display pressure, or if repeated discrepancy does not predict later resource conservation beyond established explanations.

Conclusion

This article proposed a Theory of Emotional Compliance for explaining affective behavior during continuous organizational change. Its central claim is not that employee support is generally false, but that visible alignment can have multiple emotional origins. Emotional compliance identifies a proposed discrepancy between outward affective alignment and unresolved internal appraisal. Surface commitment identifies the proposed behavioral ambiguity produced by that discrepancy, while adaptive fatigue identifies a proposed temporal economizing of investment across successive change cycles.

The theory connects these constructs through change saturation, power, display expectations, cynical interpretation, need frustration, resource conservation, and restricted corrective voice. It thereby reframes apparent cooperation as potentially valuable yet diagnostically incomplete information. It also locates cumulative strain within organizational conditions rather than treating fatigue as evidence of deficient resilience.

The synthesis remains conceptual. Its constructs require measurement development, discriminant validation, temporal testing, and multilevel examination. Alternative explanations—including genuine endorsement, workload, personality, professional norms, successful learning, and pre-existing burnout—must remain active in empirical tests. The proposed model offers neither a universal account of change behavior nor a ready-made managerial intervention. Its contribution is a bounded theoretical vocabulary for examining how organizations may obtain continued participation while gradually losing access to authentic emotional appraisal and discretionary adaptive investment.

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