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Cynicism After Repeated Organizational Change Promises and Trust Depletion

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Abstract

Repeated organizational change can leave employees facing a succession of ambitious announcements, incomplete delivery, revised rationales, and renewed requests for commitment. Existing change research explains important event-level reactions, psychological contract breach, trust, fatigue, and behavioral responses, but it does not fully specify how earlier promise–delivery discrepancies shape the interpretation of later transformations. This Original Temporal Theory Article develops the proposed Temporal Theory of Change Cynicism to explain that cross-cycle process. The theory treats a promise cycle as a proposed temporal unit in which employees register explicit or reasonably implied commitments, observe implementation, appraise discrepancies, attribute responsibility, and update expectations about organizational reliability. Repeated adverse updating is proposed to deplete trust and make cynical interpretation function as a form of self-protection that limits emotional investment and vulnerability to renewed disappointment. Such interpretation may contribute to silence, reduced discretionary effort, withdrawal, or oppositional conduct, although constructive agency and contextual moderators remain possible. The theory also distinguishes a parallel change-fatigue pathway from cynicism and specifies conditional recovery through candid explanation, bounded commitments, consequential voice, and verifiable delivery over time. The contribution is an integrative, testable temporal account rather than a validated causal model or managerial prescription. Its principal limitations concern construct measurement, reciprocal relationships, memory and attribution bias, cross-level inference, and contextual transferability. Longitudinal, within-person, multilevel, and comparative research is required to test whether the proposed mechanisms outperform rival explanations based on workload, insecurity, dispositional resistance, or general dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Why repeated change produces cynicism, Promise cycles and employee expectations, Trust depletion across failed transformations, Cynicism as interpretive protection, Propositions and recovery conditions, Implications for change leadership

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Introduction

Organizational change becomes especially consequential when leaders generate expectations that enacted practice does not subsequently fulfil. Change announcements often contain commitments about participation, resources, timing, fairness, job quality, or future capability, even when presented as strategic aspiration rather than contractual language. Scholarship integrating change research and management practice shows that credible implementation depends not only on announcing a desirable future but also on aligning change processes, leadership conduct, employee experience, and sustained execution [1]. Yet prevailing accounts often examine one initiative at a time. They consequently understate the possibility that employees evaluate a new transformation through memories of earlier commitments and delivery failures.

Recipients do not encounter change as neutral observers. They appraise what an event means for valued outcomes, assess responsibility and coping possibilities, and develop affective responses that can evolve as implementation unfolds [2]. This



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event-appraisal perspective is essential, but repeated change introduces a further temporal question: how does one appraisal alter the starting conditions for the next? The present article argues that earlier promise–delivery discrepancies may become interpretive material for later change. A new announcement can therefore activate not only expectations about the proposed initiative but also remembered evidence about whether the organization says what it can deliver, explains constraints honestly, and responds when commitments become untenable.

Negative reactions to change should not automatically be classified as irrational resistance. Dispositional resistance can have complex relations with performance, and reluctance may sometimes reflect informed concern rather than deficient adaptability [3]. Cynicism is similarly distinct from disagreement, caution, or a preference for stability. It involves negative beliefs and pessimistic expectations concerning organizational change or change agents, often accompanied by affective distancing. Treating every unfavorable response as resistance obscures whether employees contest the change’s substance, distrust the source, anticipate non-delivery, feel depleted by repetition, or protect themselves from another cycle of disappointment.

The broader evidence portrays employee reactions as heterogeneous and multiply determined, with antecedents spanning change characteristics, communication, participation, leadership, fairness, individual differences, and organizational context [4]. This heterogeneity cautions against a single-cause theory of cynicism. Workload, insecurity, poor design, identity threat, political behavior, or prior employment experiences may all generate negative interpretations. The theoretical problem is therefore narrower: to explain how repeated organizational promises and their perceived fulfilment or failure may organize cross-cycle expectation updating while retaining rival pathways, moderators, and differences in levels of analysis.

A randomized field study of an algorithmic decision-support implementation demonstrates, within a bounded public-sector setting, that a change intervention can generate fatigue and cynical reactions rather than the intended enthusiasm [5]. The finding does not establish that repeated promises universally cause cynicism, but it illustrates why event-level success assumptions are insufficient. This article develops an original non-empirical temporal theory linking promise registration, delivery appraisal, trust updating, interpretive protection, and behavioral response. Its constructs and propositions are explicitly proposed where prior research has not directly measured the complete sequence, and the theory remains open to empirical refinement or rejection.

Promise cycles and employee expectations

A change promise is defined here as an explicit or reasonably implied future-oriented organizational commitment that employees can later compare with organizational action. It may concern voice, staffing, workload, career opportunity, procedural fairness, technological support, or the distribution of benefits and burdens. The construct excludes generic optimism, forecasts, and slogans that cannot reasonably be attributed as obligations. Organizational cynicism is relationally connected to social exchange at work, indicating that employees’ evaluations are shaped partly by how the employment relationship is enacted rather than solely by stable personal negativity [6]. Nevertheless, whether a message becomes a promise depends on wording, authority, context, prior practice, and recipient interpretation.

Broken promises operate through relational, identity, and disruption contexts [6-8]. Psychological contract research indicates that perceived non-fulfilment can generate violation and turnover-related intentions, while identity can condition the meaning of the breach. Abrupt disruption can also reconfigure what employees believe the organization owes them and whether changed arrangements represent unavoidable adaptation or relational failure. These studies do not employ an identical promise-cycle measure, and they do not establish that every operational shortfall is a breach. They support the more bounded claim that expectation-generating organizational conduct can acquire relational meaning and that perceived fulfilment is not reducible to objective project completion.

The proposed promise cycle has five analytically distinct moments: promise registration, implementation observation, discrepancy appraisal, responsibility attribution, and expectation updating. Employees may register both formal commitments and implied obligations, but salience should vary with specificity, source authority, repetition, and relevance to valued outcomes. Observed delivery is then compared with the registered expectation. A shortfall may be attributed to external constraint, organizational inability, shifting priorities, or unwillingness to honor the commitment. The resulting update can preserve, strengthen, or weaken confidence in future promises. This sequence is an original organizing device, not an established scale or demonstrated universal process.

Across cycles, the article proposes an expectation ledger: a nonliteral memory structure in which prior promises, delivery evidence, explanations, and credibility judgments influence the interpretation of later change. The ledger need not be conscious, numerically balanced, or equally shared among employees. Recency, severity, identity, local leadership, and selective memory may shape what is retained. Team discussion may also create shared narratives, but individual appraisals cannot be assumed to aggregate automatically into an organizational property. The concept is valuable only if future research can distinguish promise-specific updating from generalized dissatisfaction, current workload, dispositional skepticism, and retrospective reconstruction.

Trust depletion across failed transformations

Trust depletion is proposed as repeated downward updating of confidence in the organization's reliability, integrity, or willingness to act consistently with its commitments. The metaphor does not imply a literal reservoir, fixed threshold, or inevitable linear decline. Research on employee trust repair shows that restoration is conditional on the nature of the violation, the organizational response, and temporal dynamics [9]. A single failure may be forgiven, explained, or compartmentalized; repeated adverse evidence may instead change the prior assumption brought to subsequent initiatives. Trust depletion therefore concerns direction of updating across cycles, not merely a low score measured at one moment.

The distinction between trust, trustworthiness, and enacted conduct is central. Trust is a recipient's willingness to accept vulnerability, whereas judgments of trustworthiness concern perceived ability, benevolence, or integrity. Qualitative evidence on disruption suggests that organizations can preserve trust when leaders acknowledge uncertainty, maintain relational commitments, and align conduct with stated values [10]. Communication may contribute to that alignment, but explanation alone cannot compensate indefinitely for absent resources, broken procedures, or repeated non-delivery. The proposed depletion process should therefore be inferred from patterned changes in confidence linked to identifiable experiences, not from critical speech, one disappointing outcome, or pre-existing distrust.

Failed transformations may influence trust through attributions. Employees can interpret non-delivery as unavoidable incapacity, temporary constraint, poor coordination, opportunism, or indifference. These interpretations should produce different updates even when the observable outcome is similar. Comparative evidence linking psychological contract breach with cynicism and commitment also shows that relationships vary across employee groups and institutional contexts [11]. Such variation argues against a universal depletion function. Prior trust, organizational identification, employment alternatives, national context, occupational status, and the credibility of local managers may moderate whether a failed initiative is isolated or incorporated into a broader judgment about the organization.

Trust depletion is consequently a cross-cycle theoretical construct rather than a synonym for breach. Breach describes perceived non-fulfilment of an obligation; depletion describes the proposed cumulative revision of future-facing confidence. The two may be related without being interchangeable. Strong prior trust could buffer one failure yet create sharper disappointment when a violation is attributed to unwillingness. Conversely, initially low trust may leave little measurable decline while still producing cynical expectations. Empirical tests must therefore model baseline trust, event-specific attribution, repeated observations, and alternative trajectories, including recovery, stability, polarization, and domain-specific trust.

Cynicism as interpretive protection

Organizational change cynicism refers to negative beliefs, affect, and pessimistic expectations concerning change efforts or the actors promoting them. Evidence shows that discrepancies between organizational prestige claims and experienced support can be associated with both cynicism and employee silence [12]. Building on this discrepancy logic, the article proposes interpretive protection as a possible function of cynicism: employees may lower emotional investment, scrutinize optimistic claims, or anticipate failure to reduce vulnerability to renewed disappointment. The proposed function does not mean that cynical beliefs are accurate, beneficial, or consciously strategic. It identifies a testable reason why cynicism might persist after repeated unmet expectations.

Successive structural reforms have been associated with defensive silence, suggesting that employees may withhold concerns when speaking appears risky or futile [13]. Silence is not inherently cynical: it can reflect fear, low efficacy, prosocial restraint, workload, or lack of opportunity. Interpretive protection is therefore narrower than silence and broader than any single behavior. It concerns how employees assign meaning to a new promise before deciding whether to speak, comply, withdraw, challenge, or wait. Direct evidence would need to establish that cynical interpretation precedes and predicts self-protective choices rather than merely accompanying them.

Perceived organizational politics has also been linked to silence through organizational cynicism, with perceived support operating as a boundary condition [14]. This association is consistent with a filtering role in which adverse organizational cues influence whether employees regard participation as worthwhile, but cross-sectional mediation does not prove temporal causality. Cynicism may follow silence, share an antecedent with it, or become reinforced when withheld concerns leave weak plans uncorrected. The proposed theory therefore treats interpretive protection as potentially adaptive in the short term and costly in the longer term, while leaving its net value, direction, and contextual legitimacy open to empirical testing.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for cynicism after repeated organizational change promises and trust depletion.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Cynicism After Repeated Organizational Change Promises and Trust Depletion.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Change promise	Attributable future commitment	Separates commitment from messaging	Not aspiration or forecast	Promise registration input	Perception varies	Only reasonably perceived obligations enter the cycle
Promise cycle	Registration-to-update sequence	Makes repetition analyzable	Not an entire program	Proposed temporal unit	Timing requires measurement	Original synthesis, not validated process
Expectation ledger	Memory of promises and delivery	Explains cross-cycle carryover	Not literal accounting	Proposed memory mechanism	Recall may be biased	Conceptual heuristic requiring operationalization
Psychological contract breach	Perceived unfulfilled obligation	Anchors non-fulfilment appraisal	Not objective failure or violation emotion	Event-level input	Not every disappointment qualifies	Requires perceived organizational obligation
Trust depletion	Repeated downward confidence updating	Links failed transformations	Not one violation or trait distrust	Proposed cross-cycle state	Direct measures are scarce	No reservoir, threshold, or linearity claimed
Change fatigue	Reduced adaptive energy under repeated change	Captures repetition burden	Not cynical motive attribution	Parallel pathway	Direction may be reciprocal	Must not proxy cynicism
Change cynicism	Negative beliefs, affect, and pessimism about change	Names focal interpretation	Not skepticism, resistance, or distrust	Shapes later appraisal	Targets and measures differ	Not presumed irrational or harmful
Interpretive protection	Cynical filtering that may limit vulnerability	Explains persistence after disappointment	Not resilience or objective accuracy	Proposed protective filter	Benefits and costs untested	Original function, not established adaptation
Defensive silence	Self-protective withholding of concerns	Connects interpretation with behavior	Not absent opportunity or prosocial silence	Possible response	Motive is hard to infer	Requires evidence of motive and speaking opportunity
Recovery credibility	Confidence earned through aligned words and delivery	Prevents communication-only recovery	Not reassurance or temporary satisfaction	Proposed interruption mechanism	Required duration unknown	No universal recipe or sufficiency claimed

Behavioral withdrawal and disengagement

Cynicism does not imply one uniform behavioral endpoint. Employees may comply minimally, remain silent, reduce discretionary contribution, search for exit, challenge the initiative, or continue participating while withholding emotional commitment. Survey-based mediation evidence indicates that organizational cynicism can statistically carry part of the association between psychological contract breach and employee responses [15]. This finding is consistent with a pathway from perceived non-fulfilment through negative organizational interpretation to altered conduct, but its design does not establish that cynicism always develops first. Withdrawal may also reflect insecurity, overload, injustice, limited alternatives, or a reasoned judgment that the initiative is unsound.

Temporal orientation further complicates the response pathway. Evidence indicates that occupational future time perspective conditions associations between psychological contract breach, well-being, and career-related behavior [16]. Employees who perceive substantial future opportunity may conserve relationships, seek repair, or redirect effort, whereas those who perceive constrained time may respond differently; the article does not presume a single direction for those choices. Support, employability, professional identity, job dependence, and voice efficacy may likewise alter whether cynical interpretation becomes disengagement. The same perceived discrepancy can therefore produce exit intention, guarded compliance, constructive challenge, or no observable behavioral change.

Behavior must also be treated as part of a recursive process rather than a terminal outcome. Longitudinal reciprocal-effects evidence indicates that psychological contract breach and citizenship or counterproductive behavior may influence one another over time [17]. Building on that evidence, the theory proposes—but does not establish—that silence and reduced participation can weaken corrective information, implementation learning, and the credibility of later promises. Constructive agency may instead expose delivery problems and improve subsequent commitment accuracy. Individual behavior cannot be translated directly into organizational performance; that feedback requires multilevel evidence connecting recipient action, team learning, managerial response, and later promise formation.

Proposed temporal theory of change cynicism

The proposed Temporal Theory of Change Cynicism integrates event appraisal with cross-cycle updating. Its sequence begins when employees register an attributable promise, observe implementation, compare delivery with expectation, attribute

discrepancy, and revise trust and future expectations. Longitudinal evidence shows that breach-related effort–reward imbalance can carry associations with mental and physical health across time [18]. Health outcomes are not cynicism, but the persistence finding supports the more limited premise that relational disruption need not disappear when an event ends. The proposed theory adds an expectation ledger and repeated trust updating as unvalidated mechanisms linking one promise cycle with the next.

The model separates promise-related interpretation from a parallel burden pathway. Temporal harm can persist through breach-related imbalance and repetition-related uncertainty [18, 19]. Repeated reorganization may exhaust adaptive resources even when leaders made no identifiable promise, while cynical interpretation requires negative beliefs or pessimistic expectations concerning organizational intent or reliability. Fatigue may lower scrutiny and participation; cynicism may conserve effort by lowering investment; either may intensify the other. Their empirical distinction requires separate measures of sequence density, uncertainty, workload, fatigue, breach, trust, and cynical belief rather than a single index of “change resistance.”

Sequence intensity also matters independently of any one event. Panel evidence from public organizations associates dense reform sequences with cumulative organizational injury [20]. The proposed theory interprets such density as a condition that can increase memory salience, attributional carryover, and reduced recovery time, but it does not assume that public-sector patterns generalize unchanged to private firms, voluntary organizations, or short technological implementations. Reform intensity may also proxy austerity, leadership turnover, or capacity shortages. Comparative designs are needed to determine whether promise history explains additional variance beyond the number and pace of changes.

Finally, change attributes can influence employee attitudes and well-being over time [21]. This supports event-specific updating: a later initiative may be evaluated more favorably when its process, consequences, and leadership conduct differ materially from earlier failures. The theory therefore rejects irreversible cynicism. The expectation ledger is proposed to permit differentiated updating, including preservation, depletion, compartmentalization, or recovery. It also permits heterogeneity within the same organization because employees may encounter different promises, managers, consequences, and opportunities to verify delivery.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for temporal theory of change cynicism, showing how the article’s principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

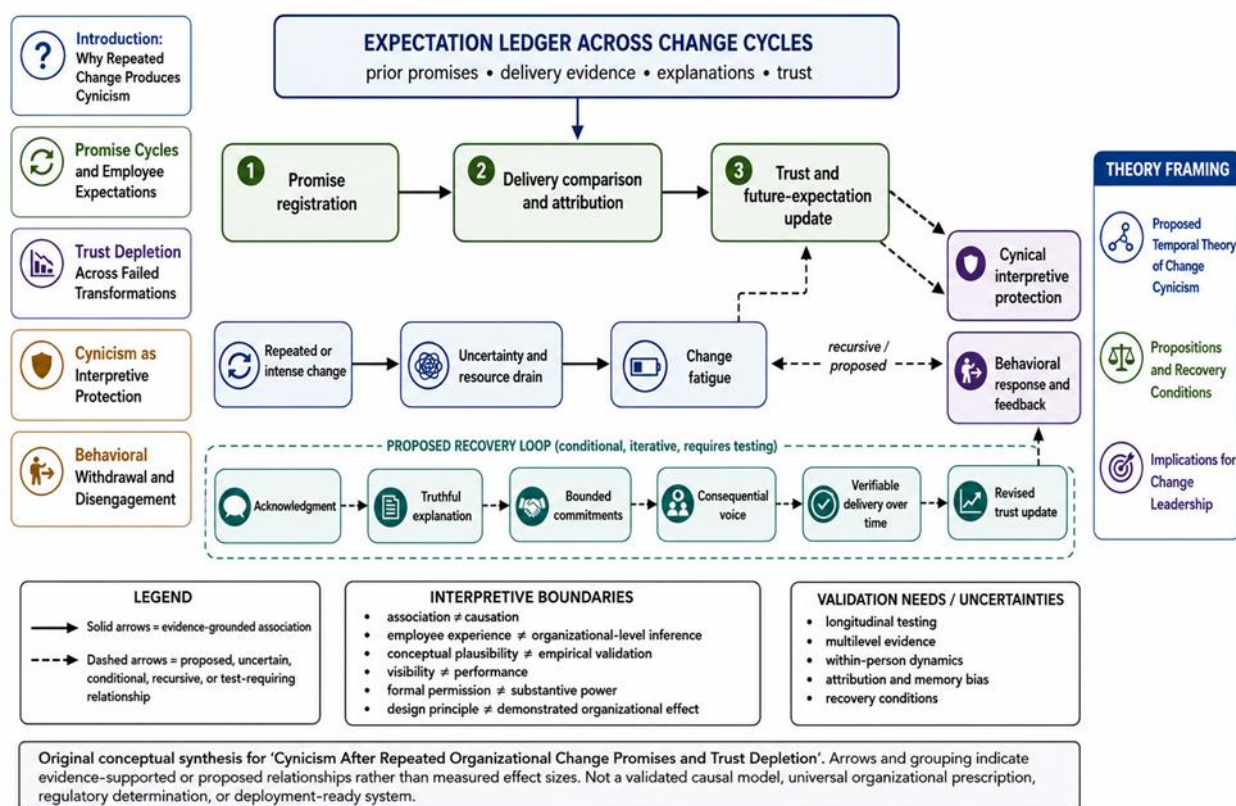


Figure 1. Temporal Theory of Change Cynicism

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in cynicism after repeated organizational change promises and trust depletion.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Cynicism After Repeated Organizational Change Promises and Trust Depletion.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Promise comparison → breach appraisal	Attributable commitment and non-delivery	Discrepancy comparison and responsibility attribution	Promise salience; controllability	Violation or revised expectation	External constraint, not unwillingness	Multiwave measures of promise, delivery, attribution, and breach
Repeated discrepancy → proposed trust depletion	Multiple adverse promise cycles	Downward reliability updating	Prior trust; recency; severity	Lower credibility of later promises	Trait cynicism or institutional distrust	Repeated trust assessments across transformations
Repetition → change fatigue	Dense or prolonged change	Uncertainty and resource drain	Pacing; workload; recovery opportunity	Reduced adaptive capacity	Insecurity or workload unrelated to promises	Sequence-sensitive panel design separating fatigue and cynicism
Cynicism → proposed interpretive protection	Prior disappointment and low trust	Skeptical scrutiny and lower emotional investment	Identification; support; future time	Reduced vulnerability with possible learning costs	Accurate skepticism or stable disposition	Experiments and process tracing of protective intent and costs
Cynicism → withdrawal or disengagement	Negative change interpretation	Reduced reciprocity, efficacy, or willingness to invest	Voice efficacy; alternatives; support	Silence, reduced citizenship, exit, or challenge	Burnout, insecurity, or career opportunity	Cross-lagged models distinguishing behavioral forms
Behavior → proposed feedback	Silence, withdrawal, or constructive agency	Changed information quality and reciprocal exchange	Voice climate; managerial response	Weaker or stronger later change capacity	Managers may possess adequate information	Multilevel linkage of behavior, learning, and later promise accuracy
Verified delivery → proposed recovery credibility	Bounded renewed commitment	Aligned action, explanation, and consequential voice	Violation severity; continuity; capacity	Conditional trust rebuilding	Temporary affective relief or regression	Multi-cycle comparison of communication-only and delivery-based recovery

Propositions and recovery conditions

The theory yields propositions that remain conceptual until directly tested. **Proposition 1:** larger and more attributable promise–delivery discrepancies will predict stronger downward trust updating than ambiguous shortfalls, conditional on prior trust and perceived controllability. **Proposition 2:** repeated adverse updates will increase the likelihood that later change claims are filtered through cynical interpretive protection. Recovery, however, may begin with candor rather than renewed optimism. Multi-study evidence indicates that truthful adverse information can reduce cynicism among highly identified employees under particular conditions [22]. **Proposition 3:** candid acknowledgment will interrupt cynical updating only when it is perceived as sincere, sufficiently informative, and followed by conduct consistent with the explanation.

Recipients also retain agency. Longitudinal evidence associates employee job crafting with adaptation during organizational change [23]. **Proposition 4:** opportunities to reshape tasks, relationships, or interpretations will weaken the connection between cynical appraisal and withdrawal when employees possess real discretion and adequate resources. This is a boundary condition, not a transfer of responsibility for organizational failure. Job crafting cannot replace staffing, authority, fair procedure, or delivery of organizational commitments. It may also intensify burden when employees must repair poorly designed change privately. Tests should separate enabled agency from compelled self-adjustment and examine who has access to each.

Leadership-related recovery depends on trust but cannot be reduced to leadership style. Survey mediation evidence places trust in leadership within the association between transformational leadership and organizational change capability [24]. **Proposition 5:** recovery credibility will develop when leaders make bounded commitments, explain constraints, close voice loops, and demonstrate delivery across multiple observations; communication without verification will produce weaker updating. **Proposition 6:** recovery will be slower after integrity-attributed failures than after ability-attributed failures and will vary with identification, support, justice, future time perspective, and leadership continuity. The theory should be revised

or rejected if stable disposition, current workload, insecurity, or general satisfaction explains later cynicism better than recorded promise history and trust updating.

Testing requires designs capable of observing processes rather than inferring them from one survey. Researchers should identify discrete promise cycles prospectively; record commitment source, specificity, delivery, explanation, and attribution; and collect repeated within-person measures of trust, fatigue, cynicism, voice, and behavior. Continuous-time, latent-change, experience-sampling, and qualitative process-tracing approaches could test lag structure and meaning formation. Multilevel designs are necessary before claiming team climates or organizational consequences. Experiments could manipulate promise specificity, controllability information, candor, and verified follow-through, but field comparisons across sectors and occupations are required to establish transferability.

Implications for change leadership

The first implication is promise discipline. Leaders should distinguish aspiration, intention, forecast, and commitment; specify what is controllable; and revise commitments openly when conditions change. Evidence associates transformational leadership and transparent communication with employee openness to change through trust [25]. This association supports attention to credibility and clarity, not a formula in which more communication automatically generates acceptance. Information volume can coexist with evasion, and polished visibility is not delivery. Leaders should therefore maintain an auditable connection among claims, responsible actors, resources, milestones, deviations, and explanations without treating employees as passive recipients of messaging.

The second implication is consequential participation. Trust has been modeled as a link between leadership and employee championing during change [26]. Championing is not the inverse of cynicism, and visible enthusiasm is not proof of trust. A credible voice process must show what was heard, what changed, what could not change, who decided, and why. Leaders should protect critical input, distinguish informed dissent from obstruction, and avoid rewarding performative positivity. Where employees lack authority or resources, invitations to “own the change” may transfer responsibility rather than create agency.

The third implication is recovery through observable alignment over time. Transparent communication, trust, and coping evidence jointly support bounded leadership design principles [25-27]. The coping evidence arose in a crisis context, so transfer beyond disruptive conditions remains uncertain. Leaders can nevertheless reduce avoidable ambiguity by acknowledging losses, avoiding inflated promises, pacing overlapping initiatives, and demonstrating small but meaningful delivery before requesting renewed commitment. These are design principles, not validated prescriptions. They cannot compensate for infeasible strategy, chronic understaffing, inequitable burden, absent accountability, or leadership turnover that repeatedly resets obligations.

Organizations should evaluate change credibility separately from project performance. Useful indicators may include clarity of commitments, perceived controllability, explanation quality, closure of employee concerns, continuity between words and action, and differentiated trust across levels. Such indicators require validation and should not become universal thresholds or surveillance scores. Leadership decisions should remain sensitive to occupation, institutional context, employment security, prior reform exposure, and the distribution of voice and power. The theory is most useful as a diagnostic question—what promise history is employees using to interpret this change?—rather than as a label applied to critical employees.

Conclusion

This Original Temporal Theory Article proposes that cynicism after repeated organizational change can be understood as a cross-cycle process rather than only an event-level attitude. Employees register attributable promises, compare them with enacted delivery, assign responsibility, and update trust and expectations. Repeated adverse updating may make cynical interpretation serve a protective function, while a distinct fatigue pathway may reduce adaptive capacity. Behavioral withdrawal, silence, challenge, and constructive agency are treated as differentiated and potentially recursive responses rather than inevitable consequences.

The proposed Temporal Theory of Change Cynicism contributes the promise cycle, expectation ledger, trust-depletion process, interpretive-protection function, behavioral feedback loop, and recovery-credibility mechanism as testable conceptual elements. None is presented as causally validated, universally applicable, or ready for prescriptive deployment. The account remains bounded by alternative explanations, attribution and memory bias, construct overlap, individual differences, institutional context, and the danger of inferring organizational outcomes from employee perceptions. Its value ultimately depends on longitudinal, within-person, multilevel, experimental, and qualitative evidence capable of confirming, revising, or rejecting the proposed sequence.

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