



# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE CYNICISM: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

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*Organizational change efforts can bring about a range of outcomes: some intended, such as organizational survival and profitability, and some unintended, such as heightened levels of organizational change cynicism (OCC) among employees. This article focuses on processes for managing OCC: we examine the role of information sharing and involvement in decision making as ways to lessen employee reports of OCC. While both of these strategies have the potential to be effective, they rest on a significant assumption—namely, that employees will enthusiastically embrace any opportunities to become involved. In this research, we investigate this assumption through an analysis of the relationship between an employee's willingness to become involved ("active orientation") on employee reports of their OCC. We find, using data from 1,214 public-sector employees, that an active orientation toward involvement plays a significant role as a moderator in reducing employee reports of OCC. The findings suggest that HR practitioners concerned about OCC should encourage their line managers to adopt a participatory style of management (information sharing, involvement in decision making), especially in those workplaces where employees are more likely to embrace the opportunities for involvement. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

## Introduction

Employees have become more cynical about their organizations (Feldman, 2000). There are many potential targets for such cynicism, such as one's occupation, top managers, and organizational change efforts (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). This article addresses or-

ganizational change cynicism (OCC), which has the potential to undermine change programs (Reicher, Wanous, & Austin, 1997), and focuses on the role of information sharing with employees and the involvement of employees in decision making to manage OCC. Managers can choose how they manage their employees. Our focus is on the participative climate managers create by the

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way they share information with employees or involve them in decision making (Tesluck, Vance, & Mathieu, 1999; Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000).

We compared the two broad approaches to employee involvement, information sharing and involvement in decision making, because their theoretical rationale and opera-

tional features are distinct (Leana, 1987). Is one approach more likely to be effective than the other? Much of the academic and professional debates about involvement imply that all employees *want* to be active participants in their employing organizations. If this is indeed the case, the only real challenge for HR managers is to decide on the mechanisms to facilitate employee involvement. But not all involvement mechanisms are successful. One possible explanation is the absence of employee support for involvement.

Employees' enthusiasm for information sharing or involvement in decision-making processes will vary, and this variation may be based on their assessment of the impact of their involvement. Is the effectiveness of an involvement strategy to deal with OCC exaggerated or attenuated by employees' attitudes toward involvement (from now on referred to as "active orientation")?

Previous studies of involvement and OCC typically have been conducted in North American private-sector organizations. For these findings to be of value in guiding HR decisions, however, they must be applicable to other places and types of organizations. Can the findings of previous studies be replicated in a large public-sector organization in Australia?

The following section reviews the literature, with a particular emphasis on clarifying the meaning of cynicism and the consequences of cynicism for employees and organizations. Research into OCC is comparatively new and has been informed by the organizational cynicism literature, a practice continued in the following sections of this

article. This is appropriate, as OCC is part of a wider construct of organizational cynicism (Dean et al., 1998).

## Understanding Organizational Cynicism

Organizational cynicism refers to "a negative attitude toward one's employing organization. . . . The core belief is that principles of honesty, fairness and sincerity are sacrificed to further the self-interests of the leadership, leading to actions based on hidden motives and deception" (Abraham, 2000, p. 269). More recently, Cole, Bruch, and Vogel (2006) have defined cynicism as "an evaluative judgment that stems from an individual's employment experiences" (p. 463). Furthermore, "irrespective of the accuracy or validity of the individual's perceptions on which the employee cynicism construct is based, it is real in its consequences" (p. 464).

There are many targets for cynicism; our interest is in cynicism about organizational change efforts. Cynicism toward organizational change consists of two elements: a view that change is futile (Reicher et al., 1997) and placement of blame for the failure of change programs on the facilitators of change—usually management. In such circumstances, management is regarded as "being unmotivated, incompetent or both" (Wanous et al., 2000). Others go further and suggest that OCC can be viewed as resistance to change (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005).

Research on organizational cynicism is comparatively new (Cole et al., 2006) and needs to be distinguished from skepticism. Skeptics "doubt the likelihood of success but are still reasonably hopeful that positive change will occur" (Reicher et al., 1997, p. 48). Skepticism deals with doubt about the viability of change in achieving its stated objective, and the skeptic's views are not influenced by the stated or implied motives for change (Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2005). On the other hand, cynics are much less optimistic about the success of change because of a history of repeated failure. Cynicism is likely "if management has a track record of making promises it cannot keep or

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if the hype is simply unbelievable" (Fleming, 2005, p. 290). Cynicism involves frustration, disillusionment, and negative feelings toward an organization (Dean et al., 1998). While both cynics and skeptics have concerns about the success of change, the difference between them lies in their attitudes toward management's motives for change.

Organizational cynicism is a learned response rather than a personality-based predisposition (Wanous et al., 2000, p. 147). In other words, organizational cynicism is "not simply the feelings that 'negative' people bring into the organization, but that these attitudes are shaped by experiences in the work context" (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 640–641). People do not decide to become cynical. Organizational cynicism develops from experience because it is "selectively validated by the organization's mixed record of successful change and by other people in the organization who hold and express similar views" (Reicher et al., 1997, p. 50). Others (Abraham, 2000; Kalimo & Taris, 2003) have suggested that cynicism is a defensive response, because it can shield employees against feeling strong emotions and prepare them for the next "inevitable failure" (Abraham, 2000, p. 129). The implication is that "the world is not divided into cynics and non-cynics:" people have "widely varying degrees of cynicism" (Dean et al., 1998, p. 346). Dean et al. suggest that cynicism can be expressed both overtly, such as through direct statements questioning the integrity of the organization, and covertly through the use of sarcastic humor and non-verbal behaviors, such as "knowing looks," "rolling eyes," and "smirks" (p. 346).

The theoretical antecedents for cynicism can be found in psychological contracts theory and affective events theory. Using a psychological contracts approach, Andersson (1996) argued that there are three contributing elements to cynicism: first, the "formulation of unrealistically high expectations, second, the experience of disappointment at failing to meet these expectations and third, subsequent disillusionment" (p. 1404). Employees develop their expectations of their employer based on general beliefs about how

organizations should behave or what they have experienced in the past (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 630). In an empirical study that considered Andersson's conceptual model, Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly (2003) argued that cynicism was a reaction to employment-related social exchange violations. They reported that perceived psychological contract violations were associated with increased levels of cynicism among bank employees.

A second theoretical approach to understanding how cynicism develops in the workplace is provided by Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This theory suggests that work events can have an impact on "affective states" (such as frustration), which then has an impact on work attitudes. Relying on AET, Cole et al. (2006) found that the level of supervisory support and psychological hardiness were significant antecedents of cynicism.

### Does Organizational Cynicism Matter?

Whether human resource managers should be concerned about cynicism or attempt to respond to cynicism will depend partly on whether cynicism has any adverse effects on employees or their organization.

Cynicism has been associated with negative consequences for employees. Employees experience a variety of negative emotions, including "distress, disgust and even shame when they think about their organizations" (Dean et al., 1998). Some researchers have suggested that these negative emotions can take a "personal toll" (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 633) and result in emotional fatigue and burnout (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 643). On the other hand, cynicism may be good for employees, as cynical workers are less likely to be taken advantage of by others who lack integrity (Dean et al., 1998).

There is debate about the consequences of cynicism for organizations. One stream of research has found negative associations be-

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tween organizational cynicism and organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and job satisfaction (Abraham, 2000; Andersson & Bateman, 1997). OCC also has been associated with lower organizational commitment, increased grievance filing, and a weakened perception of pay for performance among employees (Wanous et al., 2000). Bedeian (2007) found that university faculties with higher levels of cynicism were less likely to experience a sense of oneness with their employing organization and to be "less psychologically intertwined with its fate." He also reported higher turnover among cynics.

Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly (2003) compiled an alternative set of findings. They reported that "employees' cynical attitudes toward the employer did not influence their work performance, their organizational citizenship behaviors or their absence levels" (p. 641). The interpretation placed on these alternative findings is that cynicism is an "apathy-based reaction." Although cynical employees feel disillusioned and report less positive feelings toward their organization, "they do not act out this displeasure in behaviors that influence organizational performance directly" (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 643). Cynicism also can be good for organizations. Andersson (1997) found that cynics report less intention to comply with requests to engage in unethical behavior, while Dean et al. (1998) have suggested that cynics provide a check on the "temptation to assume that self-interested or underhanded behavior will go undetected" (p. 347).

### **Cynicism and Participative Work Climates**

The foregoing discussion suggests that organizational cynicism can have negative con-

sequences for employees and/or organizations. Therefore, the organization that effectively manages cynicism is more likely to derive benefits from an organizational change program. As Bommer et al. (2005) pointed out, "the overcoming of cynicism toward change is particularly important because when employees' cynicism toward a proposed change leads to failed implementation, the failure reinforces the cynical beliefs. Consequently, subsequent change initiatives are even less likely to succeed, and thus CAOC [cynicism about organizational change] becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 737).

Abraham (2000) argues that feelings of inequity distinguish employee cynics from others and that open organizational communications and involvement may help generate perceptions of equity. Moreover, employees' experience of the organization will be heavily affected by their supervisor. Treadway et al. (2004) have suggested that supervisors are "likely to have an important role in facilitating or impeding cynicism" (p. 499). Therefore, encouraging supervisors to adopt a participatory management style has the potential to affect levels of cynicism.

A participative work climate is created by the attitudes and behaviors of managers, who can choose how to manage their employees—for example, through the way they run meetings or involve employees in decision making (Tesluck et al., 1999; Wanous et al., 2000). There is some research that suggests that employee perceptions of a participative climate are effective predictors of job satisfaction and performance (Miller & Monge, 1986).

Managers also have a choice about the type of participative climate they establish: an information-sharing climate or a decision-making climate. An information-sharing climate refers "to practices where management encourages employees to share their opinions regarding work-related concerns yet retains the right to make all final decisions" (Cabrera, Ortega, & Cabrera, 2003, p. 44). A decision-making climate "gives employees increased responsibility

and autonomy to organize and perform their jobs as they see fit" (Cabrera et al., 2003, p. 44). In the context of organizational change, both approaches share a common objective: to reduce resistance to change by generating trust in management, reducing anxiety, and creating a greater sense of personal control (Wagner, Leana, Locke, & Schweiger, 1997, p. 52). Information sharing and involvement in decision making differ, however, in terms of their theoretical origins and operational form (Leana, 1987).

The theoretical rationale for information sharing derives from a unitarist perspective of the organization, which assumes "one source of authority and one focus of loyalty" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1975, p. 38). Information sharing reflects a hierarchical division of labor in the organization (Locke & Schweiger, 1979, p. 274). Management is the custodian of the information and decides whether it is passed onto employees and when. Management has argued that it has greater expertise, knowledge, and information than employees and, therefore, is better able to make decisions (OECD, 1975, p. 40). Management is seen to have a preference for information sharing, as it does not threaten managers' right to manage (Poole, 1986) and can encourage employees to identify with the organization (Naughton, 1996; OECD, 1975). Further, the preference for information sharing is sometimes fueled by a management belief that power is finite and "that an increase in employee power must be accompanied by a requisite decrease in managerial power" (Parnell, Bell, & Taylor, 1992, p. 33).

Operationally, information sharing is a low-level, passive, and unidirectional process: employees receive information, without any right to respond. It is about ensuring employee compliance with management decisions. Management controls the type of information made available to employees and has a tendency to be cautious—that is, management is unlikely to provide full and comprehensive information to employees for fear that it will fall into competitors' hands (OECD, 1975).

Organizational change can generate uncertainties as well as have adverse effects on employees. This can result in an increase in employees' need for information (Rousseau, 1996). According to Reicher et al. (1997), "people need to be fully informed and educated about the necessity for change, the progress and problems associated with ongoing change processes and the results of change programs" (p. 53). The sharing of information will help employees understand the reasons for management decisions and see things from a management perspective (Wanous et al., 2000). When organizations share information in a timely manner, employees are less likely to be taken by surprise by organizational changes (Dean et al., 1998), for they have the opportunity to reflect on management decisions that are signaled in advance and come to terms with their implications. When organizations fail to communicate important information to employees, the result is unmet expectations, a determinant of cynicism (Andersson, 1996). Further, inadequate information encourages employees to "fill in the blanks" (Reicher et al., 1997, p. 53) to reduce uncertainty, which can lead them to rely on informal channels of communication, such as rumors (Andersson, 1996). Information sharing is valued by employees and is often supported by managers, as it does not reduce the level of managerial power (Parnell et al., 1992).

*H1: A work environment characterized by information sharing will be associated with lower levels of organizational change cynicism.*

An alternative to an information-sharing climate is one that involves employees in decision making. The theoretical rationale for this approach is based on a pluralistic view of

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the organization. It suggests that there are at least two distinct groups within an organization—employees and managers—who have divergent but legitimate views, interests, and goals. In contrast with unitarists, pluralists

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do not believe that management should be the sole source of authority and decision making in the organization (McCabe & Lewin, 1992, p. 112). According to pluralists, the livelihood of most employees usually depends on the successful operation of the organization; therefore, they have a right to participate in organizational decision-making processes. Further, “many employees know more about their jobs than their supervisors do and [if involved] could contribute to a higher quality of decision making than their supervisors would achieve on their own” (Wagner et al., 1997, p. 50). The theoretical rationale for employee involvement in decision making, therefore, emphasizes the equalization of power in the workplace (Locke & Schweiger, 1979, p. 274) and includes an assumption that employees “can be trusted to make important decisions about work activities [and] can develop the knowledge to make important decisions about the management of their work activities” (Lawler, 1991, p. 193).

decisions about the management of their work activities” (Lawler, 1991, p. 193).

Operationally, employee involvement in decision making represents a fundamental change in the way decisions are made in organizations. Unlike information sharing, it is a two-way, proactive process. This means management needs to relinquish some of its control over decision making to provide employees with an opportunity to provide input and help determine the outcome (Strauss, 1998). It means the involvement of employees in decisions that are ordinarily the prerogative of management (Parnell et al., 1992). Besides relinquishing some control, management needs to allocate more time for decision-making processes. Participative decision-making processes are more

time-consuming, since the opinions of all interested employees need to be taken into account. Further, not all employees will be of the same opinion, so time is needed to reconcile the variety of perspectives to arrive at a decision that reflects the majority opinion.

Having the opportunity to express an opinion is important to employees, regardless of its actual impact, since it satisfies the desire to have one’s opinions considered (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995). This can translate into greater acceptance of and commitment to the final decision. Studies of employee preferences for involvement regularly demonstrate that employees rate this attribute of employment highly (Wiley, 1997) and express concern when there are insufficient opportunities to participate (Freeman & Rogers, 1999).

According to Sagie and Koslowsky (1994), during times of organizational change employees need to believe that their views are being considered. A lack of “meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making” was identified by Reicher et al. (1997, p. 52) and Wanous et al. (2000) as promoting OCC. This cynicism is the result of two factors: the lack of control that workers have over their work activities and the operation of their workplace (Abraham, 2000, p. 276). Cynics believe that fairness has been “sacrificed to further the self-interests of the leadership” (Abraham, 2000, p. 269). Involvement in decision making enhances employee perceptions of fairness (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995), especially when employees have expressed a preference for participating in decisions (Tjosvold, 1985), particularly those that affect their own positions (Gardell, 1977). An inability to influence decisions provides employees with an opportunity to blame managers for adverse outcomes of change, an element of OCC (Wanous et al., 2000). When employees are involved in making decisions, they not only have a greater say in them but also better understand the rationale for them, thereby resulting in greater motivation and effort (Wagner et al., 1997). Involving employees can also result in a better-quality decision,

which Parnell et al. described as “one in which more of the relevant information was attained and utilized and one which is more likely to result in positive organizational and personal outcomes” (1992, p. 2). Better-quality decisions can enhance the reputation of management and reduce OCC (Andersson, 1996, p. 1411).

*H2: A work environment characterized by employee involvement in decision making will be associated with lower levels of organizational change cynicism.*

The effectiveness of information sharing or involvement in decision-making strategies may be influenced by employees' attitude toward involvement. Although there is a very large body of research on involvement from a range of disciplinary perspectives (for example, psychology, sociology, economics, and industrial relations), it has tended to focus on identifying the consequences of involvement and has largely overlooked the role of employee attitudes. It is, however, implicit in much of this research (see Wilkinson, Ackers, & Goodman, 1994, for an exception) that employees *want* to participate. As Conger and Kanungo (1988) have argued, management practices are only one set of conditions for effective involvement, and Spreitzer (1995) has pointed out that a great deal of research has focused on management practices and paid insufficient attention to the preferences of employees.

Moreover, Knocke (1991) noted that employees differ in the amount of participatory effort they are prepared to expend. An Australian study found that employees' views of involvement vary from a high level of interest to disinterest (Savery & Soutar, 1991). This variation may be based on individual preferences for involvement and on an assessment of the likely impact of their involvement. Employees who feel that their involvement is likely to have some impact are more likely to become actively involved. There is some previous research on impact as a component of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). Following Spreitzer, impact can be seen as “the degree to which an individual

can influence strategic, administrative or operating outcomes at work” (p. 1443). This is important in defining an active orientation to involvement, which refers to the extent to which employees feel willing and able to influence their working arrangements. In line with Spreitzer, an active orientation is shaped by the work environment and is a continuous variable, meaning that employees can be viewed as having a more or less active orientation, rather than active or inactive orientation.

The importance of an active orientation lies in its relationship with the two involvement climates. The effect of information sharing or involvement in decision making on OCC will be exaggerated when employees have a high active orientation. When management provides information to employees with a high active orientation, they may be more likely to read it and/or attend management-sponsored meetings to discuss change initiatives. Greater knowledge is seen to prevent employee speculation (Reicher et al., 1997), generate higher trust in management's motives, and, hence, lower OCC.

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*Employees who feel that their involvement is likely to have some impact are more likely to become actively involved.*

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*H3a: Active orientation will moderate the relationship between an information-sharing climate and organizational change cynicism. The mitigating effects of information sharing on OCC will be stronger under conditions of high active orientation compared to low active orientation.*

When employees have opportunities to become involved in decision making and are high in active orientation, they are more likely to state their views and cross-examine management initiatives. Having influenced the process, they will take some responsibility for the decision and be less likely to criticize management motives and decisions. The key, according to Bommer et al. (2005), is to convince employees not to be cynical, and involvement in decision making is one way to reduce cynicism. Further, the em-

employees who are most receptive to involvement in decision making are those who have a high active orientation.

*H3b: Active orientation will moderate the relationship between a decision-making climate and organizational change cynicism. The mitigating effects of decision making on OCC will be stronger under conditions of high active orientation compared to low active orientation.*

## Sample, Measures, and Analysis

The data for the study came from a sample of employees working in a large public-sector department in Melbourne, Australia. The state government in Victoria was keen to promote the use of involvement mechanisms

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*The effect of information sharing or involvement in decision making on OCC will be exaggerated when employees have a high active orientation.*

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throughout the public sector, so the managers in this study were encouraged to think about their approach to the management of their subordinates. Formal participative mechanisms (consultative committees) were in place in one region. A survey on attitudes toward involvement was sent to 4,605 employees, along with a letter of support from the department. The department's director of resources sent a reminder e-mail to all staff two weeks after the survey was delivered, and 1,456 employees responded, generating a response rate of 32%. We investigated nonresponse bias by

comparing the characteristics of respondents and nonrespondents (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007) and were able to find out the gender of the nonrespondents from the departments' human resource records. We examined the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the percentage of genders in each group. The null hypothesis was rejected ( $\chi^2 = 6.97, p < .01$ ). Consequently, some nonresponse bias may be present, and its impact on the substantive results is unknown. After accounting for missing data, the effective sample size was 1,214. An overview of the respondents' characteristics can be found in Table I. The average age was

39.78 years, 72% of the sample was female, and the average length of tenure in the current position was 4.39 years.

Table I also provides the definitions, items, and descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis. A reliability analysis was undertaken for all multi-item scales, and the Cronbach's alphas are also reported in Table I. In all cases, the reliability coefficients were within the recommended range (Nunnally, 1978). Table II contains the correlation matrix. It is evident that there are no problems with multicollinearity.

The dependent variable in this study is organizational change cynicism, so the unit of analysis is the individual employee, which is consistent with previous studies (Dean et al., 1998, p. 348). OCC is measured using a scale developed by Brooks and Vance (1991). It has six items, and a representative item on this scale is "I have pretty much given up trying to make suggestions for improvement around here." It is a five-point scale, and higher values on this scale represent a higher level of OCC.

There are three independent variables included in the analysis: information-sharing climate, decision-making climate, and active orientation. The items for the two involvement climate scales are from Tesluck et al. (1999, p. 281). *Information-sharing climate* comprises five items that measure the extent to which information is shared but does not include an opportunity for employees to influence decisions. A representative item on this scale is "I get enough information about my organization." *Decision-making climate* is measured by five items from Tesluck et al. (1999). A representative item on this scale is "Staff have much say or influence about what goes on." *Active orientation* is measured by five items derived from an extensive review of the literature (Collom, 2003; Drago & Heywood, 1989; Fenwick & Olson, 1986; Haas, 1980; Knocke, 1991; Leana, Ahlbrandt, & Murrell, 1992; Spreitzer, 1995). Two representative items are "Matters of importance to me were being discussed" and "I had or have gained the skills to participate."

The items were analyzed using factor analysis. We used principal components fac-

tor analysis with varimax rotation (Eigenvalues > 1). The items were loaded on a single factor (with factor loadings ranging from .527 to .777) and reported an alpha of .75. A summary of all the items in this scale and their factor loadings is provided in Table III. A five on this scale represents a high level of active orientation.

Ten control variables were included in the model: six demographic controls and four situational controls. The demographic variables were age, dependents, education, employment status, gender, and union status. The situational controls were current tenure, region, resource inadequacy, and work-overload perceptions. The details on

**TABLE I** Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics

Name	Description	Mean	SD
<u>Dependent variable</u>			
Organizational cynicism	Six-item scale from Brooks and Vance (1991) that measures a sense of disbelief that efforts of staff and/or management can truly bring about change in the workplace, alpha = .70	2.90	.70
<u>Demographic control variables</u>			
Age	Age in years	39.78	10.4
Dependents	Any dependents = 1, otherwise = 0		
Current tenure	Years in current position	4.39	4.56
Education	Highest educational level attained is a university degree = 1, otherwise = 0	.39	.49
Employment status	Permanent employee = 1, otherwise = 0	.73	.44
Gender	Female = 1 male = 0	.72	.45
Union	Union member = 1, nonmembers = 0	.48	.50
<u>Situational control variables</u>			
Region	Employed in a region with formal consultation arrangements in place = 1, otherwise = 0	.28	.45
Resource inadequacy	Two-item scale from Iverson (1992) that measures the extent of resource inadequacy, alpha = .81	3.12	1.06
Work overload	Three-item scale from Iverson and Maguire (2000) that measures the extent to which performance expectations in the job are excessive, alpha = .79	3.30	.90
<u>Independent variables</u>			
Decision-making climate	Five-item scale from Tesluck et al. (1999) that measures the extent to which employees believe that they are involved in decision making, alpha = .78	2.75	.77
Information-sharing climate	Five-item scale from Tesluck et al. (1999) that measures the extent to which the organization shares information with employees, alpha = .84	2.82	.70
Active orientation	Five-item scale that measures the extent to which employees are actively committed to involvement, alpha = .75	4.06	.57
<u>Interaction terms</u>			
Active orientation * information sharing	Descriptions provided above		
Active orientation * decision making climate	Descriptions provided above		

TABLE II  
Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Organizational cynicism	1.00													
2. Age	-0.03	1.00												
3. Dependents	0.01	0.18	1.00											
4. Education	-0.06	-0.08	-0.10	1.00										
5. Employment status	0.00	0.15	0.05	0.06	1.00									
6. Gender	-0.03	-0.19	-0.16	0.09	-0.04	1.00								
7. Union	0.14	0.05	0.03	-0.03	0.06	-0.05	1.00							
8. Current tenure	0.21	0.29	0.11	-0.18	0.23	-0.13	0.15	1.00						
9. Region	0.00	0.06	-0.02	0.11	0.09	0.10	-0.10	-0.03	1.00					
10. Resource inadequacy	0.35	-0.09	0.00	0.08	0.03	-0.01	0.19	0.05	0.00	1.00				
11. Work overload	0.16	-0.07	-0.01	0.20	0.09	0.05	0.05	-0.03	0.06	0.33	1.00			
12. Active orientation	-0.01	-0.04	0.03	0.11	0.01	0.07	0.04	-0.06	0.00	0.07	0.15	1.00		
13. Information sharing	-0.57	-0.03	-0.02	0.09	-0.04	0.05	-0.15	-0.18	-0.02	-0.34	-0.17	-0.02	1.00	
14. Decision making	-0.55	-0.07	-0.04	-0.06	-0.06	0.04	-0.09	-0.13	-0.08	-0.29	-0.13	-0.02	0.56	1.00

**TABLE III** Items and Factor Loadings for the Moderator Variable (Active Orientation)

Item	Communality	Factor Loadings
1. Matters of importance to me were being discussed <sup>#</sup>	.277	.527
2. I had or have gained the skills to participate	.472	.687
3. Information on which to make decisions was freely available	.673	.820
4. Meetings were held during my work hours	.515	.717
5. The meeting had the power to make important decisions	.604	.777
Eigen value		2.541
Percentage of variance explained		50.820
Alpha		.75

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Factor loadings .50 or greater are “practically significant” (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1999, p. 111). The response anchors for the original items was 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree. Responses to these five items were averaged to create the active orientation variable. High values on this variable represent a high level of active orientation.

<sup>#</sup> The communality for this item is below the recommended threshold but represents an important element of our definition of active orientation, so it was retained for the analysis (Hair et al., 1999, pp. 113–114).

each of these control variables can be found in Table I.

Hierarchical regression (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989) was used to analyze the survey data. Demographic and situation control variables were entered in Step 1. The controls plus two independent variables were entered as Step 2, and one interaction term was entered as Step 3. The results of these analyses are reported in Tables IV (information-sharing climate) and V (decision-making climate).

## Results

The level of OCC reported by respondents in this study was 2.90 (mean), but comparison with other OCC studies is complicated by the absence of comparable measures (particularly the number and wording of items). For example, Wanous et al. (2000) reported a mean of 2.91 using an eight-item measure that focused on pessimism about change being successful and attributions about the likely failure of change efforts (five-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Using a self-developed eight-item measure of OCC (five-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), Reichert et al. (1997) classified 43% of their hourly employee respondents as cynical and 23% of managers as cynical.

Our first hypothesis postulated that a work environment characterized by information sharing would be associated with lower levels of OCC. The results in Table IV (Step 2) support this hypothesis, as the coefficient on information sharing is significant and negative ( $\beta = -.490, p < .01$ ). It would appear that employees feel less cynical when the manager provides information. Involvement in decision making is also associated with lower levels of OCC, as anticipated by Hypothesis 2 and supported in Table V, Step 2 ( $\beta = -.498, p < .01$ ).

Hypothesis 3a examined the interaction between an active orientation and an information-sharing climate (Table IV). The interaction term (active orientation \* information sharing) was entered in Step 3. This term was significant, suggesting that the relationship between OCC and an information-sharing climate was moderated by an employee's level of active orientation. The change in the *R* square resulting from the inclusion of the interaction term was .002 and significant ( $F$  change (13, 1195) = 3.872,  $p < .05$ ).

To better understand the effect on OCC of the significant interaction between an information-sharing climate and active orientation, split group regression analysis was undertaken (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen & Cohen, 1983), and a plot of the results is pre-

**TABLE IV** Organizational Change Cynicism and Information-Sharing Climate

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<u>Demographic controls</u>			
Age	-.058**	-.062**	-.060**
Dependents	-.011	-.007	-.008
Education	-.066**	-.010	-.011
Employment status	-.063**	-.056**	-.057**
Gender	-.010	.004	.005
Union	.058**	.028	.030
<u>Situational controls</u>			
Current tenure	.200***	.133***	.133***
Region	.020	.001	.002
Resource inadequacy	.301***	.153***	.153***
Work overload	.086**	.041*	.042*
<u>Independent variables</u>			
Active orientation		-.023	.147
Information sharing		-.490***	-.179
<u>Interaction effect</u>			
Active orientation * information sharing Adj			-.354**
Adj $R^2$	.175	.375	.377
$\Delta$ in Adj $R^2$		.200	.002
Overall Model $F$	25.380 (10, 1198)	59.784 (12, 1196)	55.616 (13, 1195)
$\Delta$ Adj $R^2 F$		191.431***	3.872**

Note:  $n = 1,208$ . Table entries are standardized regression coefficients; \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .10$ .

**TABLE V** Organizational Change Cynicism and Decision-Making Climate

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<u>Demographic controls</u>			
Age	-.062**	-.093***	-.092***
Dependents	-.005	-.015	-.016
Education	-.061**	-.087***	-.089***
Employment status	-.057**	-.062***	-.062***
Gender	-.010	.000	.000
Union	.068**	.054**	.054**
<u>Situational controls</u>			
Current tenure	.205***	.153***	.153***
Region	.017	-.017	-.017
Resource inadequacy	.294***	.161***	.159***
Work overload	.079***	.065***	.071***
<u>Independent variables</u>			
Active orientation		-.031	.134*
Decision making		-.498***	-.145
<u>Interaction effect</u>			
Active orientation * decision making climate			-.390**
Adj $R^2$	.172	.392	.395
$\Delta$ Adj $R^2$		.220	.002
Overall Model $F$	25.025 (10, 1204)	64.624 (12, 1202)	60.228 (13, 1201)
$\Delta$ Adj $R^2 F$		217.567***	4.939**

Note:  $n = 1,214$ . Table entries are standardized regression coefficients; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .10$ .

sented in Figure 1. First the sample was split into low and high active orientation. Then regression equations of OCC on information-sharing climate for low active orientation and high active orientation were generated. Regression coefficients indicated that the OCC–information sharing climate was negative and significant for high active orientation ( $\beta = -.6085, p < .01$ ) and also for low active orientation ( $\beta = -.5299, p > .01$ ) (see Figure 1). In other words, the results indicate that active orientation moderated the relationship between information-sharing climate and OCC such that the relationship was stronger at higher levels of active orientation.

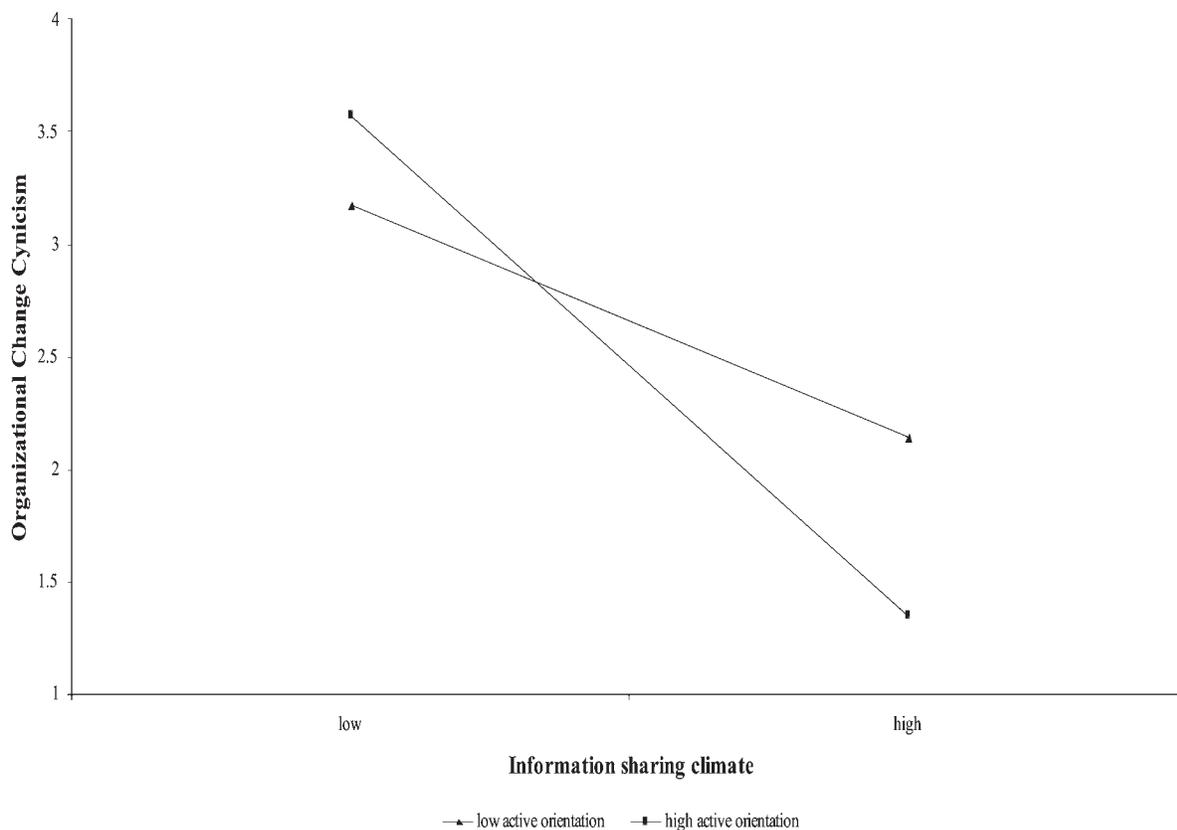
Hypothesis 3b focused on the interaction between an active orientation and a decision-making climate (Table V). The interaction term (active orientation \* decision making) was entered in Step 3. This term was significant, suggesting that the relationship between OCC and a decision-making climate

was moderated by an employee's level of active orientation. The change in the  $R$  square resulting from the inclusion of the interaction term was .002 and significant ( $F$  change [13, 1201] = 4.939,  $p < .05$ ).

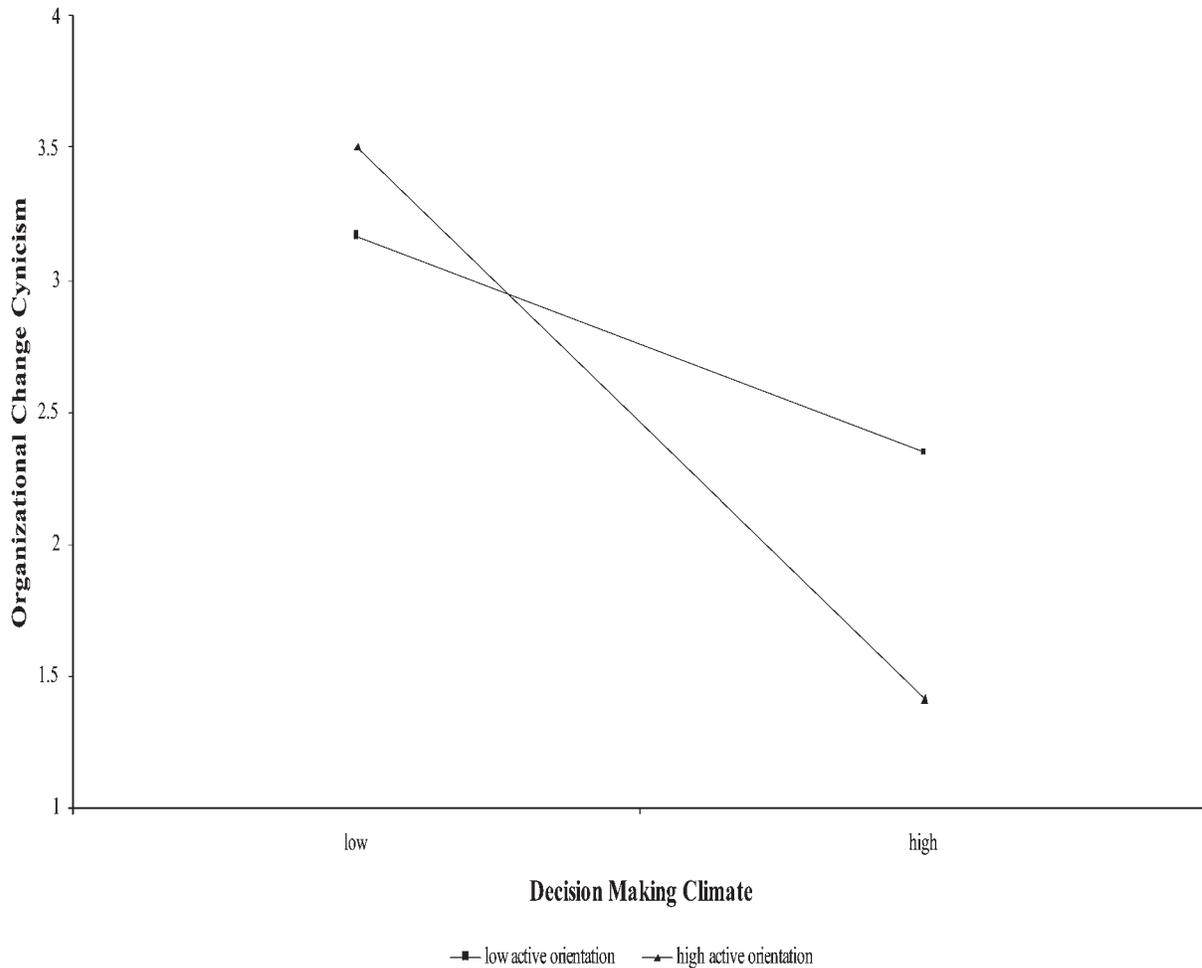
This significant interaction effect also was investigated using the process outlined above. The resultant regression coefficients indicated that the OCC decision-making climate was negative and significant for high active orientation ( $\beta = -.5240, p < .01$ ) and also for low active orientation ( $\beta = -.4675, p > .01$ ) (see Figure 2). The results indicate that active orientation moderated the relationship between a decision-making climate and OCC, with the relationship stronger when there were higher levels of active orientation.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Understanding OCC is important for both practitioners and researchers. Cynicism is about employees' view of their organiza-



**FIGURE 1.** Organizational Change Cynicism, Information Sharing, and Active Orientation



**FIGURE 2.** Organizational Change Cynicism, Decision-Making Climate, and Active Orientation

tions' management, which does not need to be grounded in facts. As cynicism derives from employee experiences in the workplace, it can take substantial efforts by management to reduce it.

We had three research objectives for our article. The first was to investigate approaches to employee involvement as a way of managing OCC. An information-sharing climate is a passive, top-down form of employee involvement, which management usually prefers because it does not undermine the managerial prerogative. Information sharing, as hypothesized, had a significant and negative relationship with OCC. Information provided by management appears to be associated with a greater employee understanding of management decisions and, hence, lower levels of OCC.

Involvement in decision making acknowledges that employees and employers have different but legitimate interests in the employment relationship. Sharing responsibility for decision making represents a fundamental shift in the nature of the employment relationship. Managers are no longer seen as the sole custodians of authority, and employees are able to bring their workplace experiences to the decision-making table. Involvement in decision making was also significantly associated with lower levels of OCC. Involvement in decision making provides employees with an opportunity to examine management's motives and the consequences of various options before settling on a binding decision. Under these circumstances, there is less potential for cynicism to develop.

The results of this study suggest that both information sharing and involvement in decision making are associated with lower levels of OCC. Researchers should now turn their attention to understanding the durability of these two forms of involvement. We anticipate that information sharing will be less durable in reducing OCC, especially when employees perceive a gap between the information provided and their experience of change. Involvement in decision making can create a virtuous cycle, as it provides opportunities to interact with management, examine management motives, and develop a greater understanding of the issues that contribute to lower OCC over the longer term.

Our second research objective was to investigate the impact of employee involvement attitudes on the effectiveness of involvement as a tool to manage OCC. We found that employees with a high active orientation were more likely to respond to the opportunities offered by both types of involvement climates and report lower levels of OCC. This suggests that it is important for HR managers to consider not only the type of management style to promote, but also the attitudes of employees. Further, as Spreitzer (1995) noted, employees' attitudes will be, in part, a function of their previous experiences with involvement. So an HR manager in an organization with positive past experiences may find involvement a more effective tool for managing OCC than an HR manager in an organization with negative past experiences. Initiatives that may help foster an active orientation among employees include providing employees with the opportunities to learn the skills necessary for effective involvement. More broadly, an examination of the organizational context will be of value. Employees working for low wages with minimal job security (transactional psychological contract) are unlikely to want to become involved. Employees with a relational psychological contract are more likely to perceive advantages from being actively involved, since they are likely to be with the organization long enough to make involvement worthwhile. So an examination of the range of HR practices (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999)

implemented and the message they convey to employees can have an impact on the willingness of employees to become involved.

Critics of involvement have suggested that opportunities for involvement can create OCC. Teicher (1992) has argued that involvement has been used to generate legitimacy for decisions already made by management, while O'Brien et al. (2004) have argued that opportunities for involvement are "fundamentally contingent on concern for the bottom line and management prerogative . . . while the methods of organizations may have changed, they are still oriented toward the same goals and these goals are set exclusively by managers rather than inclusively by employee themselves" (p. 30). According to this perspective, employees are aware of management's true intent in promoting involvement, leading to OCC.

The difference between involvement that creates OCC and involvement that manages OCC may lie in the quality of involvement. High-quality involvement, which incorporates a genuine long-term management commitment combined with adequate resources, facilities, and training (Bertone et al., 1998), is more likely to be effective in creating positive "learnings" about management. Invoking involvement when an organization is going through a change and then reverting back to a more traditional approach is likely to promote OCC. Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) suggest that a grace period between change efforts might be useful in reducing OCC: "not only will such respites permit organizational members to develop requisite skills but also serve as a stress reducing tactic" (p. 312). It will also provide an opportunity to develop involvement as a way of organizational life rather than as a tool each time the organization is undergoing change.

Our third objective was to test the generalizability of existing research findings. We

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*So an HR manager  
in an organization  
with positive past  
experiences may  
find involvement a  
more effective tool  
for managing OCC  
than an HR manager  
in an organization  
with negative past  
experiences.*

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found that results of previous empirical studies on involvement and OCC can be replicated in an Australian public-sector organization.

### *Policy and Practice Implications*

The findings of this study suggest that organizations benefit when managers share their decision-making responsibilities. Tesluck et al. (1999) suggested that the “judicious selection and promotion” (p. 295) of managers with consonant values is important, as is the support of managers at all levels in the organiza-

tion in encouraging managers to share their decision-making responsibilities. Parnell et al. (1992) suggested that managers will be more likely to adopt a participative decision-making approach when the prevailing organizational culture supports such an approach and managers believe that a participative approach will generate an improvement in performance.

These results may encourage HR managers to single out employees who are especially cynical or seek to eliminate OCC all together. A number of writers, however, have suggested that some cynicism is good for organizations, for it can provide a mechanism to monitor potentially bad decisions (Ferres & Connell,

2004). Wanous et al. (2000) have argued that too high a level of OCC can stymie attempts at change, while too low a level may result in poor decision making. Furthermore, Bommer et al. (2005) pointed out that “any perception that management is attempting to ‘smoke out’ the cynics may only serve to reinforce cynicism” (p. 748). ‘Smoking out’ the cynics also rests on assumptions about how cynicism spreads. What remains unclear is whether cynicism spreads through each employee coming to the same view of management’s motives or whether it comes from one individual forming an opinion and spreading it around. Davis and Gardner (2004) argued that cynicism will vary from one organization to another, but for HR practitioners the

issue is the extent to which cynical experiences learned in one organization will be carried over to another. Cynicism that is carried into a new organization has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of involvement as a management strategy, especially in organizations with a high level of turnover.

A number of threats to the effectiveness of involvement as a tool for managing OCC have been identified. Clark, Ellett, Bateman, and Rugutt (1996) pointed out that the level of OCC is higher when individuals’ self-interest is threatened and is lower when there is no threat to self-interest. Therefore, the nature of the change appears to be significant. O’Brien et al. (2004) have suggested that the status of the employees affected by change is important. They argued that organizations have difficulty getting low-status employees to identify with the organization and exert effort on behalf of it. This, they said, has rational foundations. Since low-status employees are less likely to share in any material dividends, they sense that key decisions are not under their control and, as a result, they are suspicious of management and its motives (p. 40). Either approach to managing OCC could be undermined by the type of change program. Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) reported that organizations are more likely to repeat previous change experiences, but if these experiences were bad for employees they may develop “immunity” to involvement practices intended to manage their OCC.

It is important to recognize an alternative view of the relationship between information sharing and employee involvement in decision making. Some writers have argued that these two approaches are different points on a continuum (Cressey, Eldridge, & MacInnes, 1985). Although this is theoretically plausible, this view fails to take into account the motives behind the choice of approach—that is, they differ in their ideological perspective (Marchington, Goodman, Wilkinson, & Ackers, 1992). Information sharing has been seen as a system to increase management control by creating the impression that control has been devolved to employees (Teicher, 1992), while involvement in decision making involves a shift in the balance of power in the

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*A number of writers, however, have suggested that some cynicism is good for organizations, for it can provide a mechanism to monitor potentially bad decisions.*

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employment relationship and implies that management trusts its employees. Employees and their representatives have traditionally favored involvement in decision making, while management has typically expressed a preference for the retention of managerial control through information-sharing approaches (Collom, 2003).

### *Limitations and Future Research*

The context and the methodology may be limitations of our study. The public-sector context might be seen as a limitation of the study, as it has traditionally reported a higher level of intrinsic motivation than its private-sector counterparts (Crewson, 1997). Higher intrinsic motivation could potentially translate into greater employee interest in all forms of involvement than in a private-sector organization. On the other hand, the widespread introduction of private-sector management techniques into the public sector (Bray, Deery, Walsh, & Waring, 2005) may have reduced these differences in motivation.

Unionization is typically higher in the public sector than in the private sector, and this could have some bearing on our findings. (In our study, 48% of respondents were union members.) OCC derives from employee experiences in the workplace, and union membership provides expanded opportunities to learn more about management and past change initiatives. Union members have access to a broader information base (for example, outcomes of change programs in comparable workplaces) than non-union employees do and may provide alternative interpretations of management's

motives. In our study, the descriptive statistics suggest that union members are more cynical (Table II). In the multivariate analysis, the union variable is nonsignificant in Table IV (information sharing, Steps 2 and 3) but is positive and significant in Table V (decision making, Steps 2 and 3). Therefore, the presence of an opposition group may contribute to OCC, an issue that should be taken up by future researchers.

Our methodology may have understated the extent of OCC. Eaton and Struthers (2002) compared employee reports of cynicism collected through an Internet survey with those from a paper-and-pencil survey. They found that an Internet sample provided more severe or harsh responses on cynicism than the paper-and-pencil test: "It is possible that those in the Internet sample felt that they had more anonymity, and hence felt that they could be more candid in their responses" (p. 311). Future researchers might need to consider a variety of ways to collect data on negative employee attitudes.

Cynicism is now a feature of organizational life, and the present study finds that employee involvement can be a useful tool for managing levels of OCC. This is particularly the case in workplaces where employees are willing to actively participate in the process. The challenge for organizations is to design and maintain high-quality involvement.

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