

# How does human relations climate and organizational support affect readiness to change? The mediating role of employee participation and leadership excellence

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## Abstract

The emerging competitiveness in the external environment and persistent need for adaptation have led organizations to recognize the essence of successful readiness to change. While individual and organizational outcomes of readiness to change have been discussed in the existing literature, a lack of clarity exists regarding how individuals embrace readiness for change. Using the social exchange theory, this empirical research examines the impact of perceived organizational support and human relations climate on individual readiness for change. The research also incorporates the intervening role of employee participation and leadership excellence for understanding the indirect effects. Hypotheses regarding the relationship between the key variables were tested through a structural equation model on a sample consisting of 284 respondents from managerial-level employees in organizations from Pakistan. The findings suggested a positive impact of human relations climate on readiness to change. In addition to the direct effects, indirect effects via employee participation and leadership excellence were found to be significant on readiness to change. Based on the findings, theoretical and practical implications of the study along with suggestions for improvement are also elaborated.

## KEYWORDS

employee participation, human relations climate, leadership excellence, perceived organizational support, readiness to change

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Emerging trends, growing competitiveness and technological advancements in recent years have led to drastic changes in organizations' management and ways of work (Campbell, 2021). Consequently, organizations have engaged in proactive initiatives for effectively managing their change mechanisms (Stouten et al., 2018). In this regard, one of the major drivers of the change process is the incorporation of conducive work culture in organizations so that employees become willing to go beyond

their comfort zones and embrace changes (Atshan et al., 2022; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Readiness to change refers to the capability of individuals to positively perceive and respond to new changes and has been identified as a key factor of success, especially after Covid-19 when a large majority of employees are required to work in dynamic and flexible work arrangements (Novitasari et al., 2020). While a reasonable understanding exists regarding the essence of readiness to change and how it leads to a positive impact on organizational performance (e.g. Gigliotti et al., 2019; Naotunna & Arachchige, 2016; Soumyaja

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et al., 2018), there has been inadequate understanding regarding how organizational factors interact with individual factors and facilitate employees in accepting such changes.

Overall, acceptance of changes by employees and successful change management is deeply influenced by organizational support factors (e.g. Labrague & De los Santos, 2020; Ming-Chu & Meng-Hsiu, 2015; Naotunna & Arachchige, 2016). In this regard, perceived organizational support and human relations climate psychologically facilitates employees in improving their connectivity with organizations (Abdullah & AL-Abrow, 2023; Cafferkey et al., 2019; Kurtessis et al., 2017) and have been identified as key drivers of readiness to change in some literature (Arneguy et al., 2020; Nazir et al., 2019). Moreover, one of the recent studies has focused on understanding the linkage between perceived organizational support and communication effectiveness (Vercic, 2021). Despite having an understanding regarding the role of drivers which impacts employees' readiness to change, an insufficient body of literature has focused on the underlying mechanism which links organizational support factors and a conducive environment with readiness to change (e.g. Arneguy et al., 2020; Gigliotti et al., 2019). Alongside above, some literature has also focused on the antecedent role of managerial leadership (Giudici & Filimonau, 2019; Tuffour et al., 2019), and has focused on the important role of leaders' support in organizational and employees' success (e.g. Asbari et al., 2021; Lassoued et al., 2020; Qureshi et al., 2021). This literature has offered sufficient guidance regarding the positive outcomes of a leader's support on trust development between members and eventual performance outcomes (Islam, 2023; Islam, Khan et al., 2020). Overall, there has been a consensus in the literature regarding the essential role of leaders' support and proactivity in employees' and organizational success (Nicholson & Odom, 2019), however, recent literature has suggested exploring whether and how managers develop leadership competencies and behaviors as a result of working in a conducive environment (e.g. Giudici & Filimonau, 2019; Tuffour et al., 2019), which remains a relatively less-examines area of research.

Overall, the social exchange perspective, which focuses on the role of high-quality interactions and exchange on individualized outcomes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), provides a useful framework for developing a linkage between organizational support factors, change experiences of individuals and eventual readiness to change. Using the social exchange theory, it is argued that there is a direct positive relationship between organizational support factors, managerial leadership excellence and organizational outcomes (Begum & Mujtaba, 2016; Kazmi et al., 2021). Moreover, the presence of support factors

improves the motivation of employees and enables them to openly participate in organizational decision-making. The presence of support factors also leads to the development of leadership excellence among employees (Vandergoot et al., 2019). Thus, employee participation and consequent development of leadership excellence among managers are likely to be indirectly linked with readiness to change via organizational support factors along with direct relationships.

To understand the relevance of organizational support factors, leadership characteristics and readiness to change, this research explores the relationship in the context of Pakistan. The context of Pakistan provides a novel angle, as Pakistan's work culture is distinctly diverse (De Clercq et al., 2020; Nadeem & de Luque, 2020), as people value in-group collectivism and prefer working in cohesive groups. Work-life balance is one of the major characteristics of Pakistani culture, as most people try to maintain a simultaneous balance between personal relationships and work responsibilities. A unique feature of Pakistani culture is the slow pace of life and the inclination of people toward well-being and internal satisfaction compared to materialism (Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018). Overall, these cultural values and beliefs also impact employees' ways of management and their approach toward work goals, as loyalty and integrity are embedded in the culture of organizations in Pakistan (Khilji, 2003; Nadeem & de Luque, 2020). Another reason behind the focus of the study on Pakistan is the recent shift in organizations' approach to work. Pakistan has experienced several socio-economic changes as the nation switched from a west dependence to a strong alliance with China. With the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative came heavy investments from China (Nadeem & de Luque, 2020). Consequently, the work environment and leadership styles are changing in Pakistan, as organizations' ways of management and leadership styles keep in tune with changes and expectations dictated by new investments (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). These changes have been noticed in the work culture of organizations in various industries of Pakistan (e.g. Bari et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2022), especially in the manufacturing, construction and technology sectors as Chinese companies have invested heavily in these industries (Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018). Owing to the mentioned changing work dynamics in Pakistan's context and the lack of clarity about employees' work dynamics, this study examines the relationship between organizational support factors and individual readiness for change. Moreover, this paper also examines the indirect effects of employee participation and leadership excellence.

Following are the key contributions of this article to the body of knowledge. First, this research has focused on the simultaneous role of organizational support

factors and individual factors (i.e. perceived organizational support and human relations climate), which provides a holistic angle for understanding how employees experience readiness to change. Further, the results supported the direct relationship between human relations climate and readiness to change as well as offered significant results for the indirect impact of these variables on readiness to change. These results are consistent with the existing literature, which offers an important role of perceived organizational support in employees' change experiences (e.g. Ming-Chu & Meng-Hsiu, 2015) as well as extend understanding of the simultaneous importance of individual and organizational support for employees. Second, along with organizational and individual support factors, the role of leadership excellence was also integrated into this research to reflect how managers are likely to develop positive leadership competencies after experiencing a conducive work environment. In line with expectations, findings suggested a significant intermediate role of leadership excellence, thus offering a novel perspective regarding how organizations may encourage the development of new competencies in employees over time. Finally, while most of the existing literature has focused on the essential role of leadership in management literature, limited literature has integrated the comprehensive role of leadership excellence (e.g. Selvarajah, Meyer & Dahanayake, 2020; Selvarajah, Meyer, Jayakody & Sukunesan, 2020). Thus, the integration of leadership excellence with the readiness to change experiences has facilitated an understanding of how managers develop leadership behaviours' after working in a conducive work environment.

The subsequent sections of the article are structured as follows: First, a brief review of the relevant variables along with proposed relationships has been presented. Afterward, the methodology of the research has been elaborated followed by key statistical approaches and findings. Theoretical and practical implications of the research along with future research suggestions are offered in the final section.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on the work culture in Pakistan, direct as well as indirect relationships of perceived organizational support and human relations climate with readiness to change are proposed in this section. Moreover, the intervening role of employee participation and managerial excellence leadership are also hypothesized in their relationship (Figure 1).

### 2.1 | Relating perceived organizational support and human relations climate with readiness to change

Perceived organizational support refers to the individual's belief that their organizations value their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). According to organizational support theory, perceived organizational support is developed by employees' tendency to give their organizations humanlike characteristics. In keeping with reciprocity expectations, strong organizational support will likely create an obligation to care about the organization's welfare and objectives (Labrague & De los Santos, 2020; Le & Lei 2019). Research on perceived organizational support provides evidence that employees tend to believe organizations have a generally positive or negative orientation towards them regarding both their contributions and their well-being (Han et al., 2019; Maan et al., 2020; Nazir et al., 2019; Saleem & Amin, 2013). Based on the presence of high cohesiveness and integration in Pakistani organizations, Nazir et al. (2019) are of the view that positive organizational support leads to an improvement in innovative work behaviour as well. Moreover, some of the recent literature also suggests a positive linkage between perceived organizational support and readiness to change (e.g. Akgunduz et al., 2018; Arneguy et al., 2020; Gigliotti et al., 2019). Thus, the expectation is that perceived organizational support may play an essential role in the change process and positively impact readiness to change in Pakistani managers. Based on the above discussion, Hypothesis 1 is proposed.

**Hypothesis 1.** *Perceived organizational support has a positive impact on readiness to change.*

Along with the perceived organizational support, the literature identifies the essential role of human relations, which refers to high levels of cohesion among employees (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). Further, it reflects shared perceptions of high morale and motivation which enhances internal focus and flexibility among individuals. Overall, the human relations climate helps in developing positive work relationships and a balance of professionalism among colleagues (Kuenzi, 2008). The human relations model is often referred to as clan culture, where organizations are committed to the employees and facilitate open communication and employee involvement (Myklebust et al., 2020) Overall, the literature guides that the human relations climate improves morale and motivation among employees and encourages employees to share novel ideas, values and practices in organizations (Kirrane et al., 2017; Myklebust et al., 2020; Soumyaja et al., 2018). It has thus

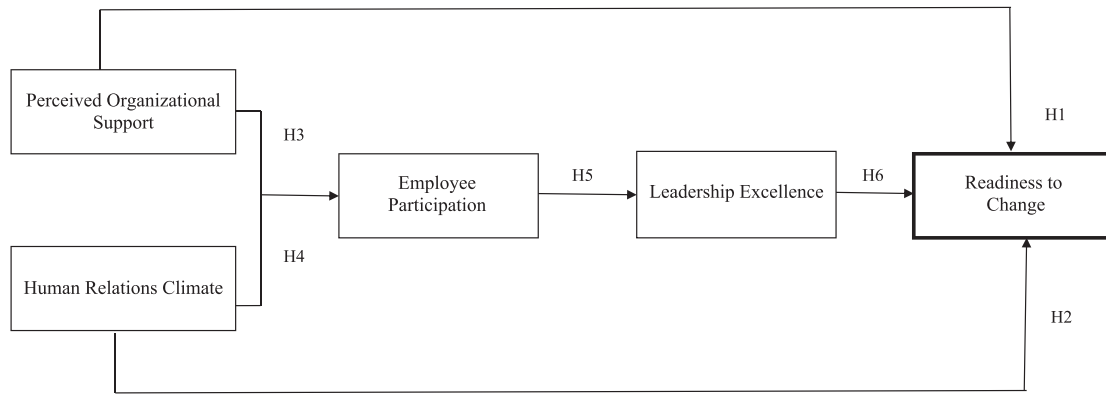


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework linking organizational leadership support with readiness to change.

been identified as one of the crucial drivers of readiness to change in organizations. This factor is especially relevant with regard to Pakistan's context because collectivism and strong social bonds are key features of Pakistani culture (Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018) and facilitate understanding the essential role of human relation values in Pakistani work culture and conducive performance of employees (Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). In-group collectivism facilitates the improvement of the cross-cultural learning of members and helps individuals in embracing new changes (Quratulain et al., 2018). A human relations climate that fosters trust creates an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. This can lead to a more supportive approach to change, and employees are more likely to be proactive in seeking out new opportunities and embracing changes (Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019; Soumyaja et al., 2018). Hence, it is expected that the human relations climate will positively impact readiness to change in employees and the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Human relations climate has a positive impact on readiness to change.*

## 2.2 | Relating perceived organizational support and human relations climate with employee participation

A large body of management literature develops a linkage between organizational support factors and individual outcomes (e.g. Eisenberger et al., 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). In this regard, the literature focuses on the role of perceived organizational support and guides that these perceptions facilitate in reducing the turnover intention of employees and improving their overall involvement in organizations (Allen et al., 2003). Similarly, literature has also argued that perceived organizational support positively impacted employees' sense of obligation and

increased their participation in various activities of the organizations (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Le & Lei, 2019). Further, from a social exchange perspective, perceived organizational support facilitates commitment and satisfaction among employees (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Nazir et al., 2019). It is argued that when employees perceive that their organization supports them, they are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction, which encourages them to participate in initiatives and activities that align with organizational goals and support their own personal and professional growth (Labrague & De los Santos, 2020; Meira & Hancer, 2021). Based on the above discussion, it is expected that perceived organizational support can improve employee participation. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3.** *Perceived organizational support has a positive impact on employee participation.*

Along with perceived organizational support, the human relations climate is another crucial factor that focuses on creating a conducive social atmosphere where employees are encouraged to participate in decision-making (Myklebust et al., 2020). Moreover, the human relations climate facilitates the development of employee-centered culture and leads to a range of individual outcomes for employees such as job satisfaction and high commitment (Cafferkey et al., 2019; Van Esch et al., 2018). Further, a positive human relations climate can lead to improved employee engagement because when employees feel that their work is valued and that they have a supportive environment, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their work, thus take an active role in supporting organizational goals Knight & Parker, 2021). A human relations climate that fosters transparency can encourage employee participation. When employees trust their organization and their colleagues, they are more likely to be willing to take on new challenges

and be more proactive in seeking out opportunities to contribute and participate in organizational initiatives (Ogbonnaya & Babalola, 2021). Overall, Pakistan's culture is collectivistic where employees work in a collaborative culture (Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018). Thus, it is expected that the human relations climate is likely to improve employee participation and involvement in organizations. Based on the above discussion, Hypothesis 4 is developed:

**Hypothesis 4.** *Human relations climate has a positive impact on employee participation.*

### 2.3 | Relating employee participation with leadership excellence

Several findings indicate that during times of change, the greater the extent of participation, the more satisfied employees tend to be, which improves their tendency to accept new changes (Li et al., 2017). As mentioned, much emphasis is placed on participative decision-making within organizations high on human relations values (Su et al., 2022). This is a term also known as involvement, empowerment, and industrial democracy. When employees actively participate in organizational initiatives and activities, they are more likely to be engaged in their work which leads to improved performance and higher levels of employee satisfaction, which can in turn contribute to the development of leadership skills and diverse experiences (Sendawula et al., 2018). Overall, high participation makes employees feel valued and helps them in connecting to a broader vision of organizations (Cafferkey et al., 2019; Qureshi et al., 2021; Shahzad et al., 2013). Bhatti and Qureshi (2007) suggest that, in Pakistan, valued employees perform better work than others who do not perceive themselves as valued. Hence, it is expected that employees' participation will lead to the development of leadership excellence in managerial employees, and the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 5.** *Employee participation has a positive impact on leadership excellence.*

### 2.4 | Relating leadership excellence with readiness to change

Leadership excellence model provides a strong basis for understanding and theorizing the unique role of organizational leadership. This model has identified four dimensions of an excellent leader, including personal, environmental, organizational and managerial qualities

(Selvarajah et al., 1995). These four components combine the characteristics from several angles and highlight the role of behaviors and attributes that are essential for leaders to bring about change. Readiness to change is conceptualized as an individual perception and reflects individuals' unique subjective perception of whether the organization is ready for a change or not (Rahman et al., 2022). Thus, this subjective perception is not necessarily shared by all employees in the same unit or workgroup (Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019). The literature guides that readiness to change is important because when employees are ready to change, they tend to display behaviors that are supportive of the organization's goals and objectives, and are more likely to be engaged and motivated (Asbari et al., 2021). On the other hand, employees who are resistant to change may display negative attitudes, low morale, and decreased performance. Also, employees who are ready to change are open to new ideas, are proactive in seeking solutions, and are more likely to embrace the challenges that come with change. As a result, they are more likely to perform better and contribute to the organization's success (Newman et al., 2018). Overall, readiness to change facilitates employees' individual work behavior as well as leads to a positive change in the mindset and psychology of employees, thus has been regarded as an important variable in the recent literature (e.g. Kirrane et al., 2017).

Alongside the above, employees are becoming proactive and engaged in their work environment in recent times (Faupel & Sub, 2019; Hameed et al., 2019; Islam, 2023). According to social exchange theory, employees are more likely to embrace change when they perceive that their leaders are providing them with rewards in exchange for their efforts. For example, if employees see that leaders are providing them with opportunities for growth, recognition, and support during the change process, they are more likely to embrace change and be positively impacted by it (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). On the other hand, if employees perceive that leaders are not providing them with sufficient rewards to compensate for the costs associated with the change process, they are likely to resist change (Ko & Hur, 2014). It is therefore expected that valued decision-making will lead to readiness to change in employees. Further, recent investments and the development of diverse culture has led to flexibility and open-mindedness in the culture of organizations (Hussain et al., 2018; Memon et al., 2020; Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018; Ramdas & Patrick, 2019). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 6.** *Leadership excellence has a positive impact on readiness to change.*

### 3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Sample and procedure

Data were collected from managerial-level employees working in various organizations in Pakistan in the telecommunication, and information technology sectors. The reason behind focusing on telecommunication and informational technology employees is the presence of role uniqueness which facilitate employees' learning in a dynamic and uncertain environment. Moreover, recent technological changes have led to increased diversity and flexible work culture in these sectors of Pakistan, thus has uniquely impacted employees' change experiences (Agha et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2019). Hence, data were collected from these sectors in Pakistan. Since most of the organizations switched to an online mode of work during Covid-19 in Pakistan, the research strategy involved the use of an online survey method for data collection. The researchers developed a six-page online questionnaire using a Google form. To overcome the challenges of the online data collection process concerning low response rate and weak quality of data, a pilot run survey was conducted, and a link to the questionnaire was initially forwarded to known participants to identify any potential problems in the online survey questionnaire. Based on the feedback from the ten respondents, the language of the questionnaire was simplified, and a dummy question was added to manage potential biases.

After finalizing the changes, the first author facilitated in conducting the field survey in Pakistan. The online questionnaire was administered in two phases. In phase 1, and a link to the questionnaire was initially forwarded to around 150 employees working in the telecommunication sector in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. For administering the process with precision and accuracy, the purposive sampling technique was used in line with the guidance of literature (Sharma, 2017) for two reasons. First, the research aimed to understand the experiences of managerial-level employees only, hence the purposive sampling technique facilitated targeting the right segment of employees from selected sectors (Campbell et al., 2020). Second, the use of the purposive sampling technique helped in identifying the respondents who volunteered to be a part of the research (Etikan et al., 2016). This has resulted in data collection from around 60 managers. Although frequent reminders were sent to the respondents to expedite the data collection process, the response rate remained very low (i.e. 40%). Hence, the researchers integrated the snowball sampling technique and accessed more managers through the social circle of respondents in phase 2 as recommended by Heckathorn (2011). The use of the snowball sampling technique facilitated data collection from several

cities in Pakistan hence helping generalize the findings across Pakistan. In phase 2, the link of the questionnaire was forwarded to around 650 respondents resulting in data collection from additional 214 managers; the response rate was 33%. Overall, data were collected from 284 working managers in four months.

#### 3.2 | Sample

The demographic statistics indicated that 58% males and 42% females participated in this study. Regarding the religion of respondents, a large majority of respondents (96%) were Muslims, while 4% were Christians. The average age of the respondents was under 40 (89%), 7% were in the age range 40–50 and 4% were above 50. About 52% of the respondents were working at middle management positions, 26% were line management and 22% were senior managers.

#### 3.3 | Measures

The survey questionnaire has 91 questions that were based on five constructs (perceived organizational support, human relations climate, employee participation, leadership excellence and readiness for change). All the questions were developed on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from '1 = low importance' to '5 = high importance'. The constructs are briefly explained:

*Perceived Organisational Support:* Perceived organizational support was measured using Lynch et al. (1999) 8-item survey of perceived organizational support. Following is a sample item: 'To be an excellent leader it is important that the organisation care about the well-being of its employees'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.772.

*Human Relations Climate:* Human relations climate was measured using an 8-item scale developed by Kuenzi (2008). Following is a sample item: 'To be an excellent leader it is important to have high morale among the staff in the organization'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.876.

*Employee Participation:* Employee participation was measured through a 5-item scale developed by Wilkinson and Dundon (2010). Following is a sample item: 'To be an excellent leader it is important for employees to receive sufficient information in advance of change'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.787.

*Leadership Excellence:* Leadership excellence was measured through a 72-item scale adopted from Selvarajah et al. (1995). Following is a sample item: 'To

*be an excellent leader it is important to treat most people as if they were trustworthy and honest'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.939.*

**Readiness to Change:** Readiness to change was measured using Vakola's (2014) 6-item readiness for change survey. Following is a sample item: *'To be an excellent leader it is important that when changes happen in my organization, I am ready to deal with them'. The Cronbach alpha was 0.784.*

Along with the above, demographic questions such as age, gender and religion were also included in the questionnaire to understand the demographic characteristics of the sample and to understand their potential impact on the model. Following this, control tests including an independent sample *t*-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to evaluate the impact of demographic variables on the model as recommended in the literature (Becker, 2005). The findings did not suggest a significant impact of gender ( $F = 2.51$ , ns), religion ( $F = 1.34$ , ns), or age ( $F = 0.073$ , ns) on the dependent variable. Therefore, as there was no significant impact, these demographics variables were not included in subsequent statistical analysis.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Confirmatory factor analysis

To establish the validity of all the constructs, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted and multiple fit indices including Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI) and Chi-square statistic (CMIN/df) were analyzed. Initially, pilot testing was conducted after data collection from 30 respondents for evaluating the validity of the scales. Based on low factor loadings for some of the items, those items were removed before subsequent analysis for maintaining rigor and accuracy in findings. For discriminant validity, a five-factor model [POS; HRC; EP; EIL; RTC] was tested in which all five variables were treated as independent constructs. Afterwards, a one-factor model [POS+HR+EP+EIL+RTC] was tested in which items of all the variables were loaded on a single construct. In line with the expectations, the findings suggested that a five-factor model fitted data well [CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.04; GFI = 0.91; AGFI = 0.89; NFI = 0.88; CMIN/df = 2.08] in comparison with a one-factor model [CFI = 0.66; RMSEA = 0.12; GFI = 0.61; AGFI = 0.58; NFI = 0.65; CMIN/df = 4.12]. Further, factor loadings of all items were above 0.70 on their respective factors in a five-factor model.

Table 1 provides the details of the descriptive and correlation analysis. The findings suggested a moderate positive association of perceived organizational support with readiness to change ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $\rho < 0.001$ ). Further, a strong positive association was found between human relations climate and readiness to change ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $\rho < 0.001$ ). Finally, employee participation ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $\rho < 0.001$ ) and leadership excellence ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $\rho < 0.001$ ) were also positively linked with readiness to change. Overall, correlations were found to be significant at the 0.001 level; mean values were high for all scales, which indicated that all constructs were important in the leader's perception of organizational readiness for change.

### 4.2 | Model estimation

Structural equation modeling (SEM) is a useful method for regression analysis because it allows for the modeling of complex relationships between variables while still taking into account measurement error (Gefen et al., 2000). Also, it allows for the testing of theoretical models by assessing the fit between the observed data and the specified model, making it a powerful tool for testing theories and hypotheses (Hayes et al., 2017). Thus, SEM was conducted to test the regression results in this study. AMOS software was used for conducting path analysis for the proposed model. overall, perceived organizational support and human relations climate predicted 68.8% and 29.8% change in the model respectively.

It was proposed in Hypothesis 1 that perceived organizational support has a positive impact on readiness to change. Contrary to the expectations, the findings suggested insignificant results ( $\beta = 0.070$ , ns), hence Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Hypothesis 2 proposed a positive impact of human relations climate on readiness to change in employees. In line with the expectations, the results suggested a positive impact ( $\beta = 0.483$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), hence Hypothesis 2 was accepted. In Hypothesis 3 and 4, it was proposed that perceived organizational support and human relations climate positively impacts employee participation, respectively. In line with the expectations, the findings suggested a positive impact of perceived organizational support ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and human relations climate ( $\beta = 0.457$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) on employee participation, therefore Hypotheses 3 and 4 were accepted. It was proposed in Hypothesis 5 that employee participation leads to leadership excellence. Data supported the hypothesis ( $\beta = 0.297$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was accepted. Finally, a direct relationship between leadership excellence and readiness to change was proposed in Hypothesis 6. The results suggested a positive impact of leadership excellence on readiness to change ( $\beta = 0.288$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),

**TABLE 1** Descriptive and correlation analysis ( $N = 284$ ).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived organizational support	4.07	0.83	–				
2. Human relations climate	4.44	0.56	0.37	–			
3. Employee participation	4.20	0.66	0.57	0.53	–		
4. Leadership excellence	4.26	0.82	0.36	0.49	0.49	–	
5. Readiness to change	4.36	0.67	0.29	0.41	0.42	0.43	–

Note: All correlations significant at 0.001 level **\*\***(2-tailed).

**TABLE 2** Regression results of path analysis.

Structural path	Estimate	p-value	Result
Perceived Organizational Support → Readiness to change	0.070	0.097	H1: Not supported
Human Relations Climate → Readiness to change	0.483	0.000	H2: Supported
Perceived Organizational Support → Employee participation	0.345	0.000	H3: Supported
Human Relations Climate → Employee participation	0.457	0.000	H4: Supported
Employee Participation → Leadership Excellence	0.297	0.000	H5: Supported
Leadership Excellence → Readiness to change	0.288	0.002	H6: Supported

hence, Hypothesis 6 was accepted. Along with the significant direct effects for most of the hypotheses, the results of the indirect effects indicated around 3% and 3.9% change in readiness to change through perceived organizational support and human relations climate, respectively. The statistical results of path analysis are presented in Table 2.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study has examined antecedents of readiness to change from the managers' perspective. Moreover, it has identified the intervening role of employee participation and leadership excellence in this model. This research contributes to organizational behavior and international business literature in several ways, which have been briefly elaborated on in this section.

First, a direct impact of perceived organizational support on readiness to change was proposed in Hypothesis 1. Contrary to expectations, the results did not support this proposition. While some literature has developed a positive linkage between perceived organizational support and readiness to change (e.g. Nazir et al., 2019), most of the above literature exists in the Western context. Based on the drastic differences between the Asian and Western contexts, the insignificant nature of this relationship may be explained in light of the Asian culture. Although organizational support factors are considered essential in the work environment of Asian organizations (e.g. Islam, Furuoka et al., 2021; Islam, Khan et al., 2020; Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018), there is a possibility that perceived orga-

nizational support might have led to a positive impact on the job performance and satisfaction of employees (e.g. Wen et al., 2019), it may not always be related to readiness to change as readiness to change can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as the nature of the change, the reasons for the change, and the potential outcomes of the change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019; Seville, Van Opstal & Vargo, 2015). Thus, perceived organizational support may not be the most important driver for employees in this research. Also, perceived organizational support may not immediately impact readiness to change, as it can take time for employees to internalize the support they receive and translate it into action. As a result, the relationship between perceived organizational support and change readiness may be more complex than a linear relationship. In view of the above, the use of longitudinal research designs and curvilinear relationships might offer a comprehensive understanding of such relationships. Also, there might be the presence of some veiled conditional factors between perceived organizational factors and readiness to change whose absence might have led to insignificant results. Future researchers are suggested to incorporate the role of conditional factors such as leader-member exchange for deepening an understanding of the nature of the above relationship. Further, some of the items were removed from perceived organizational support and readiness to change scales due to low factor loadings during pilot testing, which might have led to some inconsistencies in results, hence the use of full-version scales of these variables might facilitate researchers in understanding this relationship.



Second, a direct relationship between human relations climate and readiness to change was proposed in Hypothesis 2. This study has highlighted human relations climate as the most important construct supporting readiness for change. It has both a direct and an indirect effect on the organizational readiness for change. In line with the literature, these findings provide support for high morale and conducive work culture as important characteristics for managers to prepare for organizational change (Alnoor, Al-Abrrow, Abdullah & Abbas, 2020). Since human relations climate is an important area of research, future researchers may further deepen an understanding of the role of human relations climate by investigating the role of specific dimensions. In this regard, the role of trust, openness, collaboration and authenticity may be integrated for developing a holistic understanding of the human relations climate on readiness to change.

Third, while perceived organizational support did not directly contribute to readiness for change, the results provided support regarding the impact of perceived organizational support on employee participation and supported Hypothesis 3. Thus, perceived organizational support has an important function in Pakistani organizations in improving employee participation. This study confirms other research such as Nazir et al. (2019) and Saleem and Amin (2013) that have confirmed positive relationships between perceived organizational support and employee participation. Further, a good human relations climate is viewed by Pakistani managers as important for getting employees to participate (Hypothesis 4). Future researchers may deepen an understanding of the above relationships through the integration of qualitative research methods for understanding how the above organizational support factors encourage the development of changes in the mind-set of employees. The use of exploratory qualitative research approaches, for example in-depth interviews might facilitate future researchers in identifying the role of additional organizational support factors.

Fourth, the respondents have also viewed employee participation as having a positive influence on leadership excellence as proposed in Hypothesis 5. Also, the findings suggested a positive impact of leadership excellence on readiness to change (Hypothesis 6). Despite the presence of a large body of literature on the essential role of leadership in the organizational change process (e.g. Mumtaz & Rowley, 2020), a comprehensive model of leadership in excellence was integrated with the limited literature (e.g. Selvarajah, Meyer et al., 2020, 2020b). Thus, the integration of this research and the above findings adds contributions by focusing on the role of leadership excellence, and how managers develop leaders' characteristics over time. Based on the importance of this area and its focus on multiple

dimensions, future researchers are suggested to investigate the role of various dimensions of the leadership excellence model for deepening an understanding in this domain. In this regard, the integration of factors such as decision-making, environmental factors, organizational demand, management style and personal qualities would facilitate researchers in understanding the relative importance of these dimensions in this model.

Finally, this research also adds contextual contributions by developing a deep understanding of the readiness to change processes in the Asian context. Additionally, the study has provided insights into how collectivistic culture in organizations and similar beliefs facilitate employees in embracing positive changes. In order to comprehensively understand the role of cultural differences in the organizational context, future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies to understand the individualized change experiences of employees in the Asian and Western contexts, and how unique work systems support or prohibit employees in the work context.

## 5.1 | Managerial implications

Based on the findings of this research, this section offers some practical implications to organizations regarding ways to effectively manage their work environment. The findings of the research suggest an essential role of organizational support factors, especially human relations climate, and how conducive work culture positively impacts managerial outcomes in Pakistani organizations. Overall, the results emphasized the importance of discussion and the creation of collaborative work culture for the motivation and well-being of employees. Based on the above, it is suggested that organizations should develop a work culture and environment after understanding the unique needs of their employees for successfully managing organizational change processes. In this regard, human resource departments are advised to take feedback from employees regarding their expectations and incorporate new values in their culture accordingly. Further, the findings reflected an essential role of employee participation in readiness to change. Thus, the use of collaborative decision-making and increased participation by employees is likely to be beneficial in improving employees' acceptance of changes, their performance as well as organizations' goals achievement. In this regard, employees at top management should take the input of employees at multiple levels and involve them in decision-making to fully understand their expectations regarding what constitutes a conducive work environment.

Alongside the above, the findings highlighted the essential role of leadership excellence and its role in developing

readiness to change in managers. This finding is important in that greater effort should be pursued to create improved leadership practices in organizations, especially in the South Asian context as there are several similarities in the work culture and employees' mind-sets in these countries (Irfan, 2016). Moreover, most South Asian countries are experiencing drastic changes in their work culture and ways of work in recent times owing to increased foreign investments (e.g. Gong, 2019; Jain, 2018). Thus, these findings would offer guidance to managers in understanding changing expectations of employees, and factors that facilitate employees in embracing positive changes. Finally, based on the importance of organizational and individual factors in readiness to change, organizations are recommended to develop diverse teams, where employees can work in collaboration and easily adapt to new changes. Working in such teams would help improve the frequency of communication between the two groups, hence might reduce barriers to interaction and improve the work relationships between employees.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This study has included organizational and individual support factors when measuring the preparedness of the organization's readiness for change. The preparedness is measured using perceived organizational support and human relations climate. Moreover, the intervening role of employee participation and leadership excellence was also investigated in the model. This study has highlighted that though human relations climate has a direct relationship with organizational readiness for change, its association with organizational readiness to change has a much stronger relationship through managerial leadership. Further, perceived organizational support was found to be indirectly linked with readiness to change as well.

### 6.1 | Key takeaways

The study is particularly referenced to Pakistani organizations and would be especially useful for Asian organizations which have increasingly seen business investments from multiple other countries. Thus, as the nation prepares for social and economic shifts that usually come with strong foreign influences, Asian organizations will have to be ready to change and embrace consistent changes in their work environment. In this regard, organizations must develop a conducive work culture where employees can flexibly interact and meet work goals. The provision of organizational support is likely to help employees in embracing positive changes in their attitude and behav-

ior, and eventually improve their readiness towards new changes.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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