

The process by which executives unlearn their attachments in order to facilitate change

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Abstract

Unlearning an attachment has become a critical change competence for executives. Although attachment behaviour in the workplace is ubiquitous, there is a scarcity of empirical research on the processes executives follow in order to release their dysfunctional attachments to systems, routines, ideas, divisions and certain members of staff. By unlearning attachments, executives can embrace new concepts, methods and processes and thereby enable their organisations to be more competitive. This qualitative research investigated executives' experiences of unlearning an attachment, through the pre-unlearning, unlearning and post-unlearning phases. A de jure model was formulated from concepts that emerged during the literature review and this model was the basis of in-depth interviews with 10 change experts and 10 executives who had unlearned attachments. The executives and change experts shared real-life experiences during each of the unlearning phases. The findings informed a de facto model of the experiences of executives unlearning their attachments. This process model makes a theoretical contribution by depicting the major types of attachments, influences on, processes of, actions required by and outcome of the executives' unlearning. The model should contribute to change practitioners' facilitation of executives' unlearning processes and executives' insights into their own attachments.

Key words: attachment, unlearning, executive, release, change

1 Introduction

Change is inevitable. Unfortunately, executives often unwittingly reinforce systemic patterns, causing organisations to remain stuck and unable to implement change (Higgs & Rowland 2010). Nkomo and Kriek (2011) emphasise the imperatives caused by South Africa's sociopolitical changes and the subsequent impact on executives. Akgün, Byrne, Lynn and Keskin (2007) argue that owing to the rapid and unpredictable changes that occur in the business environment, core organisational competencies can become core rigidities capable of hindering an organisation's ability to compete.

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Unlearning is therefore critical as it makes it possible to alter inappropriate frameworks and responses. Releasing obsolete information facilitates the creation of new knowledge (Yang, Chou & Chiu 2014). Moreover, modifying long-standing ways of behaving, rules, frameworks and methods is critical for sustainable change (Becker 2008). Successful change therefore includes both learning new routines and discarding existing ones (Tsang & Zahra 2008). Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2004) emphasise that all learning is about how we interact in the world and the type of capacities that develop from our interactions. Zhao, Lu and Wang (2013) recognise that organisational unlearning begins with individual unlearning. Unfortunately, attachment behaviour is commonplace in today's workplaces (Grady & Grady 2013) and contributes to failed organisational change initiatives.

While current literature focuses on a range of change management processes, the aspect of unlearning an attachment deserves more attention and as a result the researchers investigated the intricacies of the actual unlearning process of executives, who are key to organisational success. This empirical study builds on the work of Braun (2011), Becker (2005), Tsang and Zahra (2008) and Grady and Grady (2013) and focuses on the component experiences of unlearning when releasing an attachment, the enabling behaviour and emotions experienced during the process and the outcomes of the process.

2 Literature review

This literature review comprises a number of themes. First, it discusses the phenomenon of attachment and being stuck, then goes on to discuss unlearning, the relation between individual and organisational unlearning and between the unlearning processes and change models and, finally, the effect of unlearning an attachment on organisational effectiveness.

2.1 Attachment and being stuck

Attachments are one of the major internal working models (Dykas & Cassidy 2011) that assist individuals throughout their lifespan to process and categorise information from their social environments. The literature on attachments was pioneered by Bowlby (1988), who found that attachments are experience-based mental representations of relationships which start to form in early childhood and serve many useful purposes in ordering one's world and determining one's responses to the world. Dykas and Cassidy (2011) found that attachments can be either qualitatively favourable or unfavourable and that as a result these mental functions are either adaptive or maladaptive information processing patterns. In maladaptive processing the individual processes knowledge in a negative, biased schematic way.

Braun (2011:123) states: "All individuals bring to the organisation attachment patterns which become part of what happens unconsciously between people, in relation to tasks, creativity and innovation." He identifies three types of attachment in organisations, namely attachment to a system, a work activity or a person. He found that increased complexity in the organisation's internal or external operating environment increases insecurity, which leads to enhanced attachment behaviour as individuals become more dependent on familiar internal working models. Grady and Grady (2013) say that executives are faced with continuous pressure and complexity, and that this strengthens attachments to familiar internal models which provide a sense of security. This article focuses on maladaptive, dysfunctional attachments. Braun

(2011) says that in an ever-changing globalised environment it is important to attach to the future and to let go of current attachments, to enable the organisation to survive. Richards and Schat (2011) emphasise that attachment theory has received attention in social sciences but that there has been a lack of empirical research in the form of organisational behaviour studies.

Stuckness refers to the concept of keeping to one's dysfunctional attachments despite evidence that another approach may be preferred. Higgs and Rowland (2010) observe that the outcome of numerous change initiatives is "stuckness", either at the decision-action or action-result stage. According to Kahn (2003), if organisation movement fails to take place, individuals remain caught in ineffective working patterns that contribute to poor work activities and output. There are various origins of stuckness, such as the history, culture, ineffective structures, policies, intergroup relations and bureaucracy of the organisation (Kahn 2003). Various researchers acknowledge that stuckness usually occurs in situations of conflicting needs, paradoxical motives or coexisting opposites (Bishop & Dzidic 2014; Browne & Bishop 2011; Higgs & Rowland 2010).

2.2 Unlearning

Unlearning is distinct from forgetting. Where unlearning involves the purposeful discarding of practices, forgetting refers to the loss of practices from organisational memory. Forgetting could, for example, lead to a loss of customers and could therefore be dysfunctional (De Holan, Phillips & Lawrence 2004; Yang et al 2014). Azmi (2008) defines unlearning as an intentional, active and planned attempt towards strategic rethinking and forgetting. It is a conscious decision to clear out knowledge that produced insufficient outcomes. Consequently unlearning is the basis of building new capacities and capabilities in the changing business environment. It allows organisations to adapt to new environments and produce innovations (Yang et al 2014). Unlearning incorporates both behavioural and cognitive dimensions. Cegarra-Navarro, Sánchez-Vidal and Cegarra-Leiva (2011) made the connection between Lewin's three-step change model and the individual forgetting process.

Unlearning at an organisational level requires unlearning at the individual level as organisations will only change through the actions of the unlearning individual (Tsang & Zahra 2008). However, unlearning may cause frustration and stress as it requires an individual to risk part of what has already been learned (Azmi 2008). It also threatens leaders as they may view their security and control in terms of unchanged routines, partly because they gained authority in the context of this belief system (Tsang & Zahra 2008). Becker (2010) warns that these routines create inertia within organisations and lead to inhibition of learning and innovation. Regrettably, top managers often believe that they are acting wisely while they are in fact regularly misled by their internalised faulty beliefs and perceptions (Nystrom & Starbuck 1984). If they are to lead organisational change they are often required to unlearn these attachments. In this regard, Ibara, Snook and Ramo (2010) argue that this form of leadership development involves painful unlearning and identity loss, because leaders have to spend less time and energy on activities and relationships that have defined their professional identity up to that point.

Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) argue that cognitive structures manifest themselves in perceptual frameworks, expectations, world views, plans and goals. Not only do these cognitive structures shape the leader's own actions, they strongly influence the

organisation's actions. Interestingly, the reverse might not be true, where the organisational unlearning might not influence the individual's unlearning (Tsang & Zahra 2008). Researchers such as Cegarra-Navarro and Dewhurst (2006), Cegarra-Navarro and Moya (2005), as well as Cegarra-Navarro and Sanchez-Polo (2008) emphasise the importance of discarding old ways of thinking and behaving and disbanding existing cognitive patterns, especially when these historic problems are preventing the achievement of new outcomes.

Becker (2010) identifies factors that influence individual unlearning, such as the outlook of the individual prior to the change, emotions such as apprehension and discomfort, the individual's ability to unlearn and accommodate the new, as well as the history of both the individual and the organisation around adapting to change. However, Zhao, Lu and Wang (2013) find that individual ability to eliminate outdated knowledge and routines is fundamental in organisational learning and yet organisational success often causes organisations to emphasise routine efficiencies, to become growth-complacent and learn too little. To prevent this, Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) go as far as to recommend that organisations remove top management to erase past learning and become more receptive to new ideas. It is evident that unlearning plays a crucial role in organisational change, particularly when current knowledge is perceived as a barrier to newly acquired knowledge (De Holan 2011).

Consequently, the elimination of memory via disconfirmation and changing the way memory is manifested are common themes in the unlearning discipline (Akgün et al 2007). Becker (2010) identifies the individual and organisational factors that enable and inhibit unlearning. At the individual level the factors are depth and breadth of experience, personality and resistance to change; the organisational-level factors include type of change, organisational infrastructure, informal leaders, culture as well as training and support. Zhao et al (2013) also emphasise the connection between individual, group and organisational unlearning and the evolution of all three. However, Tsang and Zhara (2008) warn that intentional replacement of old with new learning does not guarantee improvement of performance or organisational effectiveness.

2.3 Comparison of change management models and their relevance to unlearning

Table 1 compares various seminal change models and shows their relationship to the unlearning of attachments. The shaded cells represent those parts of the models that relate to unlearning.

Table 1
Comparison of change management models and their relevance to unlearning

Kotter (1996)	Lewin (1951)	Bridges (1986)	Scharmer (2009)
Sense of urgency			Suspending
Guiding coalition			Redirecting
Developing vision	Unfreeze	Letting go	Letting go
Communicating vision	Movement	Neutral zone	Presencing
Empowering for broad-based action			Crystallising
Generating short-term gains			Prototyping
Consolidating gains and producing more change	Refreeze	New beginning	Performing
Anchoring in culture			

Organisational change often embodies unlearning. Kotter's (1996) eight-step model includes the first step of creating a sense of urgency, which emphasises an identification of what needs to change and could be likened to the unlearning process's first phase. A classical theory of change Lewin (1951) laid the foundation of organisational development (Nasim & Sushil 2011). Lewin's stage of unfreezing could be compared to unlearning (Lewin 1951). Another seminal piece is Bridges' (1986) framework and in this instance, the "letting go" phase resembles the release of an attachment. In addition, Sharmar's (2009) and Scharmer and Kaeufer's (2010) renowned work included a phase of "letting go": a threshold to allow the next phase, namely "letting come".

2.4 Effects on unlearning

The link between organisational effectiveness and individual unlearning is important. Individual unlearning is a catalyst for group and ultimately organisational unlearning. In cases where the unlearning is intentional, the replacement with new learning is not always better and therefore does not guarantee improvement in performance or organisational effectiveness (Tsang & Zahra 2008). At the individual level, various human errors and biases can occur. Tsang and Zahra (2008) point out that executives find it difficult to let go of attachments. Grady and Grady (2013) investigated the relationship between organisational loss of effectiveness during change processes and attachment behaviour of individuals. They show that during change, individuals who are required to unlearn attachments may show the symptoms of frustration, anxiety, withdrawal and refusal to participate. During these change processes there may be a loss of productivity, lowering of morale and motivation and increasing labour turnover and absenteeism.

3 Research aims

While the literature review covered a range of issues pertaining to the complexities of individual unlearning attachments, the actual process of an executive releasing an attachment to enable unlearning merits further focused research. Grady and Grady (2013) state that it is surprising how little empirical research has been conducted on attachment behaviour in the workplace. This study therefore explores the unlearning process of executives when releasing an attachment. The research questions were developed to explore the executives' attachment prior to the unlearning phase, the breaking point that leads to the unlearning, actions of the executive during the unlearning, the emotions experienced by the executives during the unlearning process and finally the perceived impact of the unlearning.

Research question 1:

What types of attachments were unlearned and what started the unlearning process?

Research question 2:

How do executives experience the actual unlearning process?

Research question 3:

What was the perceived impact of the unlearning?

4 Research method

4.1 Method

The researchers chose an in-depth qualitative explorative study as the appropriate method because the phenomenon of releasing an attachment during the unlearning process was little understood and the researchers had to discover categories or patterns of meaning (Saunders & Lewis 2012; Marshall & Rossman 2006). The qualitative face-to-face interviews allowed the researchers to delve deeply into the complexities and processes of human behaviour and experiences in real-life situations. It was essential to understand the meaning that executives assign to the process, as it involved thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptions. As Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) emphasise, qualitative investigation is an inductive process that allows the researchers to discover patterns, categories and interrelationships through the exploration of open questions.

4.2 The sample

The relevant population for the study consisted of two groups. The first group consisted of senior executives with experience of releasing an attachment through the unlearning process from large financial, manufacturing, civil society and media organisations in Gauteng. The second group was made up of change experts (both consultants and managers) who had observed executives releasing an attachment. They had an average of 12 years' experience in the field. It was decided that this triangulated approach would yield the most valid data. The 10 interviewees in each group were selected with the aid of a combination of non-probability quota sampling, to ensure that the sample represented the two groups equally, purposive sampling and snowball sampling, where sample members referred subsequent sample members who had shared similar experiences (Saunders & Lewis 2012). The interviewees were asked to describe sensitive personal experiences of the phenomenon, and therefore good communication skills, openness and interest in participating in the research were important when selecting interviewees (Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006). The unit of analysis was the accumulated experience of executives during the unlearning process.

4.3 Data collection

Weiss (2004) emphasises that in-depth interviewing illuminates events that occurred in the past, and provides clear descriptions of personal experiences. Asking people to describe a particular event has been defined as tapping into episodic memory (Flick 1997; Maxwell 2013). Each interview lasted about forty-five minutes; the interview was semi-structured to allow the interviewee an opportunity to revisit experiences during the different episodes of the unlearning process. The construct of attachment was explained at the outset and during the interviews the interviewees were referred to the *de jure* model to validate and extend the concepts around executives' unlearning processes.

Given the personal nature of the subject, the interviewer had to develop trust and rapport with the interviewees, allowing them to comfortably share their experiences. Two pilot interviews were conducted to ensure that the semi-structured interview guideline was appropriate and that relevant information was obtained. These led to the identification of limitations and challenges during the interview process and allowed changes to the process before the main study commenced. The twenty interviews were

recorded and the interviewer took detailed notes to ensure that the main themes had been covered to allow for coding, transcribing, editing and enhancement of the *de jure* model.

4.4 Data analysis

Content analysis was employed and took the form of grouping the data and exploring the frequencies and patterns manifested during the unlearning process. During data analysis a comparative approach was employed to compare responses from each sample group in terms of the unlearning of an attachment. Reliability was enhanced by standardising the interview guideline as far as possible across the two sample groups, regardless of some minor differences in wording to accommodate the different target audiences. Saunders and Lewis (2012) described data validity as the extent to which (1) data collection methods measure what they were intended to measure and (2) the research findings are trustworthy.

4.5 Research limitations

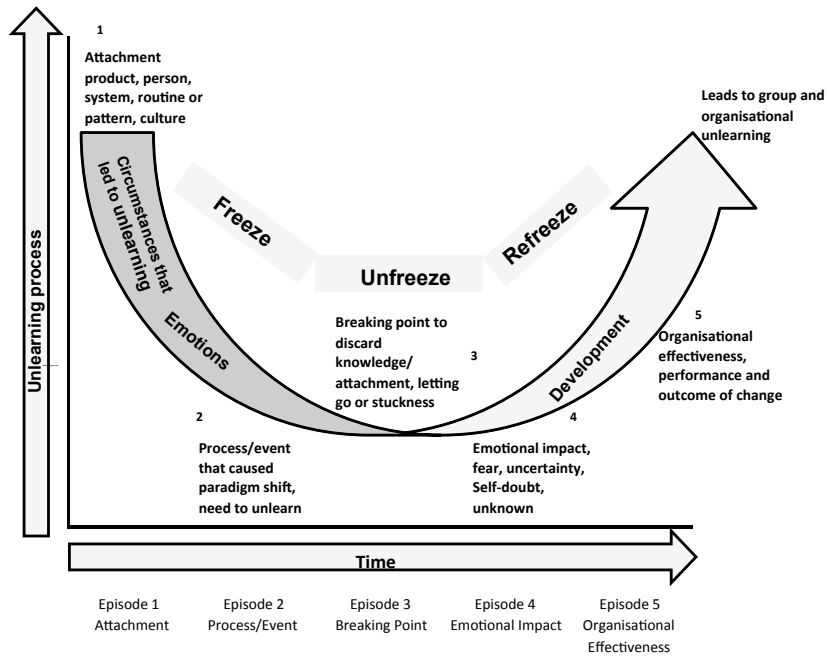
Given the nature of this research, researcher bias was possible; therefore the interviewer made every effort to pay attention to the perspectives and language of the interviewees as opposed to her own interpretation. Given the nature of the sample, the generalisability of the findings cannot be assured.

5 Findings

5.1 The *de jure* model of unlearning an attachment

The *de jure* model in Figure 1 developed from the literature review by the authors presents the unlearning curve on a two-dimensional graph. The development of this hypothetical model used the U-process of change by Scharmer (2009) as the starting point. The y-axis represents the amount of unlearning taking place and the x-axis represents time in the form of episodes. The model also used Lewin's (1951) work, the ideas of Cegarra-Navarro et al (2011) as well as Braun's (2011) findings. The model consists of five episodes that were linked to the interview and research questions. Importantly, the episodes present a linear movement and in many instances if no forward movement is present, the executive may experience the phenomenon of "stuckness". During each interview the interviewee was given the opportunity to share experiences of each episode of the model to uncover the experiences of the executives during the unlearning of an attachment in order to validate and extend the model. Thus, the *de jure* model acted as a stimulus to uncover the lived experience of executives. This enabled constructs to be identified, which is a hallmark of qualitative research.

Figure 1
De Jure model of the unlearning curve when releasing an attachment



Source: Author's own model

5.2 Findings for research question 1: What types of attachments did the executives have and what started the unlearning process?

The first interview question dealt with the types of attachments that executives had to unlearn. Table 2 illustrates the top ten types of attachments identified. All tables combine the data from the two samples.

Table 2
Types of attachments that had to be released

Rank	Types of attachments	Frequency N=20
1	Overall systems, routines and patterns	14
2	Past success and own robust formula	11
3	Company or division	9
4	Specialist promoted to manager – attached to old routines	7
5	Executives' self-identity	6
5	Belief systems	6
7	To particular people	5
7	Organisational structure	5
9	Country and national culture (expatriate assignments)	3
9	Attached to own legacy	3

The findings from the two subsamples were similar. The findings show that a wide range of types of attachments needed to be released. An interviewee indicated that he

had “developed all the systems over the past 10 years; it is like raising a child, parting from something very dear to you”. Another executive stated, “My entire career is built on this division; to let go is terrifying.” Another one asked, “How can I let go of my core competence; what will this mean for my identity going forward?” The change experts highlighted attachments relating to job changes, especially during promotion from a specialist role to a managerial role. Attachment to part of one’s identity was observed in many cases.

All interviewees indicated that the significance of the attachment was influenced by a deep emotional connection to some attachments. Thus the level of significance varied, for example founders of organisations and entrepreneurs had a deeper emotional connection to their attachments. The interview data revealed the significance of the level of the attachment in relation to the whole process, thereby illustrating that all attachments cannot be viewed similarly.

The findings for this question indicate two major sources of attachment, namely organisational systems and people’s self-perceptions. Attachments were formed through personal successes and personal history as well as through overall organisational systems that include routines and patterns. Both sample groups agreed that the dominant attachments within the workplace were to “overall systems, routines and patterns”. In the context of the existing literature these types of attachment support Braun’s (2011) proposition that all individuals bring to the organisation attachment patterns in relation to tasks, creativity and innovation. The literature states that people are attached to a person, system or work activity and not to people, systems and work activities in general. This is borne out by Kahn (2003), who pointed out the wide-ranging origins of stuckness.

The interviewees then contributed insights into the tipping point that indicated the need for unlearning to occur, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Event or circumstances that led to the unlearning of the attachment

Rank	Event/Circumstance that led to unlearning	Frequency
1	Breakdown of businesses (acquisitions and mergers)	9
2	Numbers – financial losses	8
3	External economic forces	7
4	High level of frustration	5
5	New position, new responsibilities	4
6	Burning platform, becoming overwhelmed by volume of work	3
7	Breakdown in key relationships	2
7	Legislative changes	2

The table shows that the primary reasons that led to the unlearning of an attachment were the breakdown of businesses, followed by poor financial results and external economic forces. A change expert stated for instance that “unlearning only occurs when hard data exists, when a company is entering into crises or when market analysis conducted forces a shift in behaviour”. Another expert indicated that most events that led to unlearning were very dramatic and were usually external or financially driven, with very few having internally driven causes. An interviewee from the executives’ sample group stated, “We had to let go, whether we liked it or not – we had no choice – we thought we could take old ways into the acquisition, but had to leave everything behind, we had to start from scratch.” These data concur with the findings of Zhao et al

(2013), who state that the personal drivers for change are often changes in the environment. The findings also support Kotter's (1996) reference to the sense of urgency created by a burning platform and Lewin's (1951) concept of unfreezing occurring when one experiences a shocking personal event.

The interviewees then explored the breaking points that persuaded the executives to release the attachment. Table 4 illustrates the top ten reasons that were given.

Table 4
Causes of reaching breaking point and deciding to unlearn

Rank	Cause of breaking point	Frequency
1	Different perspective from external parties	19
2	Current way not viable as business performance/individual performance is declining	14
3	Cleaning of filters needed – realisation	8
4	Self-awareness	6
5	Big "Ah-ha" moment	4
6	Frustration – moving away from or towards change	3
6	Shifts in beliefs and values	3
8	Not always a specific point	2
8	Health breakdown	2
8	External economic forces	2

The top-ranked cause was being shown different perspectives by external parties, and declining performance of the organisation or divisions of it. The change experts indicated that the catalyst to the breaking point was a combination of input from external people, insights from peers and awareness of different perspectives. Change experts indicated that executives needed support because "stuckness" was both a possibility and a reality during the breaking-point stage. Another change expert stated that the breaking point only occurred when executives were aware of the attachment and they realised the importance of letting go. A couple of change experts indicated that the breaking point was not a smooth transition, but rather a helix which resulted in a backward-and-forward movement.

An interviewee from the executive sample stated that the breaking point was reached only once confirmation of the attachment was received from an external party. Other interviewees said that the breaking point was reached through a brutal conversation with the CEO, or advice from a mentor and family members. An executive stated that: *"It was an extreme emotional overload which caused physical health problems, the breaking point was reached because the current way was not viable anymore."* Some executives indicated that the breaking point was the beginning of a "slippery slide". Interviewees confirmed that the breaking point was reached with the realisation of the need for a new status quo, after which the executives were prepared to "clean their filters".

Most interviewees indicated that the unlearning was mostly forced by external events and parties and once the executive accepted the need for letting go, the process became a combination of forced and self-initiated actions. This supported Nystrom and Starbuck's argument (1984) that to avoid organisational crises, organisations must unlearn. With mounting organisational success, organisations emphasise efficiency, become growth-complacent, and learn too little. In the ever-changing environment unlearning is an inevitable reality and executives are required to unlearn the past as

this is the only path to future success. This finding can be likened to Kotter's (2008) suggestion of enhancing a sense of urgency by bringing the outside in, that is by offering hard data around business realities. This view was supported by Yang et al (2014), who said that the unlearning of changes in routines and beliefs in organisations is a response to new situations and challenges. These data also support Bridges (1986) and Scharmer's (2009) concept of the "letting go" process as the beginning of a change process.

5.3 Findings for research question 2: How do executives experience the actual unlearning process?

This question was divided into a few subquestions. The interviewees explored the difficulties experienced in releasing attachments and the reasons why some executives still chose to hold onto attachments, thereby displaying stuckness. Table 6 illustrates the top eight reasons.

Table 5
Difficulties in releasing attachments

Rank	What makes it difficult to release an attachment?	Frequency
1	Invested in the <i>status quo</i>	9
2	Fear of unknown	8
2	Loss of control	8
4	Comfort zone	7
4	Culture of organisation, the DNA	7
6	Fear of irrelevance	4
7	Realisation that you have to let go to improve for the future	3
8	Do not have the know-how to deal with the change	2

The executives' investment in the *status quo* was the most significant reason for holding on, followed by fear of the unknown, loss of control and being in a comfort zone. There was a difference in emphasis between the two samples. Change experts indicated that the difficulty in releasing the attachment was due to the fact that executives found it difficult to ask for help, followed by fear of the unknown and considerations of ego and status. They indicated that it was particularly difficult to let go if the executive had been successful. The letting go required the executive to redefine success for the future and this caused fear of the unknown regarding the next stage. A change expert said that "*the attachment provided a sense of self-worth...the executive had past success and had added value, therefore it is very difficult to let go*". The change experts indicated that the level of difficulty associated with releasing an attachment correlates negatively with the level of security and confidence of the executive.

The executive interviewees stated that the fear of losing control was the biggest factor influencing the detachment. An executive interviewee stated: "*until the pain of your present misery overwhelms the fear of the unknown, only then will you move in seeking for answers and new ways*". Another interviewee stated that difficulty depended on the level of ownership one felt, the sense of accountability and the depth of emotional connection to the attachment.

The two major sources contributing to difficulty in releasing an attachment were identity and fear of losing security, control and ownership. Ibara et al's (2010) findings supported the finding that unlearning is painful as regards identity. In line with this

research finding, Grady and Grady (2013) emphasise the loss of security as an important reason for holding on to an attachment. Sharmar's (2009) research also supports these difficulties with "letting go". The interviewees were then asked what enabling actions had been taken after the decision to change had been made. Table 6 presents the top eight ranked actions.

Table 6
Enabling behaviour after the decision to change

Rank	Actions taken	Frequency
1	Consciously knowing when to acquire help – must have a trusted adviser	9
2	Must take first step towards letting go/unfreezing	8
3	Good communication with themselves and others	5
3	Self-awareness	5
3	Explore alternatives (in the case of "stuckness")	5
3	Define goals and objectives	5
3	Prioritise new responsibilities	5
8	Build on self-esteem	2

The results are different for the sample groups in that change experts indicated that their assistance was given top priority, followed by self-awareness and direction. The executives agreed that self-awareness was important, followed by clear and open communication and strong leadership skills. Change experts indicated that executives who moved successfully through this unlearning process took actions to move towards the future and had a clear understanding of the parts that were shifting towards the new learning and the parts that were conforming to the status quo.

Many executives indicated that it was worthwhile to spend time talking to people and creating a new vision for the future. An executive stated that coaching played a significant role during the process and this helped to "clean the filters", thereby causing the paradigm shift. In addition an executive specified that support from the CEO was instrumental during this part of the process. Another executive stated that *"unlearning requires you to push, rest, look back and reflect, but continue to look forward, involve your team, you don't want sheep on board"*. Executives had to unlearn one way of being and relearn a new way of being, often in a non-linear process. For instance, an interviewee indicated that *"unlearning is a process, you don't just make the decision to unlearn, you need to check every transaction, therefore it takes continual self-awareness to ensure that you don't fall back to old behaviour; this is a journey not only a destination"*. Furthermore, executives who successfully went through this unlearning phase engaged in continuous inner and external dialogue around the change process.

The interview data demonstrated that a forced process made it more difficult to let go than a self-initiated one. The data show that the executives require self-awareness, in addition to clear direction setting by creating a vision for the future. This concurs with Higgs and Rowland's (2010) research, which suggests that leaders are required to have a high level of self-awareness, thereby understanding the contribution of their own behaviour regarding either the inability to unlearn/"stuckness" or movement. Scharmer's (2009) second movement, namely retreat and reflect, allowing inner knowledge to emerge, is akin to the self-awareness aspect.

Importantly, this part of the unlearning process was found not to be a linear movement and in many instances if no forward movement is present, the executive experiences the phenomenon of "stuckness". It is worth emphasising the process of

letting go versus the reality of “stuckness” during this phase. This is a backward-and-forward process as information is gained and various options are considered or tested. The studies by Kahn (2003) and Higgs and Rowland (2010) indicated that the outcome of many change initiatives is “stuckness”, at either the decision-action stage or the action-result stage. The interviewees indicated that this part of the process moved backward and forward between “letting go” and “holding on” until the final release took place. The interviewees indicated that executives had to know when to get help and to take the first step towards “unfreezing”. The final barriers to moving forward were executives’ investment in the new status quo. The findings of the current research study support the work of Bridges (1986), who says that an individual has to let go of an old situation and refers to unfreezing and “letting go” of the old situation before a new beginning is possible.

Interviewees stated that, because the business world is changing, the importance of releasing an attachment is to ensure organisational and individual survival. The executives indicated that another important function of unlearning was to allow development and succession planning for others and that if unlearning does not take place this could lead to the breakdown of relationships. One interviewee declared that South Africa was actually a good laboratory for unlearning as executives have had to unlearn many things in the recent past because the country has gone through profound change. Both sample groups indicated that it was important to unlearn to prevent stress-related ineffectiveness. One executive stated, *“I had a burnout and took six months sabbatical to recover, if only I had let go sooner”*. The majority of the interviewees stated that although the initial unlearning was forced, once there was acceptance of the need to release the attachment the process became self-initiating until the attachment had been released. One interviewee from the executives’ group stated: *“You must be self-aware to unlearn a certain way of thinking.”* An executive stated, *“This is the time to show your leadership abilities. You feel like a fighter pilot being required to act quickly and effectively”*. Researchers such as Goleman (1996) and Merlevede, Bridoux and Vandamme (2003) likewise identified self-awareness as essential in identifying and labelling emotional responses. These findings are in line with the research of Becker (2005) on the intricacies of the unlearning process.

The interviewees were then asked about the emotional impact experienced both when the executives remained stuck and when they let go of their attachments. The findings are shown in Table 7.

It is clear that when they remain stuck there is a wide range of negative emotions. Yet when they let go there is a mixture of positive and negative emotions. Grady and Grady’s (2013) model illustrated similar emotions resulting from an organisational change initiative and the loss of stability. In this study the emotional impact on the executive was high and the dominant emotions included fear, excitement and optimism. The top-ranked emotions associated with letting go for both sample groups were fear and self-doubt. A change expert indicated that *“unlearning is very intense and dramatic.”* Another interviewee stated that *“executives need an emotional vocabulary to deal with unlearning”*. An interviewee stated: *“I was sitting in a grey sea of mud waters, I had to deal with my own self-doubt and the insecurities of those around me.”* An interviewee stated: *“I experienced high level[s] of uncertainty, I asked myself, I’m I doing the right thing, letting go of my company culture was extremely hard, will my team continue to support me?”* An executive indicated that fear of failure, guilt and a sense of responsibility were experienced during the process of unlearning.

Table 7
Emotional impact of unlearning or remaining stuck

Rank	Emotional impact	Frequency
Of letting go		
1	Fear	10
2	Excitement	9
3	Uniform optimism	7
3	Relief	7
5	Self-doubt	5
Of remaining stuck		
1	Anger	4
1	Feeling the need to create something new for myself	4
3	Resentment	3
3	Fear	3
5	Never moved forward	2

Change experts indicated that unlearning was a continuum of emotions; the process began with fear, uncertainty, self-doubt and then some relief was present, followed by liberation and finally happiness. An interviewee from the executives' group stated that the emotions experienced were mixed and consisted of fear of failure, hope for the future, relief and readiness to let go. Another executive expressed the emotional impact as follows: *"I was very nervous, excited and overwhelmed at the same time."* An executive who remained stuck stated that this was a "stress test", he felt resentment and anger and ultimately had to create something new for himself. Some interviews likened unlearning to trauma and loss in real life – *"it was like becoming disabled"*. An interviewee made the following comments: *"Unlearning is not for the faint-hearted, it is a very intense process, it takes courage, and a bit of ignorance at the start of the process is good."*

In line with the findings of this study, Becker's (2010) study revealed apprehension and worry as emotional responses. Downs (2002) similarly emphasises the distress that executives experience and warns against this allowing the executives to remain stuck. Grady and Grady (2013) also associated a range of difficult emotions with the release of an attachment, while Dotlich, Noel and Walker (2004) caution that executives should not deny the existence of these intense emotions. According to Amzi (2008), unlearning may cause frustration and the process may be stressful because it requires an individual to risk part of what has already been learned.

5.4 Findings for research question 3: What was the perceived impact of the unlearning?

Finally, the perceived impact of executives' unlearning an attachment on personal and organisational effectiveness was explored and the main findings are shown in Table 8. The overall findings indicated a positive impact on many aspects of the organisation.

The data show that individual unlearning is a catalyst for group and ultimately organisational unlearning. The table shows how organisation-wide the effect of executive unlearning is, with the top-ranked constructs being increased teamwork and efficiency, an increase in performance and improved business communication. An interviewee from the change expert group stated that during the unlearning process productivity decreased, support and input increased significantly up to a certain point, before the organisation moved to the next stage, upon which performance increased

steadily. Another change expert indicated that the unlearning had a larger impact on the organisation when the letting go was defined as a goal by the organisation, in that the executives had to unlearn something to ensure the survival of the organisation. An interviewee from the executives' sample indicated that the unlearning of an attachment increased efficiency. Another interviewee indicated that the unlearning process created development opportunities for senior management.

Table 8
Impact of unlearning an attachment

Rank	Organisational effectiveness	Frequency
1	Increased teamwork and efficiency – team more focused	18
2	Performance increase – both personally and organisationally	10
3	Improved business communication	5
4	Greater exposure, acquired a new skills set	4
5	Difficult to isolate, intertwined with other learnings in the organisations	2
5	New ways of thinking	2
5	Dependent on the organisation	2
5	Impact where leader has control, sometimes ripple effect to rest of organisation	2

The findings indicated that the post-unlearning phase of the unlearning process had a positive impact on organisational effectiveness and that the negative symptoms in the organisation as described by Grady and Grady (2013) were largely unnoticed. These findings confirm those of Zhao et al (2013), who articulated that the unlearning process is the connection between three aspects, namely individual unlearning, group unlearning and organisational unlearning, and that the process of unlearning is the continuous evolution of all three aspects.

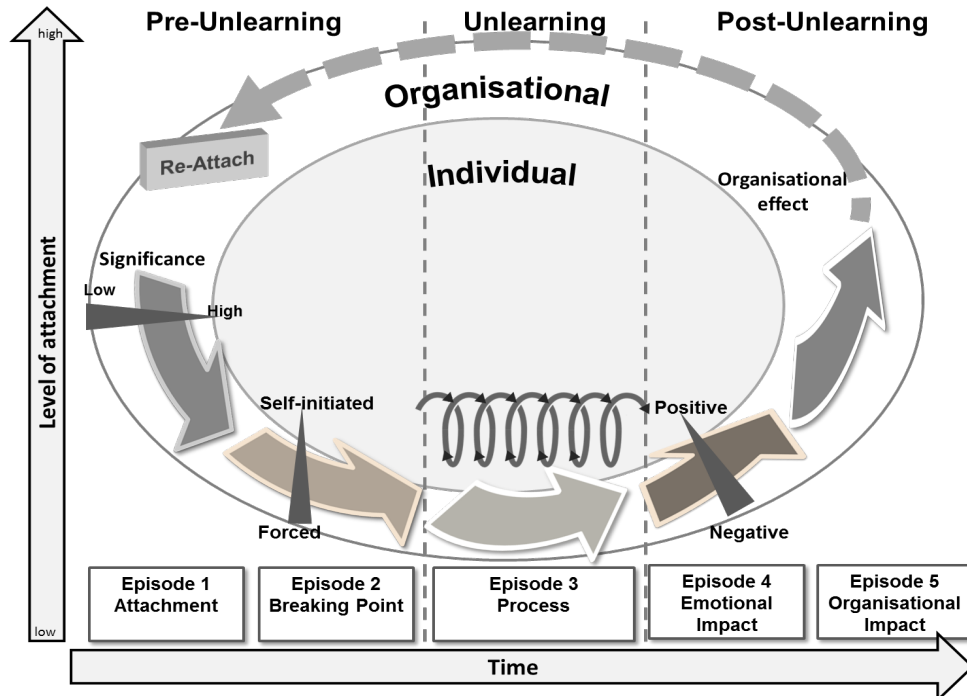
It is worth mentioning that in the post-unlearning phase once the initial attachment has been unlearned the possibility of a newly formed attachment exists. As Azmi (2008) stipulated, unlearning involves discarding outdated and stereotyped methods, processes and techniques and accepting the new. Re-attachment behaviour in the workplace is then possible as the ultimate outcome of unlearning.

6 Consolidation

The interviewees all agreed that releasing dysfunctional attachments was a vital part of adaptive change processes. In order to consolidate the empirical findings and add to the extant literature, a *de facto* model, shown in Figure 2, was developed from empirical data on the experience of executives who were unlearning an attachment. The model presents a comprehensive framework of the unlearning process. It shows that there are five overlapping episodes, each representing various components of the unlearning process. The background illustrates that attachment behaviour in the workplace is intertwined on an individual and organisational level. Episode 1 indicates that the major determiners of attachment behaviour are both personal and organisational systems and that there are different levels of attachment. In particular, executives find it most difficult to release an attachment if the attachment is identity-related, as when entrepreneurs form attachments in their own business. Episode 2 shows that the breaking point indicating that the dysfunctional attachment should be released is driven by both organisational factors and personal insights. However, most unlearning processes are made imperative by external factors. Episode 3 represents the actual unlearning

process after the breaking point has been reached, illustrated by a helix as the process is not a smooth transition, but consists of oscillating movement. During this process executives need to know when and where to get help in order to avoid remaining stuck. The final barriers to letting go of the attachment were found to be the following: being invested in the status quo and fear of both the unknown and of losing control. Episode 4 depicts the range of emotional impacts of the unlearning process on the executive, such as fear, uncertainty, self-doubt, excitement and relief. The positive outcomes of the unlearning by the executive on both the individual and the organisation were found to be multifaceted, and are represented in episode 5. The model reminds the reader that after the attachment has been unlearned the executive may form another attachment. The model depicts the interconnectedness of the empirical findings on the different components of unlearning an attachment.

Figure 2
The *de facto* process model of unlearning an attachment



Source: Author's own model

7 Implications for practitioners

Change consultants and managers could use the outcome of this study to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and level of significance of the attachments of executives. The change expert can support executives who are releasing attachments by supporting them through the angst of the process, with specific focus on team development, followership and communication. It is noticeable that the change experts did not rank uncertainty among the major emotions. In contrast, the executives indicated that the entire unlearning process consisted of ambiguity and continual

moments of uncertainty. Therefore, change experts must be aware of the high level of uncertainty that the executives face during the unlearning process. At the breaking point of letting go the executives indicated that frustration causes them either to move away from or to move towards the change. Consequently, change experts must be cognisant of the fact that “stuckness” is a reality during this phase and their specific support is needed once breaking point is reached. The executives indicated that the viewpoints of external parties play a significant role throughout the process; change experts could act as trusted advisers.

The model could be utilised by executives during the unlearning process. It would be valuable for the executives to understand that their experienced emotions, actions and circumstances are not unique and they can draw on previous real-life experiences to assist them in future. It is important for executives to move to a conscious state of awareness regarding their dysfunctional attachments in the workplace as the data show that current letting go of attachments is mostly enforced by unfavourable circumstances. Once the executives have more insight, a proactive approach towards letting go of harmful attachments can be adopted instead of a reactive approach. The executives should familiarise themselves with the phenomenon of “stuckness”, to gain insight into the contribution of their own behaviour regarding the inability to unlearn. The findings confirmed that the more confident the executive is, the less difficult it is to release the attachment. This confidence can help the executive to voice the attachment and thereby deal with it appropriately. The executives need to understand the emotional impact of the unlearning and the need to rely on trusted advisers to help them through the process.

8 Recommendations for future research

Future research could follow a quantitative approach with a larger sample to further explore the constructs revealed in this study. An in-depth investigation into group unlearning would be of interest. The attachment behaviour of founders and entrepreneurs could be researched in detail. Finally, research on the phenomenon of “re-attaching” could provide valuable input for both executives and change experts.

It is hoped that the insights from this study will assist executives and change managers to gain a deeper understanding of the need for, processes of and benefits of executives unlearning their attachments.

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