Estudios y Perspectivas Revista Científica y Académica
ISSN en línea 3005-2599, enero-marzo 2025,
Volumen 5, Número 2.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.61384/r.c.a.v5i1

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HISTÉRESIS ORGANIZACIONAL: UNA VARIABLE NO LINEAL DE RESISTENCIA AL CAMBIO EN LA GESTIÓN DE PROYECTOS EN EMPRESAS FAMILIARES

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Estudios y Perspectivas
Revista Científica y Académica

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.61384/r.c.a..v5i2.1133

Organizational Hysteresis: A Nonlinear Variable of Resistance to Change in Project Management within Family- Owned Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a theoretical framework to understand resistance to change in the management of strategic projects within family-owned businesses by introducing the concept of organizational hysteresis, drawing on a critical review of literature on institutional path dependence, structural rigidity, and strategic adaptation, the paper argues that family firms experience persistent and nonlinear forms of resistance to change. The study contributes to project management theory by positioning organizational hysteresis as a second-order explanatory variable, helping to explain adaptive lag in organizations with strong structural memory.

Keywords: *organizational hysteresis, resistance to change, family-owned businesses, project management, nonlinear behavior*

Recibido: 07- marzo-2025 / Aprobado: 10-abril-2025

Histéresis Organizacional: Una Variable No Lineal de Resistencia al Cambio en la Gestión de Proyectos en Empresas Familiares

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone un marco teórico para comprender la resistencia al cambio en la gestión de proyectos estratégicos en empresas familiares. Para ello, introduce el concepto de histéresis organizacional. A partir de una revisión crítica de la literatura sobre dependencia de la trayectoria institucional, rigidez estructural y adaptación estratégica, se argumenta que las empresas familiares experimentan formas persistentes y no lineales de resistencia al cambio. El estudio contribuye a la teoría de la gestión de proyectos al posicionar la histéresis organizacional como una variable explicativa de segundo orden, lo que ayuda a explicar el retraso adaptativo en organizaciones con una sólida memoria estructural.

Palabras clave: *histéresis organizacional, resistencia al cambio, empresas familiares, gestión de proyectos, comportamiento no lineal*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations do not operate within a neutral space of purely rational decisions; their behavior is deeply conditioned by institutional trajectories, power structures, and persistent cognitive frameworks, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced in family-owned enterprises, where the transmission of values, norms, and leadership styles creates an organizational fabric strongly shaped by tradition.

In such environments, change processes—such as those driven by strategic project implementation—face a form of resistance that cannot be fully explained by linear or voluntaristic management approaches. This article argues that such resistance follows a logic of organizational hysteresis: a nonlinear dynamic in which the organization's response to change depends not only on present stimuli but also on its accumulated structural memory.

Inspired by the physical concept of hysteresis—where a system retains a "trace" of past states that shapes its future behavior—this framework allows resistance to change to be understood as a path-dependent phenomenon, characterized by inflection points, adaptive delays, and transformation thresholds.

This proposition is particularly relevant in the context of project management for at least three reasons. First, because strategic projects are often the primary vectors of organizational change; second, because family-owned firms, due to their identity-based nature and concentrated power structures, exhibit distinctive decision-making patterns when facing transformation.; and, third, because current models of resistance to change tend to underestimate chronic and non-reactive forms of structural opposition.

From this perspective, the article addresses the question how does organizational hysteresis manifest as a nonlinear form of resistance to change during the management of strategic projects in family-owned businesses.

To answer this, the article develops a theoretical framework that articulates the concepts of path dependence, structural rigidity, organizational memory, and strategic change. It proposes that

hysteresis may function as a second-order explanatory variable in project management. This contribution seeks to enrich project management theory by offering an alternative lens to recognize and anticipate organizational dynamics in which change does not occur proportionally to effort, but through critical thresholds and zones of structural delay.

Theoretical Framework

Organizational hysteresis: from physics to organizational theory

The term hysteresis originates in physics, particularly in the study of materials subjected to magnetic, electric, or mechanical fields. In these contexts, hysteresis refers to a system's current state depending on its historical trajectory—meaning the system does not respond immediately or proportionally to external stimuli but instead retains a "memory" that determines its behavior over time. This phenomenon is widely documented in ferromagnetic materials, electric circuits, structural elasticity, and complex ecological systems, its distinctive characteristic lies in the presence of response lags and threshold cycles between cause and effect.

Göcke (2002) extends the concept of hysteresis to economics by analyzing how agents' decisions and system responses depend on past states, resulting in persistent structures and retarded adaptation. This interpretation facilitates the conceptual migration of hysteresis from physics into institutional and organizational dynamics, but also this notion evolved into the study of persistent institutions, organizational routines, and cultural patterns that inhibit or slow down adaptation, also, in organizational studies, organizational hysteresis can be understood as structural resistance to change grounded in the accumulation of past decisions, entrenched routines, cultural norms, and institutionalized power dynamics, this form of resistance does not manifest as explicit or ideological opposition but as a systemic delay that prevents the organization from responding synchronously to environmental demands, in this sense, hysteresis functions as a second-order variable that affects both the perception of change and its effective implementation.

Duque, de Ocampo, and Velásquez (2013) emphasize that organizational resistance is not always conscious or visible, but may arise from deeply rooted psychological and cultural factors that generate

inertia. These internal dynamics act as latent sources of hysteresis, particularly in leadership structures with entrenched interpretive schemas, where environmental interpretations are filtered through unprocessed historical experiences, this is compounded by the presence of rigid structures in family-owned businesses, where strategic decisions tend to be concentrated in traditional authority figures, reinforcing path dependence and limiting structural flexibility (Hill, Schilling, & Jones, 2019; Daniels, Radebaugh, & Sullivan, 2010).

Organizational hysteresis thus represents a nonlinear form of resistance, distinct from planned, negotiated, or culturally visible resistance. It is latent, cumulative, and persistent, and is particularly evident in contexts where change is perceived as a threat to organizational legacy or identity, as is often the case in family-owned enterprises. This lens allows us to move beyond mechanistic or voluntaristic explanations of organizational change by incorporating the temporal, structural, and symbolic dimensions of how organizations react to transformative projects.

Resistance to change in family-owned businesses

Family-owned businesses occupy a unique space within the organizational ecosystem, their strategic behavior, governance models, and internal dynamics are shaped not only by market logics but by familial identity, legacy, and long-term continuity orientation (Vera Zambrano & Vegas Meléndez, 2022). These features make them particularly prone to resisting strategic transformation, especially when such transformations are perceived as a threat to the preservation of core values or intergenerational continuity.

Unlike publicly traded corporations or start-ups, family-owned firms often maintain centralized decision-making, low structural turnover, and strong informal power networks rooted in personal relationships. This governance structure, while enabling stability, also fosters a path-dependent logic that impedes the rapid absorption of external innovations or internal reforms.

Shrivastava (1985) argues that strategy cannot be understood independently from organizational culture, as the latter establishes deep cognitive and emotional structures that shape how organizations perceive threats, opportunities, and change—often creating resistance through cultural lock-in,

especially when the change challenges foundational assumptions or disrupts existing authority hierarchies, furthermore, Daniels et al. (2010) emphasize that organizations operating in uncertain or complex environments -such as family businesses navigating generational transitions- often exhibit strategic rigidity reinforced by emotional attachment, low tolerance for failure, and symbolic investment in tradition. These elements create fertile ground for organizational hysteresis, as change initiatives encounter structural resistance and cultural reticence and inherited interpretive frameworks. Laloux (2016) highlights that organizational transformation is rarely successful without reworking the underlying identity structures. In hysteretic systems, these structures resist externally imposed change unless a cultural redefinition occurs internally and symbolically.

This resistance is not merely attitudinal but embedded in the cognitive architecture and procedural routines of the organization. Sánchez, Maggi, and Paredes (2019) propose that resistance to change often stems from unaddressed emotional and symbolic attachments that frame how change is perceived and enacted, forming interpretive blind zones that hinder transformation. This process reinforces hysteretic cycles where current inaction cannot be explained by present conditions alone, but must be understood as a function of accumulated past states.

In this light, the implementation of strategic projects, commonly associated with technological innovation, structural redesign, or new business models, frequently encounters friction that is invisible to conventional project management tools. The resistance is not expressed through open conflict but through subtle delays, diluted commitment, and silent non-cooperation, all of which are symptoms of hysteresis, not misalignment per se.

Nonlinear organizational change and project management

Project management theory often assumes that change can be planned, structured, and executed through sequential stages -initiation, planning, execution, monitoring, and closure- based on rational decision-making and goal-oriented behaviors. However, in real-world contexts, particularly in family-owned enterprises, change rarely unfolds as a linear or proportionate process, instead, it exhibits delayed reactions, threshold effects, and feedback loops that resist standard modeling and challenge

conventional assumptions of control.

The concept of nonlinear organizational change recognizes that organizational responses to interventions are not necessarily immediate, proportional, or predictable, change -then- may require the accumulation of tension, confrontation with legacy constraints, or external shocks before any significant behavioral shift occurs. In systems influenced by hysteresis, a project's input (e.g., a strategic plan or new technology) may produce no observable output until a critical point is reached, after which change unfolds abruptly or disproportionately.

This phenomenon has significant implications for project management, first, because it challenges the adequacy of traditional risk and stakeholder analysis tools that rely on the assumption of linear causality; second, because it calls into question the predictability of performance metrics and success indicators, which may fail to account for latent organizational inertia.

According with observations, in hysteretic organizations, resistance is not always visible in the early phases of project planning, emerges silently and cumulatively, often undermining execution when adaptive momentum is most needed, from this perspective, hysteresis introduces a temporal dimension of resistance that project managers must learn to recognize and navigate. What appears as a failure to deliver or a lack of engagement, may actually reflect residual dynamics from prior initiatives, deeply rooted in the organization's structure and culture.

Understanding this nonlinearity is critical to designing interventions that acknowledge organizational memory, challenge institutionalized routines, and foster readiness for change before project execution begins, moreover, hysteresis interacts with the feedback mechanisms inherent to project cycles: as projects are monitored and adjusted, the organization's past experiences influence how information is interpreted and how corrective measures are received, this creates a recursive dynamic where present behaviors are constantly filtered through historical lenses, slowing down learning, diminishing responsiveness, and reinforcing inertia.

Ultimately, integrating the concept of organizational hysteresis into project management theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of resistance, not as a failure of planning or leadership, but

as a structurally embedded feature of organizations with strong path dependence. It suggests that effective project design must go beyond stakeholder engagement and change management protocols to include diagnostic assessments of organizational memory, cultural rigidity, and adaptive thresholds.

Organizational hysteresis as a second-order explanatory variable in strategic project management

In project management, explanatory models often focus on first-order variables: stakeholder engagement, scope clarity, resource allocation, leadership style, and risk management; these elements are proximal, observable, and actionable within the temporal frame of a project. However, in most organizations with high path dependence, such as in family-owned businesses, these variables are often modulated by deeper, latent forces that lie beneath the surface of managerial rationality.

Organizational hysteresis operates at this second-order level, it does not act directly upon project tasks or deliverables, but instead shapes the organizational context in which projects are conceived, planned, and executed, it influences how change is interpreted, how initiatives are metabolized, and how organizational energy is mobilized or suppressed. As such, hysteresis affects project outcomes indirectly but structurally, often explaining delays, resistance, or implementation gaps that are otherwise attributed to individual or procedural shortcomings.

Second-order variables are often systemic, historical, and nonlinear, they require a different kind of analytical attention, one that is longitudinal, interpretive, and sensitive to symbolic dimensions. In this sense, organizational hysteresis provides a valuable lens to reframe common project failures not as miscalculations, but as expressions of institutional inertia and delayed adaptation.

A digital transformation project in a family-owned firm, for instance, may falter rather than of technical flaws or resource shortages, because of an unresolved legacy of failed past initiatives, mistrust toward external consultants, or subtle loyalty to the status quo.

These are not immediately measurable risks, yet they structure the organization’s readiness and capacity for change, means factors that are rarely captured in standard project planning documents. Conceptualizing hysteresis as a second-order variable encourages project theorists and practitioners to reconsider their models of organizational change, it suggests that resistance is not always an

aberration or a deviation, but a patterned response conditioned by organizational memory; this view also aligns with systems theory and institutional analysis, which emphasize the embeddedness of present action in historical trajectories.

Thus, integrating the concept of hysteresis into project management, expands the theoretical repertoire available to scholars and professionals seeking to understand complex, delayed, and path-dependent responses to change, it opens a space for new diagnostic tools, intervention strategies, and project designs that are adaptive to technical variables, as well as to the deeper temporal and cultural structures of organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a theoretical-conceptual methodology grounded in critical literature review and interpretive synthesis. The aim is to articulate an original analytical framework that introduces organizational hysteresis as a second-order variable for understanding nonlinear resistance to change in the context of strategic project management within family-owned businesses.

Rather than relying on empirical data collection, this study engages in a systematic exploration of foundational theories from multiple disciplines—namely, physics, institutional economics, strategic management, and organizational studies; this transdisciplinary approach enables the translation of the hysteresis concept from material systems to organizational behavior, framing resistance to change as a path-dependent, structurally embedded, and temporally delayed phenomenon.

The methodological process followed four phases:

Conceptual grounding: The origins of hysteresis were revisited through foundational texts in physics and systems theory (e.g., Morris, 2011) which defines hysteresis as a dynamic response pattern where the system's current state depends not solely on present inputs but also on its historical trajectory—exhibiting memory effects, threshold behaviors, and delayed adaptation. Similarly, Mayergoyz (1986) formalizes hysteresis through mathematical models that illustrate nonlinear loops and state-dependent transitions.

Theoretical transposition: Works on institutional path dependence and strategic inertia in

organizations (e.g., Hill, Schilling, & Jones, 2019) were analyzed to explore how the logic of hysteresis maps onto organizational contexts.

Contextual application: The review then focused on literature about family-owned businesses and their resistance to strategic change (e.g., Daniels et al., 2010; Vera Zambrano & Vegas Meléndez, 2022), identifying the structural and cultural characteristics that render them susceptible to hysteretic behavior.

Synthesis and proposition: Drawing from this integrative analysis, the article constructs a theoretical proposition that defines organizational hysteresis as a second-order explanatory variable affecting project dynamics in contexts of high legacy, identity entrenchment, and institutional inertia.

The selection of sources followed criteria of academic rigor, disciplinary relevance, and conceptual complementarity, the core bibliography includes canonical authors in strategy and project management, as well as contemporary contributions to organizational theory, allowing the framework to bridge foundational and frontier knowledge.

This methodological standpoint is aligned with the normative role of theory-building in project management research. In this sense, the article does not seek to validate a hypothesis through empirical testing but rather to expand the conceptual vocabulary available to understand complex forms of resistance and adaptive dysfunction in project-based organizational change, offering new explanatory lenses that are vital for the evolution of the discipline.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework articulated introduces organizational hysteresis as a novel lens to understand nonlinear resistance to change in the management of strategic projects, particularly in family-owned enterprises, this contribution has profound theoretical, methodological, and practical implications, for project management and for the broader field of organizational theory.

Rethinking Organizational Change and Resistance

The dominant paradigms in project management rooted in rationalist, linear, and control-oriented frameworks assume that resistance is an obstacle to be overcome through adequate planning, stakeholder engagement, and leadership. However, these paradigms often fail to account for why some organizations consistently resist transformation, even when projects are technically sound and strategically aligned.

Organizational hysteresis challenges this assumption by shifting the analytical focus from observable behaviors to temporal embeddedness and structural inertia, it suggests that resistance to change is not always caused by current factors (e.g., miscommunication, misalignment, lack of training), but may instead result from past experiences encoded into organizational routines, narratives, and structures. This perspective aligns with institutional theories of path dependence, which argue that historical choices create self-reinforcing mechanisms that persist even when conditions change. It also echoes complexity theory, which emphasizes that organizational systems are nonlinear, adaptive, and history-sensitive.

From this standpoint, resistance is not noise; it is signal. It is not a deviation from ideal behavior, but a recurrent pattern rooted in organizational memory, such insight has critical implications for how we understand project failure: rather than attributing failure to executional flaws, the concept of hysteresis invites scholars and practitioners to explore deep structures of dysfunction, such as legacy trauma, institutional fatigue, symbolic attachments to the past, and cognitive lock-in.

Furthermore, hysteresis advances our understanding of second-order dynamics in project environments, those latent forces that shape first-order processes like communication, risk, and scope, it argues that project management must move beyond input-output logic and embrace temporality, trajectory, and interpretive complexity as core dimensions of project success and failure.

Strategic Project Design in Hysteretic Organizations

The practical implications of adopting organizational hysteresis as an analytical lens are far- reaching, especially in high-inertia contexts such as family-owned businesses, legacy-driven organizations, and

traditional industries undergoing transformation. These are environments where change management strategies frequently fail, not due to lack of technical expertise, but because the organization's historical fabric resists the logic of reinvention.

Unlike conventional resistance, which can often be addressed through training, communication, or stakeholder alignment, hysteretic resistance is embedded, it operates below the surface, shaping the organization's very perception of what is legitimate, possible, or desirable, therefore, project professionals must shift from an instrumentalist mindset to one that is diagnostic, interpretive, and temporally attuned.

Rethinking Organizational Readiness: From Capacity to Temporality

Standard models of organizational readiness tend to focus on capacity variables: resource availability, strategic alignment, and leadership support; these are necessary, but insufficient, in hysteretic organizations. What matters most is not whether the organization can change, but whether it is positioned in time and memory to accept and sustain that change.

This reframing requires project managers to develop temporal diagnostics that assess how past projects, leadership transitions, or crises continue to echo in current organizational discourse, while identify symbolic residues from previous failed initiatives -what it might be framed as institutional memory scars- that shape risk perception and strategic hesitation, to then map zones of temporal drag, where legacy norms delay or distort adaptation, particularly in firms where founders remain involved or revered.

In this view, organizational readiness becomes a question of chronostrategy: is the organization not only structurally prepared, but temporally aligned to engage with the present and move toward the future?

Designing Projects for Adaptive Thresholds, Not Linear Progression

Project plans often rely on linear assumptions: clear milestones, time-bound deliverables, and predictable resource flows. Hysteretic organizations, however, do not change incrementally, they change when thresholds are crossed, when emotional, symbolic, or structural tensions reach a point that reconfigures the system's equilibrium.

To accommodate this, project designs must incorporate:

- Threshold modeling, identifying critical points of resistance and designing interventions to gradually increase adaptive tension while preventing organizational rupture;
- Pacing strategies, such as intentional pauses, buffer zones, and low-stakes pilot programs, that allow latent resistance to surface and be processed safely;
- Symbolic sequencing, where early project stages focus on redefining narratives or engaging with organizational myths, setting the stage for technical implementation.

For example, in a family-owned firm transitioning to digital systems, success may depend less on technical tools and more on ritualized closure of the previous analog regime, acknowledging its symbolic value before displacing it.

Governance with Temporal Intelligence: From Authority to Interpretation

Project governance in hysteretic organizations must be reimagined. Rather than emphasizing control and compliance, effective governance must mediate between historical logics and future aspirations, this calls for the rise of a new role: the temporal interpreter, a leader who understands the emotional texture and narrative architecture of the organization, while translate the language of innovation into terms that resonate with legacy systems of meaning; and, possesses the social legitimacy to unlock latent resistance by reframing the story of the organization's past as compatible with its future.

In family firms, this role may fall to a successor who honors the founder's vision while subtly repositioning its application, or to a respected internal figure who narratively integrates discontinuity as continuity, an essential skill in managing identity-based resistance.

Metrics of Success: From KPIs to Metabolization Indicators

Success in hysteretic contexts must also be redefined. Traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) assume that progress is observable, linear, and quantifiable; but the true measure of transformation in these environments lies in the organization's ability to metabolize change, to incorporate it into its symbolic structure, routines, and identity.

This implies, tracking discourse evolution, such as shifts in internal language, metaphors, or storytelling

practices; assessing behavioral recoding, including changes in informal routines, conflict resolution styles, and micro-decisions; as well as observing structural recalibration, like the emergence of new informal leaders, renegotiation of status hierarchies, or diversification of decision-making spaces.

These indicators may not appear in dashboards, but they often predict long-term viability better than short-term gains. In this sense, project success becomes a function of narrative integration, not just technical completion.

Toward Hysteresis-Aware Project Methodologies

Finally, these insights call for the development of hysteresis-aware project methodologies frameworks that explicitly incorporate concepts like organizational memory, adaptive lag, symbolic resistance, and path dependence. Such methodologies would complement agile and waterfall approaches with temporal-memorial diagnostics, embeding sense-making processes as core phases of project cycles, while also reframe risk not only as external uncertainty, but as internal latency, the organization's time-delayed response to itself.

These innovations could lead to the emergence of a new generation of project professionals: less focused on tools and templates, and more attuned to organizational time, symbolic codes, and strategic inertia.

CONCLUSION

This article has proposed a theoretical framework that introduces organizational hysteresis as a second-order explanatory variable for understanding nonlinear resistance to change in the management of strategic projects, particularly within family-owned enterprises. By drawing from interdisciplinary sources -physics, institutional economics, complexity theory, and organizational behavior- this framework reframes resistance not as a deviation from managerial intention, but as a structurally embedded and temporally delayed organizational phenomenon.

Unlike conventional models of resistance, which focus on immediate behaviors and situational misalignments, hysteresis reveals how accumulated organizational memory, symbolic structures, and cultural inertia can condition the organization's ability to absorb and metabolize change, this insight is

especially relevant in legacy-rich environments, where history is not merely a background factor, but an active force shaping present decision-making and future possibilities.

The article makes several distinct contributions to project management theory: (a) it expands the explanatory repertoire by foregrounding temporality and memory as critical dimensions of organizational change; (b) it positions resistance as a systemic and recursive pattern, rather than a localized or reactive phenomenon; (c) it introduces new practical considerations for project diagnosis, design, governance, and evaluation, urging practitioners to move beyond linear planning and engage with narrative, symbolic, and temporal complexities; and, (d) it opens new avenues for research, including the development of hysteresis-based diagnostic tools, performance indicators, and hybrid methodologies that integrate adaptive thresholds and organizational time into project cycles.

More broadly, the concept of hysteresis challenges the discipline of project management to reconsider its assumptions about change, agency, and success. Projects do not unfold in neutral terrain, they are enacted within organizations that remember, resist, and reinterpret interventions according to their historical trajectories; to ignore these trajectories is to risk designing technically sound projects that fail symbolically, culturally, or structurally.

Thus, embracing organizational hysteresis is not simply an academic exercise, it is a strategic necessity for those seeking to manage transformation in systems where the past is not dead, but operational.

The future of project management lies not only in mastering uncertainty, agility, or innovation, but in learning how to navigate organizational time, interpret institutional memory, and engage with the deep logic of resistance that shapes how, and whether, change truly takes root.

Conflict of interest

I declare that there are no financial, personal, institutional, or other conflicts of interest related to the content of this article.

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