



LEADING SUCCESSFUL CHANGE IS A DIFFICULT JOB “Dealing with Resistance to Change”

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"The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it."

Marcus Aurelius, A.D. 121 – 180

re-sis-tance – noun – (ri-'zis-t&n(t)s)

1 a : an act or instance of resisting : **OPPOSITION** **b** : a means of resisting

2 : the ability to resist; especially : the inherent capacity of a living being to resist untoward circumstances (as disease, malnutrition, or toxic agents)

3 : an opposing or retarding force

Here is a blinding glimpse of the obvious: reducing or mitigating resistance to change is crucial to the success of organizational change efforts. Having said that, why do people within organizations resist change?

People resist change for various reasons such as:

- Old and routine is known and comfortable
- Not knowing the reason for change
- Not knowing what is expected of them
- Not knowing how to change
- Perception of imbalance between giving and receiving
- Taking change personally!
- Fear of getting hurt by the change
- Need time to integrate and get comfortable with the change

The term resistance, as used in the context of organizational change, describes our reluctance to abandon the status quo. Organizational "change agents" use it to describe something commonly called pushback. But it's a loaded term, because it under-values that reluctance. When change is approached with this model of reluctance in mind, the effort can be sabotaged.

The term resistance is loaded, carrying with it the perspective of the change agent. Resistance is what the change agent encounters when change first begins to come into view as a real possibility. The term is inherently adversarial, because the "resistors" don't view themselves as resisting change, while the change agent does. From the resistors' perspective, they're just trying to hang on to a world they know and accept. An adversarial, superior attitude is certainly not helpful to an agent of change. Even though the change agent advocates a more collaborative approach, the use of the term resistance suggests the possibility of a deeper, less constructive position. People can pick this up, whether it's real or not, and when they do, their resentment of the change agent deepens.

Those who have been charged with leading organizational change know that dealing with people's resistance is the most difficult part of the change process. People's need to maintain personal stability and a sense of control over their lives can manifest itself in resistance to change. Understanding basic human behavior is one of the most important leadership tools in dealing with resistance. It helps to remember that as humans, each individual has a belief and judgment system that allows them to make decisions and navigate through life. When individuals face new changes, they may need time to absorb them and to decide if they are positive. That hesitance to jump right in can appear as resistance.

It is human nature to seek the comfort and safety that stability brings. The reality is that everything in the world is constantly changing. Of course, not all changes are created equal; change comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some of these changes are very real to us because of their direct impact on our lives, while others cause little distress.

Where to begin?

"First secure the oxygen mask on your own face, and then help others with theirs." Every air traveler has heard this standard pre-takeoff caution. The same principal applies to leaders of change. To be an effective agent of change and help others manage their way through it, we have to start with ourselves.

Change leaders are not immune from the emotional impact of change or from reacting to it. As a change leader we have to attend both to our own reaction to change and of the reactions of those we lead. If we deny our own emotions we cannot be receptive to others' emotional responses. The only way to support our team emotionally is to be aware and accepting of our own feelings.

Tips for dealing with your own resistance to changes in your organization:

- Problems are a natural side effect of the change process.
- Controlling your emotions increases your control over the situation.
- You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.
- Management has to make some tough decisions, and it is impossible to keep everyone happy.
- If the organization is changing you need to be changing too.
- You have the power to choose your own response to change.

Our first step is to understand our own view of this change, its effect on us, and our own coping style. The second step is to recognize that other people may view and cope with the change in a much different way than we do. We cannot take other peoples' process personally and maintain effectiveness. As good leaders we have to allow space for the different ways people work through or cope with change while we help them overcome their fears.

Once you have addressed your own feelings of reluctance to change, then you can begin to help others with the same task. In order to successfully lead an organization through major change, it is important for you, as a change agent, to balance both organizational and human needs. Organizational change is driven by personal change, and individual change is needed for organizational change to succeed.

During organizational change, individuals create their own interpretations of what is going to happen, how they themselves are perceived, and what others are thinking or intending. This is especially true when there is a lack of adequate information. If these mistaken perceptions are not corrected, then resistance to organizational change will increase. Organizational upheavals lead to feelings of anger, denial, loss and frustration. Individuals experience loss and grief when established ways of doing business are changed, leading to feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety and low self-esteem. When individuals fail to adapt emotionally to change, then they experience resistance.

Tips for dealing with other people's resistance:

- Resistance is a natural human reaction. It is healthy and serves a purpose.
- We all resist changes that we do not perceive as safe.
- Resistance is always accompanied by emotions.
- To overcome resistance, we have to work through the underlying emotions.
- Resistance can be acted out in different ways such as outburst of anger, withdrawal, persisting negative behaviors, etc.
- We can deal with resistance effectively or ineffectively.
- Ineffective strategies to deal with resistance can produce the appearance of results but the moment the pressure is gone the process is reversed.
- Ineffective strategies to deal with resistance create mistrust and low moral, which are detrimental to sustainable change.
- Effective strategies to deal with resistance often require patience, consume more time and energy but produce sustainable change, build trust and support collaborative behaviors.

Leading a successful change effort is a difficult job. It can be made easier, though, by recognition that to change an organization, its people must see their roles in it differently. If focus can be put on the people, and how they change themselves, the task becomes less difficult.

Expect Backtracking

There will be false starts and backtracking, and it's inevitable that things that you thought were tightly fastened down will come loose. Build it into your expectations, your schedule and your budget. This is a reality which must be planned.

Not everyone "gets it" in the same way

Even though you've carefully designed your communications and training, you can't expect everyone to understand your message right away. Change managers who have unrealistic expectations might blame the communications failure to attain 100% coverage on the people who "don't get it." This is one way "resistance" takes hold. A blaming change effort leader helps create resistance.

Instead, offer alternative ways to understand the change and its implications, and offer these ways in multiple formats. Consider offering live sessions, handouts, Web sites, web casts, videos, and even CDs for drive time. Do as much as you can. It's much cheaper to offer multiple messages in multiple formats than to deal with resistance, or worse — to have to start all over again a year from now, having failed the first time. A single approach simply isn't enough.

Not everyone "gets it" on your schedule

If you try to go faster than the people in the organization can, you risk creating unnecessary resistance. People get through chaotic times at different rates. You can convey what you would like have happen, but it's up to them to make it happen. Be flexible. Often, you might find it necessary to adapt your change plan as you discover what is actually happening in the organization.

You aren't in charge of anybody else's mind

If change efforts require changes in processes, and processes are just ideas, then you'll probably be tempted to try to change other people's ideas. Resist the temptation. You can't change anybody else's mind — only they can. You can provide information, vision, motivation, education, training, incentives, opportunity, resources, support, compassion, and anything else someone might need as they go through change, but only they can actually execute the change.

Welcome Resistance

Many change effort leaders feel that resistance is a bad thing, that it indicates failure to cooperate, or a poor change plan. It just isn't so. Resistance is wonderful. It shows that you're making some real progress. Resistance isn't actually resistance to change — it's resistance to the loss of the old status quo. So when you see resistance, it means that people are sensing the loss of the old, and that change has begun. Resistance isn't a problem — how we cope with resistance is often the problem. Make certain that your change plan accounts for resistance, and that you have a sense of where resistance will come from and what you can do about it.

Ten factors to remember for leading effective change:

- There are three triggers for people to choose change; pain, payoff, and perception.
- Change creates insecurity and confusion.
- Change is giving up one thing for another.
- Giving up something involves loss.
- Change is emotionally charged.
- People cannot fully move on to the new until they process the feelings that accompany the loss.
- Humans resist most changes to some degree. The more negatively the change is perceived, the more it is resisted.
- Resistance allows time to sort out new information.
- Often change is resisted out of fear of the future, not love of the past.
- To manage change one has to understand the role and importance of the emotions.

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