

## Employee Resistance to Change: A Contrarian View

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By  
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Resistance to change is a natural outcome of the change process manifesting in a variety of ways ranging from passive resistance to open conflict, from decreasing work performance to employee absenteeism and turnover. Change must take place to allow organizations to adapt to their environment in order to remain competitive and successful adaptation necessitates the willingness of its members to support change efforts, however, change disrupts normal patterns of organizational behavior and processes, requiring organizational actors to develop new patterns of behaviors and processes that can be ambiguous; in simple terms, change imposes extra work on change recipients. Change recipients may be unsure as to how changes will impact their position at work or conflict with personal values and goals, threatening their personal safety, creating stress and resistance.

Change impediments may originate at the organizational, change agent and change recipient levels (Furst & Cable, 2008). Impediments can be real or perceived, and resistance may be advantageous to the change process and the sustained health of the organization. However, management and the change agent must be willing to embrace employee resistance in order to facilitate positive outcomes.

### *Organizational Context*

The context of an organization encompasses organizational structure and culture. Corporate frames determine the roles, relationships and rules of engagement for formal relationships and cultural norms governing informal relationships and behaviors. Alignment of corporate structure, infrastructure and norms to corporate vision and goals is essential for successful change execution. The relationship of culture strength to employee adaptability is key to an organization's successful response to change. Strong cultures are less flexible and adaptable than weak cultures; they impede adaptability as they constrain the influencing ability of individuals who do not conform to cultural norms (DelCampo,

2006). Weaker cultural norms enable diverse perspectives and dispersion of influence throughout the organization, fostering an environment that is more responsive to change.

Assessment tools such as SWOTT and the Deshpande cultural assessment model can identify process strengths and weaknesses in the context of organizational culture and provide a roadmap for continuous improvement (Saxby, Parker, Nitse, & Dishman, 2002). Organizational context determines how changes are effectively implemented. Process changes may require changes in work task procedures and people interrelationships, and can require changes in technology.

Successful leaders frame and reframe the corporate vision and supporting relationships to reduce employee resistance. Effective organizational change requires both a strategy for change and a structure to mobilize the change. Shifts in structure are necessary in order to set change in motion before cultural changes can transpire. Alignment of rewards and recognition to support the proposed changes is critical to successful adoption. Employee behavior is based on the manner in which they believe they will be rewarded; new norms are reinforced through organizational change agents (including senior management) modeling the desired behavioral changes.

Organizational leaders determine the appropriate degree of organizational risk which drives appetite for change. Organizations may introduce a multitude of changes which exceed the cognitive ability of employees to assimilate the changes resulting in change implementation failure. Focusing on the initiatives most important to the organization and providing a timeframe for implementation that does not exceed the change recipient's ability to manage the change mitigates resistance to the proposed changes as well as disruption to the organization. Realistic resource estimates of proposed changes as input to the budget planning process provide the organization sufficient information to implement the most critical changes and align adequate resources to support the effort.

#### *Change Agent*

Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) posited that change agents can contribute to the occurrence of "resistant behaviors and communications' through their own actions and inactions, owing to their own ignorance, incompetence or mismanagement" (p. 362). Change agents who expect to experience resistance will find it, especially if the change effort is perceived to be problematic. Laying the blame on resistance diverts attention from other sources of failure resting with the organization or the change agent.

Change agents may break agreements in the course of affecting change, violating trust between the agents and change recipients. Breaches can be associated with allocation of resources, the method of allocation or in the manner in which authority figures interface with change

recipients. The change agent may intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent the level of effort, costs, impact of the change or change benefits. Change agents must talk the talk to communicate the established vision of the new culture and walk the talk to insure organizational structures (process and people) are aligned to mobilize action in support of the change and model the desired behavioral changes. Anything more than complete integrity between words and deeds will cast doubt on management commitment to the change or the ability to lead the change. Ambivalent behavior of the change agent also sends inconsistent messages to the change recipients; for example, stating cultural changes are required while manifesting behaviors consistent with the current culture undermine the credibility of the agent as well as the proposed change.

Broken trust results in negative behavior such as “cynicism, a tendency to engage in disparaging and critical behaviors toward both change and change agents, and lower work motivation and commitment” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 366). According to *Innocation Theory*, if trust is not restored change recipients become immune to change (Ford et al., 2008). Resistance is particularly likely when the cost or impact of the changes is understated. Change agents may repair damaged relationships in later phases of the change process; failure to repair broken trust may result in a change resistant culture. Setting realistic expectations with regard to the change effort, including identifying the knowns and the unknowns, reduces uncertainty with regard to proposed changes and builds credibility.

Transformational changes necessitate alteration in cultural and behavioral norms. Change agents may require coaching to transform their own behaviors and to improve their listening skills to mitigate perceptions of the change agent being resistant to feedback provided by change recipients. Failure of the change agent to respond to feedback may result in escalation of change recipient resistance. In addition to modeling new behaviors, change agents must also be prepared to coach change recipients in requisite behavioral changes.

### *Change Recipient*

Whether responses of change recipients are reactive or responsive is determined in large part by the organizational context of the change and the actions or inactions of the change agent. According to *Attribution Theory*, change recipients respond differently to the same managerial/change agent behaviors depending upon how the intent of the behavior is interpreted. Each individual seeks to make sense out of a situation or behavior by considering cues to determine “whether a behavior is caused by dispositional factors (i.e., caused by the actor) or situational factors (i.e., caused by the context or situation)” (Furst & Cable, 2008, p. 453). Change agent behavior that is consonant with past behavior is

attributed to dispositional factors and inconsistent behavior is attributed to situational factors. The quality of the change agent/change recipient relationship determines the appropriate engagement mechanisms; high quality relationships are characterized by loyalty and trust, and low quality relationships are impersonal and based on transactional exchanges.

Agents who understand change recipient sensemaking in the context of the organizational environment can select the best combination of influencing tactics to obtain change recipient support. Furst and Cable (2008) proposed four influencing methods to gain change recipient cooperation: Sanctions, legitimization, consultation and ingratiation. Sanctions punish non-compliant change recipients through reprimands or withholding rewards. Legitimization establishes credibility of the change based on authority in high quality relationships; change recipients in low quality relationships may perceive the change agent is ducking responsibility for the change, undermining trust. Consultation involves change recipients in the change process; this tactic is most associated with positive outcomes as change recipients become engaged in the outcomes when the proposed change is aligned with their own values and goals. Ingratiation, use of praise and flattery, can be effective in demonstrating respect and value of the change recipients when not perceived to be politically motivated.

Change recipients have organizational roles to ensure the survival of their organization akin to horse communities where each herd member has the responsibility to continuously challenge the leadership abilities of other herd members with higher rank; constant insubordination of lower ranking horses insures that the most qualified hold the higher positions in the herd. It is a natural process for change recipients to challenge the change agent to determine strengths or weaknesses in order to assess the worthiness of the change and assess the commitment of the change agent. Consonant with horse whispering, a transformational leadership model, the leader has to prove his or her worthiness before the follower will allow him or herself to be led. Change agents who perceive resistance as a challenge rather than an impediment can use the feedback to strengthen the proposed change plan, develop compelling justifications for the change, choose more effective influencing tactics, and prove their ability to lead in order to engage the change recipients.

#### Conclusion

Organizations must continually change to adapt to their environment in order to remain competitive and they rely upon the willingness of their employees to support change efforts. Resistance to change is a natural outcome of the change process as change disrupts normal patterns of organizational behavior and processes, imposes extra work on change recipients, and may conflict with personal values and goals of the affected

parties. Change impediments may originate at the organizational, change agent and change recipient levels. Misalignment of strategy, proposed changes, and supporting processes and resources raises barriers to change. Change agents may contribute to resistance based on their own actions stemming from ignorance, incompetence or misconduct. The nature and extent of change recipient responses is determined in large part by the organizational context of the change and the actions or inactions of the change agent. Which combination of influencing methods (sanctions, legitimization, consultation and ingratiation) is used is dependent on the quality of change agent/change recipient relationship in the context of the organizational environment and structure.

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