

Resistance to Change

About resistance:

1. It is always present in some form.

It may only be in the helpful doubts we have about costs or likely outcomes but it is present. If the change is significant it will impact people's work and lives. People may begin to fear losing something, they feel uncertain about the future, social networks are disrupted, influence patterns change, and reward systems are rearranged.

2. The standard issues in resistance are managed primarily by doing good work in introducing change.

Most resistance is managed by involving people in the process of planning and introducing the change. Leaders need to create a critical mass of people who see the need for change, share a vision of what that change would look like, and are clear about the first steps. It's a good rule of thumb not to introduce too many initiatives at the same time. The task is to manage resistance within the process of introducing the change. See other handouts on "The Change Formula" or other ways of looking at the change process.

3. Learn from the resistance.

- It is important to listen to the resistance. There may be information in the resistance that can improve the change project. People are more likely to feel respected if their feelings and ideas are considered. Use follow-up surveys and outside consultants to help leaders stay in touch with where the change is taking hold and where it is weak. Leaders can take a stance that they want to learn from the resistance. That stance will help leaders be less defensive and anxious. It may also result in improvements to the current change project and better ways of introducing change in the future.

Having mismanaged the change process – now what?

This handout is mostly about those situations where we have not done the best job in introducing change. Resistance to the change has developed and now has some strength. In a change process it's not always clear as to whether you are still in the initial introduction phase or are well beyond that. It's an obvious problem if there is open and virulent resistance taking place well after the change has been introduced. It's also a problem if the change has been introduced, and some time has elapsed, and people are still complaining or simply not acting in ways that implement the change. How can we understand and influence these forms of resistance?

Three Things to Notice in Reading the Resistance

A leader's first task is to work at understanding the resistance. Better yet would be to appreciate the resistance. You need to understand how people are experiencing the change you have introduced. You will need to suspend judgment and attempt to see this from the perspective of others. Skills in active listening and data gathering are useful. Consider bringing in an outside consultant to manage the process and coach you.

Active and passive resistance

What are the expressions of resistance that you are seeing? How intense are those expressions? Is it an underlying simmering of annoyance, a passive unwillingness to out the new way into practice, or is it open and loud? The more public people have been in resisting the more difficult it will be for them to change their position.

Active resistance looks like

- Verbal behavior that is critical, grumbling, blaming, ridiculing or mocking
- A pattern of blocking action, undermining efforts to move forward
- Threatening; spreading fear
- Starting or passing-on rumors
- Selective or distorted use of facts

Passive resistance looks like

- Agreeing to the change when addressed but not following through.
- Putting things off, procrastination
- Claiming to not understand without active work to gain understanding
- Withholding behaviors; not providing needed information or support.

The Causes of Resistance

Consider what the particular causes of resistance in this case are. Which ones are you dealing with?

- People don't see the need for the change
- People see the potential risks as greater than the potential benefits
- People think that this change will fail.
- People do not trust the leadership
- People think that the change process has been mismanaged.
- People think that the change will have some negative impact on them
- People feel incompetent to make the change. They don't have required the skills and knowledge.
- People see the change as a violation of their values.

Resistance as conflict

It may be useful to understand resistance as a form of conflict. It may be a very low level conflict or it may be so serious that someone is going to have to leave the organization. Here's a modified use of Speed Leas' "Levels of Conflict" that might be used in understanding resistance.

Problem to solve	Disagreement	Contest	Fight/Flight	Intractable
There is some concern about the change. People just want to fix the problem. This will not strike most people as resistance.	People have gotten cautious. They are beginning to feel a need for self protection. The primary interest is still on fixing the problem.	A win/lose dynamic has developed. People make personal attacks, exaggerate, and see only two sides.	The resistance to is inflexible, ideological, and self-righteous. There is a desire to be "right", and to get rid of others or hurt them in some manner.	Attempts to do serious damage to those initiating or supporting the change. An extremely aggressive and hostile form of resistance. Ongoing, not simply an occasional outburst.

When the change process has been poorly managed; when anxiety has built, people are avoiding one another, and not acknowledging the tensions or concerns; and when there has been either a public eruption, or a series of smaller eruptions, involving large numbers of people or key people –

then we have arrived at a high level of resistance and conflict. At these levels it becomes very difficult to manage the resistance.

Engaging the Resistance

You are late to the game. The change has been introduced in an ineffective manner and resistance has gotten out of hand. But now you have worked at listening and trying to understand the resistance. What can you do?

1. Revise the change in ways that concretely addresses concerns people have. Acknowledge that you are making the revisions based on what people have said.
2. Bring in an outside consultant experienced in process consultation, conflict management, and other aspects of organization development. Have the consultant work with you in the initial listening process and in how you respond to the resistance.
3. Back up in the change process. Do the work that might have been better done when you first introduced the change. Involve people in the process of reintroducing the change. Create a critical mass of people who see the need for change, share a vision of what that change would look like, and be clear about the first steps. To get people to cooperate with this reengagement process you may need to apologize for jumping too far ahead or too fast.
4. Consider backing off. If the data, and your gut, are telling you that the cost of this change will be too high or may not produce what you were seeking – acknowledge that and reverse the decision.
5. If the resistance involves just a few people, and if they are not people with a lot of influence with others, consider having a confrontation in which you invite the person to cooperate with the change or at least to not continue resisting it. Ask the person to consider what you have said and to get back to you in a few days with a response. If the person offers a response that is really a form of continued resistance be clear about the consequences of that behavior.
6. Address the causes of resistance that you have discovered. If they don't see the need for the change involve them in a process to explore the issues and options. Have them look at the information that got you to want the change in the first place.
7. Build trust. Do the basic work in all areas of organizational life to build trust with employees or members. Trust may have been damaged in the process of introducing the change. Show your appreciation for, and understanding, of the culture and the people. Spend some time creating a sense of inclusion. Do some team building work that allows people to acknowledge one another's contribution to the present and future of the organization may help. Make sure that people don't think their jobs are at risk (unless of course they are at risk, in which case you will have to struggle with the trust issue). Do not spend a lot of time talking about changes that you want to make instead of making them in a competent way. Talking about changes can just generate the same anxiety and resistance that the change itself will bring. Have lots of face-to-face time in groups and possibly one-on-one. Make sure that people have an overall sense of where the leadership is trying to take the organization. Checkout what people are hearing and missing. Gather information about organizational issues from employees/members on a routine basis.