

Stop Blaming Resistance to Change and Start Using It

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Executive Summary

Over half of all organization change efforts fail. Resistance is the primary reason given for these failures. Despite its bad reputation, resistance can be a valuable tool in the successful accomplishment of change – *if* executives and managers are willing to consider two new ideas about resistance to change. The first idea is that we tend to see resistance as part of the problem of change, and we focus on overcoming it rather than engaging it. This tendency is the product of three compelling forces: cognitive biases, social dynamics, and managerial missteps. The second idea is that resistance is a form of feedback and, as such, it provides potentially valuable information that may not be available any other way. By being willing to consider resistance as useful feedback, managers can reshape specific aspects of a change, thereby increasing the likelihood of success. Five examples demonstrate specific ways in which resistance can be useful to the successful accomplishment of change. It guides us to focus on the purpose of the change, helps improve the change plan, is a vehicle to gain people's involvement, completes issues from the past, and clarifies objectives and strategies. Resistance can be appreciated as a form of committed expression, and can be productively engaged.

Stop Blaming Resistance

Resistance can be a valuable resource in the accomplishment of change. Accessing its benefits, however, requires a shift in the change managers' tendency to blame resistance for the failure of change. This may be difficult, because over half of all organizational changes fail and, according to the managers involved, the primary reason for those failures is resistance to change.

So why stop blaming resistance as a hindrance, and start using it as a resource for achieving change? There are three reasons. First, blaming resistance can be dysfunctional for managers who perceive resistance as threatening. These managers may become competitive, defensive, and uncommunicative, more concerned about being right, looking good (or not looking bad), and winning (having their way) than about accomplishing the change. As a result, they may alienate potential partners in accomplishing change by relating to them as obstacles rather than resources. Responding negatively to resistance behavior can cost good will and valuable relationships as well as the opportunity to learn how to improve change implementation.

Second, blaming other people for their apparent resistance behaviors is inaccurate in that it presumes resistance is a unilateral phenomenon. Resistance is at least partially dependent on the behaviors of change managers themselves. It is inaccurate and simplistic to view resistance as coming only from "over there, in them", in the attitudes (and thinking), behaviors, and communications of the individuals and groups who are asked to make changes. This gives us the view that only "they", those resisters, must alter their behaviors, and that the change would succeed if not for the irrational and self-serving actions of people who seem to be blocking or deflecting the change. Seeing resistance as solely "over there" is to see only one side of what must be a two sided story, and obviates it as a possible contribution to defining and implementing a proposed change.

Stop Blaming Resistance

Finally, blaming resistance is incomplete because it ignores the functional value of resistance. Managers who consider resistance as negative and dysfunctional believe it increases the amount of work required, hinders progress, and serves the narrow self-interests of those resisting. This purely negative view of resistance is not found in other fields of study, e.g., mechanics, biology, and electronics, where resistance is an operational factor. In those fields, resistance is inherently neutral and only takes on a value of “functional” (e.g., in space heaters) or “dysfunctional” (e.g., excessive air drag) depending on what one is trying to accomplish. As a result, people in those fields are ambidextrous in working with resistance, capable of seeing it as both an asset and a liability. A more complete and balanced view of resistance can provide more flexibility in the field of managing change.

While it seems to be the consensus approach, blaming resistance robs managers of a powerful lever in the conduct of change. Resistance is feedback, and like all feedback, it may be useful for improving the design and implementation of the process in question. By understanding our inclination to dismiss certain behaviors as resistance, we can learn to listen in a new way to the opportunities those behaviors provide for a successful change.

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first is to provide an understanding of why managers blame resistance and support a greater awareness of the factors influencing their perceptions and actions regarding resistance. The second is to identify specific ways in which resistance can be a positive contribution to the successful accomplishment of change.

What Is Resistance?

There is no agreed definition of resistance. Managers have many ways of talking about it: “pushback”, “not buying in”, “criticism”, “foot dragging”, “work-arounds”, etc. These labels embrace a wide variety of behaviors, including not responding to requests in a timely manner, making critical or negative comments, and agreeing to do something and

Stop Blaming Resistance

then not doing it. We can label as resistance virtually every type of behavior, ranging from a roll of the eyes to overt sabotage.

What one manager labels resistance, others may not. This is evidenced in the case of Amy, Paul, and Blaine, three project managers from Battelle enrolled in an MBA class at Ohio State, who conducted separate “project management revision” meetings with their respective teams. The purpose of each meeting was to inform team members of changes to in-house project management procedures, and to give them an opportunity to have their questions answered. Although people knew that procedural changes were coming, they did not know the particulars. These meetings would be their first opportunity to find out first hand how it would affect them.

After their respective meetings, Amy, Paul, and Blaine compared notes on what had happened. Paul reported getting considerable “pushback”, and said, “They asked me a ton of questions, more than a few of which I couldn’t answer. I felt like I was being interrogated. I started getting frustrated and they got irritated. It wasn’t pleasant.” Amy said she felt she was being “stonewalled” by silence; “I didn’t get any questions, not a one. They just sat there stonewalling.” Blaine, however, reported that he got none of this. “My people were very receptive,” he said. “They asked me lots of questions, some of which I couldn’t answer. Some people seemed disappointed and bothered that I didn’t know all the answers, but I told them I would find out and get back to them. Overall, it was an engaging and energizing meeting. Nothing like what happened to you two.”

The different experience of these three managers illustrates the problem of agreement and understanding about what constitutes resistance. Two opposite behaviors, asking questions and not asking questions, were both perceived as resistance. When two

Stop Blaming Resistance

groups did the same thing, ask questions, their behavior was perceived in opposite ways, as either resistance or engagement.

We have come to realize that resistance is more in the “eye of the beholder” than an objective report by an unbiased and disinterested observer. Resistance is a concept that managers use to label the behaviors and communications they don’t like or don’t think should happen, and which they feel will increase the amount of work they must do to ensure a successful change. What managers call resistance does not depend on the behaviors observed, but on the interpretation and judgment of the observer(s) doing the labeling. This is why Paul and Blaine see participant questions differently, and why Paul and Amy saw both questions and no-questions as resistance.

Those people who are labeled as resistant, of course, are unlikely to see their own behavior that way. On the contrary, people perceived as “resisters” may believe their behaviors are consistent with and supportive of organization objectives or values. The people in Paul’s meeting might have been surprised to hear that their asking “lots of questions” was considered “pushback”, since they had been told the meeting was an opportunity to get their questions answered. Perhaps the people who attended Amy’s meeting legitimately had no questions, or had heard enough about the new system and had nothing to add. While there are always people who appear to enjoy throwing a monkey wrench into a discussion, most people are listening to what a change proposal means for them. Their communications are most likely to reflect their immediate concerns about what the change will mean for their job, their lives, and their future. It is unreasonable to assume that everyone is intentionally resisting just to be difficult.

People do have reactions to change, some of which may be, in fact, detrimental to its accomplishment. Even in this instance, there could be value in listening to the underlying

Stop Blaming Resistance

communication. In any case, the managers who label certain reactions as resistance could ask themselves, “Why are we calling this reaction resistance?” and “If we considered it feedback, what would it tell us that might be useful in refining the change process?” Authentically asking these two questions can shift a manager’s perspective from blaming resistance as a barrier to using it as a resource.

Why We Blame Resistance

Shifting our point of view regarding the reactions people have during change requires an awareness of the hidden, almost unconscious pull for managers to blame resistance. This tendency is the product of three compelling forces: cognitive biases, social dynamics, and managerial missteps. Although these dynamics are both natural and ubiquitous, their effects can be tempered by an awareness of how they shape our responses to people’s reactions during change.

Cognitive Biases. Psychologists tell us that people make attribution errors when it comes to explaining successes and failures. We are likely to attribute a success to our own abilities and efforts, and take credit for positive results and accomplishments. On the other hand, we are likely to attribute a failure to the bad luck or inappropriate actions of other people or external factors, blaming them for failures or setbacks. As a result, I succeed because of my talent, the effort I put forth, my persistence, and my work habits. Any failure with which I am associated is due to problems of resources, personnel, or unreliable vendors.

CEO letters to shareholders in annual reports, such as JP Morgan Chase’s 2008 letter, may be an example of this cognitive bias, attributing negative outcomes to uncontrollable factors such as economic turbulence, market conditions, and extraordinary events while failing to describe how management actions and decisions contribute to poor performance.

Stop Blaming Resistance

Positive outcomes, on the other hand, are attributed to good management practices such as fiscal conservatism, client service, or an ability to mitigate negative impacts. Research on performance appraisals finds that managers tend to blame poor performance on the employee, while the employee blames the same poor performance on external factors, often including a lack of manager support. Managers who encounter problems during change, therefore, are likely to attribute their problems to external factors, including the resistance of others.

In addition to attributing success to ourselves and failure to outside factors, people consistently overstate their own role in achieving objectives while understating the role of chance or the contribution of others. Studies asking participants to press a button were told a light would come on due to a combination of their action and random chance. Results showed most people grossly overstated the influence of their own actions in turning on the light, and greatly discounted the role of chance.

Self-esteem further adds to our cognitive bias. In a survey conducted by the College Board, one million students were asked to rate their leadership ability in comparison to their peers. Seventy percent rated themselves “above average”. Only two percent rated themselves “below average”. Sixty percent of the same students rated their ability to get along with others “in the top 10%”, and twenty five percent of them said they were “in the top 1%”. It seems we tend to think we are better than we could possibly be.

Social Dynamics. People naturally hate to fail because it risks embarrassment, diminished stature, and a loss of respect. The fear of failure is particularly intense and debilitating in the competitive world of business, where a mistake can mean losing a reputation, a bonus, a promotion, even a job. Leaders are expected to be competent, make things happen, and get things done.

Stop Blaming Resistance

Against this backdrop, managers who encounter problems, delays, or surprises in the process of an organization change may feel the need to provide an explanation that preserves their social position and reputation. Successful managers who encounter difficulties are thus likely to downplay them, perhaps unable to consider that the difficulty may be due to their own actions (or inactions). Paul, for example, did not consider the possibility that either his failure to have answers or to promise to get them could have contributed to the irritation of his team members. Rather than publically acknowledge that he was insufficiently prepared, Paul blamed the unsatisfactory result on his team's resistance.

Blaming resistance is a socially acceptable explanation among managers because "everyone knows" that people resist change. It is also socially functional, providing managers a way to marshal resources and support they might not otherwise be able to obtain. In the context of change, declaring resistance is a call for help, i.e., "I have a problem here", that elicits attention, empathy, and support from other managers. It is not an admission of ineffectiveness, but a way to excuse oneself from failure, solicit concern and interest, and shift the focus of the problem to those who are resisting. This can have the beneficial effect of freeing up resources and giving managers permission to use strategies for overcoming resistance which they might not otherwise use or consider appropriate.

Managerial Missteps. Every manager makes mistakes, but not every manager recognizes having done so. One mistake managers make is breaking agreements and failing to restore the resulting loss of trust. Agreements are the underpinning of most executive and management communications with others in the organization. Whether they are agreements about resources, opportunities, or schedules, when they are broken they create mistrust and reluctance to accommodate subsequent proposals for change.

Stop Blaming Resistance

A corporate executive who promises her mid-level managers new resources, such as additional budget allocations or personnel increases, sets up expectations that go rapidly beyond only the managers who were directly involved in the original conversation. If the new resources are not forthcoming, a communication to the managers may not be sufficient to avoid widespread damage to executive credibility. The same is true of proposed opportunities, such as the suggestion that promotions, bonuses, or pay raises will be forthcoming. Such news travels fast, and may be perceived as a promise or an agreement no matter how many caveats are attached to the original communication. If financial, political, or other circumstances prevent fully meeting the expectations of the people involved, it is a misstep to believe that everyone will understand and accept that those circumstances negate the fulfillment of the opportunity. Widespread corrective communications may be required to make everyone whole.

Similarly, schedules and deadlines are easily broken or set aside without the communications needed to restore confidence that the organization remains committed to on-time performance. Many managers do not view missed deadlines and failed budget targets as an issue of corporate or managerial integrity, a breach of trust, or even as a managerial misstep. As a result, breaking promises and agreements becomes part of the culture, as reported by junior managers who say, “Nobody keeps deadlines around here”. While this could be perceived as resistance, it is equally a product of management missteps.

The cost of broken agreements to organizations is both financial and cultural. Siemens, the German electronics firm, reported in 2007 that if it met the deadlines and budgets for all its projects worldwide, it would add \$3.7 billion to its bottom line over a three year period. The cultural cost is a lost of credibility, trust, and confidence in organizational management. One study found that 64% of employees do not believe what they are told by

Stop Blaming Resistance

their own management. Creating plans and targets, and setting deadlines and budgets, are positive actions that set up an agreement with all participants in a change. The failure to honor those agreements communicates that the agreements do not really matter, and participants come to learn that repeated failures can be explained away. This is tantamount to learning that proposed changes will not get enough follow-through to ensure their success, and that quasi-fulfillment of a proposed change will be acceptable.

A second managerial misstep is overselling a change by overstating its benefits and understating its downside. Carly Fiorina, former CEO of HP, ran into this problem in the proposed merger with Compaq, which led to a vicious proxy by heirs of the firm's founders, and ultimately to her termination. Although overselling can generate initial enthusiasm, people may become disillusioned or feel misled and betrayed as the realities of the change become apparent. An agreement (understanding) has been broken and confidence lost: the change is harder, more complex, and less rewarding than promised. As unfulfilled expectations accumulate, people become more cautious about subsequent change proposals, questioning intentions and challenging data, assumptions, or conclusions. These behaviors, the product of management actions, are then perceived as resistance rather than as legitimate attempts to avoid further mistakes.

A third managerial misstep is a manager's ambivalence or reluctance regarding the change. Employees take their cues from managers, and managers who share offhand or "candid" comments may undermine their own power to lead. The manager who says, "The plan is to get this done in this year's budget, but it will probably really take more money and time than that," should not be surprised when team members do not honor timelines and expenditure constraints. By failing to speak consistently in support of a successful change, managers undermine their own credibility, reduce the likelihood of getting the best work

Stop Blaming Resistance

from team members, and contribute to the reluctance or lack of enthusiasm of participants who will then be perceived as exhibiting resistance behaviors.

The fourth type of misstep is when managers break accepted practices, values, and principles, taking shortcuts or suggesting that some policies and rules are unimportant. These managers undermine their ethical authority and weaken the relationships necessary for successful change. Honesty and integrity are critical to effective leadership and successful change: when missing or compromised, people are less willing to follow. The loss of credibility in management can begin a downward spiral of reduced confidence and self-determination, leading to behaviors that will appear to be a signal of resistance.

The combination of the three factors – a cognitive bias to believe the best of ourselves, a social need to explain mistakes or failures, and managerial missteps that undermine trust, credibility, and confidence – contribute to and reinforce each other. Blaming resistance is an obvious and natural solution to all three, but it causes problems of its own. Aside from the cost of management missteps, accusing people of resisting introduces an adversarial note that distances leaders from the people who are expected to implement the change. A more satisfying solution is to listen to resistance as a form of feedback that can be used to improve the change and the success of its implementation.

USE RESISTANCE TO IMPROVE THE CHANGE PROCESS

People at all levels in most organizations often have more things to do than they have time in which to do them. Most do not respond well to the idea of changing what they are doing while simultaneously being held accountable for continuing to produce their assigned results and keep the machinery of communications running smoothly. Introducing a proposal for change into a group with an already full schedule can be difficult at best and

Stop Blaming Resistance

impossible at worst. There *will* be some reaction, and it is likely to sound negative, in part because people don't always choose – or know how – to communicate productively.

Resistance has a value. In the early stages of a change, any talk, even negative or adverse talk, might be the only thing that keeps a change proposal alive. Although managers may consider complaints, criticisms, and objections to be forms of resistance, a proliferation of complaints or a highly charged dialogue can serve a useful function by making more people aware of the change. Resistant communications can deepen the discussion and keep conversations about the change circulating. Consider the case of a pharmaceutical company introducing a birth control product into South Korea:

“Using [the] data was very strong, something like ‘shock therapy,’ but it gave us the opportunity to get our foot in the door. We wanted as many people as possible talking about the issue; we wanted to create a debate. In the beginning, we weren't concerned whether people were talking in a positive or even a negative way, because either way, it was bringing attention to our issue...”

A study on introducing Total Quality Leadership into the US Navy found that criticism kept people talking about the ideas, gave leaders an opportunity to clarify aspects of the program's implementation, and provided more opportunity to make sense of the change and its implications. The discussions in this “resistance phase” generated new understandings and contributed to the subsequent acceptance and expansion of the change.

Information available from resistance behaviors can become a critical factor in the ultimate success of change. Rather than try to suppress or eliminate negative reactions during the early stages of change, change managers may want to let these reactions happen and even interact with them to ensure they serve a useful function. The experience of the following

Stop Blaming Resistance

five managers suggests that shifting our objective from “overcoming resistance” to engaging it as useful feedback will add value to the change and the implementation process for all concerned.

Resistance Invites a Return to the Purpose: Why Change? Alison, the manager of University Hospital’s Information Technology Division, was preparing for a change in her hospital’s computer systems for registration and insurance. Although these two functions were at the opposite ends of the hospital’s business processes, with patient registration as the entry point and insurance billing and payments at the end point, Alison realized installing the new Accounts Management system would touch almost every employee in between, including the clinical and laboratory personnel.

“I had a four-point action plan,” Alison said. “First, our IT team would plan and manage the detailed work of hardware and software installation and support, and integrate the new system and our existing clinical system. Second, the Registration department and the Finance departments were going to work together to revise their business processes to accommodate the new system. Third, the clinical areas would participate in vendor workdays to understand the changes in their clinical system required by the new Accounts Management package. Finally, our Training unit would schedule the system vendors to be sure that everyone who used the system directly or indirectly was trained appropriately.”

“In our first two meetings, I learned the biggest lesson by realizing my biggest mistake,” Alison said. “I went into the first meeting with Registration managers, showed them the list of business processes, and asked for volunteers to work with our IT team to update them. I did the same thing in the second meeting with the Insurance billers. In both cases, I got lots of objections and questions, and it seemed like they were all really irritated about this project.”

Stop Blaming Resistance

People asked Alison, “Why are you doing this?” One of them said, “The system we have right now is not that big a problem to justify all the chaos that installing a whole new system will produce.” The insurance team was most annoyed, saying, “We can’t just change systems overnight. This will change our record-keeping system and all our historical files will be inaccessible. We need those files to work well with the insurance companies and their ever-changing reimbursement policies.”

Alison explained, “I realized that none of these people had heard much more than rumors about the new system. They did not know anything about how their computer screens would be different, or that there would be user groups and training – all the things I had told their managers about in our executive meetings. I even gave the executives and managers handouts to help them explain it to their staff. They never took it back to their staff, or if they did, it was not with any intention to get them engaged. When I heard some people saying their historical files would be totally inaccessible, I knew that good information about the Accounts Management system had not gotten out at all. I was going to have to go back to the very beginning and explain why we needed a new system, what it would do for the hospital’s revenue cycle, and how it would help us give our patients better service and more accurate financial information.”

Alison had assumed that all the hospital executives would take information from the hospital’s senior management team meetings back to their staff to let them know the importance and the benefits of the new Accounts Management system and explain the way it would work in their area. This new system had been the center of Alison’s attention for over six months, and she had led discussions about it in every senior management meeting for almost that long. Still, it seemed that basic information about the purpose of the new system

Stop Blaming Resistance

and its value for the hospital had not been communicated to the people who were going to be directly affected by it.

“I cancelled the next meetings that were already on the calendar,” Alison said. “I knew I needed to come up with a communication plan before we did anything else.”

She used the hospital organization chart to frame the structure for her communication plan, listing all the section managers and supervisors in the Registration and Finance departments, the two front-line groups for the Accounts Management system. She made a second list of the managers of every clinical and lab section in the hospital. Then she booked the auditorium for two large meetings, one for Registration and Finance and the other for Clinicians. She drafted an agenda that would be the same for both meetings:

1. Introductions – the IT team, Vendor representatives, and all meeting attendees
2. Accounts Management – what it is and why we want to improve it in our hospital
3. Registration – what the new system will change and what will stay the same
4. Reimbursement – what the new system will change and what will stay the same
5. Nursing Units and Labs – what the new system will change and what will stay the same
6. Next steps:
 - a. More information about the new system and why we are changing
 - b. User groups and how they can be helpful to implementing a change
 - c. The timeline and plan – it’s only a draft and needs your input to finalize it

“I explained to the vendor that the timeline might need to be revised until we learned from the hospital managers, supervisors, and staff what they could promise in terms of their participation and support”, Alison said. “I knew people would have things to say about the computer changes, the timing, the management, even the way it was being introduced. So I changed the agenda to assure both groups that I was listening to them.”

She set up the room with her IT team leaders on the stage, in a row behind the speaker. She started by introducing each IT team leader, and then introduced the lead vendor representative who talked about the Accounts Management system and what it

Stop Blaming Resistance

would do for the hospital. The Registration manager was next, and showed four PowerPoint slides about the registration processes and what the system would change. The Finance manager led everyone through the next four slides on reimbursement processes, and the VP for Clinical Services took the next slides, explaining the changes for nursing units and laboratories.

Alison had prepared all the slides. The Registration manager was embarrassed that she had not properly briefed her staff, and that Alison had run into so much resistance at the first meetings. “I should have told the registration people more about the system,” the Registration manager said, “but I really didn’t know what to say or how soon I needed to communicate. I’m glad Alison prepared those slides and called this meeting.”

The Finance manager told Alison, “I wondered when you were going to get around to calling a kickoff meeting in the auditorium. I knew I’d never be able to explain this stuff. I’m just not a computer guy. I heard you had a rocky first meeting, but you should have done this kind of meeting first.” The VP for Clinical Services said much the same thing. “You couldn’t have expected me to communicate all this to the nurses and lab managers,” she said. “This meeting was absolutely necessary, and I hope your team leaders are ready to help my managers with this change.”

Alison led the last segment of the meetings. She used that discussion to find out what other information people wanted about the system change, get the names of people who wanted to be in a User Group for their area, and learn about their questions and concerns regarding her timeline and plan. She was successful in all three goals.

“I didn’t get as many names for User Group volunteers from the clinical areas as I had hoped,” Alison said, “but everybody saw the plan and the timeline and asked enough questions about it that I am confident they understand and will support this change. We will

Stop Blaming Resistance

probably be able to stay on the original timeline, which made the vendor very happy. They had everything ready to roll out and were worried we'd have to stop for a long time to get the buy-in we needed.”

“It’s good we did this,” she continued. “I think the executives of Registration, Finance, and Clinical Services should have done more communicating with their people about this system. They certainly had all the information. But frankly, I think they were afraid they were bringing their people bad news, telling them they would have to change the way they worked. They didn’t want to do that, so they left it to me. This is a good lesson learned. I was ready to roll out the change, and it wasn’t until I got all that push-back that I realized I needed to educate the whole hospital staff, not just the managers, about the purposes of this system decision.”

Managers who are spearheading a change may be reluctant to confront potential resistance head-on the way Alison did. She says she has learned to make sure there are formal introductions for a change process to include all the people who will be involved in a successful implementation. She also has a new motto: “When in doubt, bring the purpose out.” She had a banner made for the cafeteria spelling out the three benefits of the new Accounts Management system, and she reminds people of them in every meeting. When people know why things are changing, she says, they are more willing to join the process.

Resistance can Change the Change. Harold, the COO of a large manufacturing organization, drew up a plan to consolidate two groups of engineers, the product design engineers who worked in the main office, and the capital planning engineers who worked at the plants. His objective was threefold: (1) Improve engineering collaboration on equipment challenges; (2) Make better choices on new capital equipment investment in light of recent changes in environmental compliance requirements; and (3) Reduce maintenance costs on

Stop Blaming Resistance

production equipment. He was confident that the consolidation of the two kinds of engineering groups would bring together the best minds to solve these new challenges, and having them all report to one manager would improve communication for everyone.

When Harold announced his plan to the Engineering and Operations managers, he got strong objections from Eric, the manager of the Plant Engineering group. Eric complained about projects past and present, criticized management planning, and said the consolidation plan would not work and would cause bigger problems than it solved. Although some of Eric's objections seemed to be potentially important concerns about engineering communication, they were so vague and ambiguous that it was not clear what exactly he was opposing. As the meeting progressed, Harold noticed Eric's eyes rolling as he highlighted various aspects of the consolidation plan, and he grew reluctant to invite Eric to speak whenever his hand went up.

After the meeting, Harold took Eric aside for a private discussion. He restated the objectives of the change, and the importance of the timeline. Then he said, "Eric, I need you to be specific about what won't work here. You talk, I'll write."

"No," Eric said. "I want to show you the problem." He went to the board and drew three circles, one for his Plant Engineering group, one for the Plant Maintenance group, and one for the Product Design Engineers who worked at the main office. "It might seem like a good idea to put these two groups under the same manager," he said, drawing a big circle around the Plant and Product Design engineering groups. "But that's going to break up my relationship with the Plant Maintenance group. It's going to set up a fight between engineers and maintenance people where now we have a partnership, at least in the plants." He drew a line connecting his Plant Engineering circle to the Plant Maintenance circle. "Right now, my engineering group works very closely with these maintenance guys. We all report to the same

Stop Blaming Resistance

Plant Manager, and we work together to make decisions about what equipment to purchase, what to lease, and what to repair because it's good enough to last. You don't want to have me reporting to the Product Design Engineering manager, or even to the Engineering VP. I belong with the Plants because that's where my work is."

Eric sat down and they talked for over half an hour. Harold took his turn at the board, making a list of more than fifteen items Eric felt would cause problems for his staff, the maintenance crews, or the capital budget for new plant equipment. Harold noted that the objections fell into three general categories: technical, budget, and personnel.

"Eric, I know we can resolve the technical problems here, and I really appreciate your taking the time to identify them," Harold said. "And the budget problems too, because I think we can reduce some of the costs you have identified by dealing with the technical issues appropriately. So all we have left are the personnel problems. What's really going on here?"

Eric said, "The maintenance manager told me this morning if this consolidation plan goes through, he's going to start looking for a job at another plant. He just feels if he is not on the same team with the Plant Engineers, he will be back where he was five years ago, begging for engineering support, and never being able to get anyone to include his input about machine maintenance costs in the company's capital purchasing decisions. And he threatened to take two of his best mechanics with him."

Harold was skeptical, saying, "Do you really think these three maintenance workers are going to leave the company just because we are consolidating some engineering responsibilities into a single unit?" With more discussion, Harold learned more about the critical role maintenance personnel played in making good capital equipment decisions, and

Stop Blaming Resistance

the costs to the company in the days before there were equipment engineers on the Plant Manager's team. When he heard the cost data, he began to reconsider his consolidation plan.

“At that point,” Harold told us, “I asked Eric to give me some options on how to maintain the key relationships he needed while also meeting the objectives I had for the consolidation plan. He was surprised I asked him to help, saying he thought I wouldn't have any room for flexibility, but he gave me several ideas he was willing to talk through.”

Eric erased the big circle on the board that combined the two engineering groups, and drew a line connecting them. He labeled the line “Collaboration Meeting”. He and Harold then came up with a plan where all the engineering teams in the company would meet for a half day every other week. They developed an agenda for the meetings to address three engineering issues: (1) Plant machine status and maintenance problems; (2) Prospective equipment changes to address interfaces with new partners and new product lines; and (3) Equipment capital investment plans looking ahead for the next 6 years.

“My consolidation plan was out the window,” Harold admitted, “and replaced with a bi-weekly collaboration meeting. It made sense to have the meetings instead of changing the organization. The way he acted in the first meeting, I wouldn't have believed Eric could have made a persuasive case, but he did. He also agreed he would work with me on developing new statements of engineering responsibilities to improve comprehensive fiscal reporting for the plants. It seemed funny that we started our meeting in opposition to each other, but in just over an hour he was working for me again.”

Sometimes one “difficult” person can slow a change proposal, or prevent it from moving into a more productive phase by being active in his or her resistance. However, it is worth remembering that people who are outspoken about their objections to a change proposal are often people who genuinely care about getting things right, and who are close

Stop Blaming Resistance

enough to the inner workings of an organization to see the pitfalls in a plan. Managers who are willing to work with such people can see their plans improved and their change proposals altered for the better.

Change agents do not need to overcome or eliminate all resistance. Some of it is valuable. The anger or fear that some people have about organization change does not necessarily mean they are against the entire change, believe management is incompetent, or suspect the plan is a cover for something nefarious. Rather than trying to remedy or ignore negative responses to a change proposal, it can be useful to take a closer look at the specifics of the objections and use them to improve the change or the implementation process.

Resistance and Building Participation and Engagement. Sharon, the manager of a 110-person phone center, was preparing to merge a group of 30 billing specialists into the phone center to make a one-room 140-person Customer Service Center. The change would alter the responsibilities of her phoners, who would learn to send out bills and make bill adjustments in addition to handling customer service calls. The billing staff would learn to perform customer service tasks in addition to their financial duties. While Sharon saw the logic of having a larger group of people who were cross-trained to handle all types of customer communications, neither billers nor phoners welcomed the change.

Sharon began by conducting what she called a “Change Tour” to introduce the change, present the rationale behind it, and gather input and observations from all the employees. She arranged the meetings in five smaller groups to support a more effective dialogue. Before going into each meeting, she took a few minutes to prepare for what she might get in response. She said, “I was sure people would have all kinds of reactions, some positive, some not so positive – particularly some of the billing people who have a reputation for being difficult and not customer-oriented. But I decided I would listen to

Stop Blaming Resistance

everything people said as valid even if I didn't agree with it, and that I would take everything they said into consideration in planning for the implementation of the change. I made it a point to tell this to each group as I met with them."

According to Sharon, "The meetings went well and I felt we had a productive exchange. I was genuinely interested in what they had to say, and I wrote it down on a white board so they could see that their concerns and ideas were heard and would be put to use. Some of it was a little confrontational, like when a few people objected to the "dictatorial" nature of the change. I explained that the decision for this merge was consistent with the company's strategic plan and that it was our job to implement it with as much attention to detail as we could. A small group of the billers are never going to be happy, but they understand that we will go ahead with the input that we have."

After the meetings, Sharon compiled the comments and noted how many people had similar concerns so she could get a sense of how big an issue each item really was. To prepare for the follow-up meetings, she made three poster-boards to present to the employees. The first was a "worry list" of all the major concerns identified by both phoners and billers. The two biggest concerns were how the pay scales for both groups would be reconciled for supervisors and staff, and how the physical space would be apportioned for phoners. Would there be private offices for the billing supervisors? Would the cubicles for phoners and billers be different or the same? Would they be intermingled or in separate areas?

The second list was an "idea list" that showed all the ideas and suggestions Sharon collected from the Change Tour meetings on how to address those concerns. Some ideas were very popular and voiced in every group: update the pay scale and position titles; mix the staff together in similar cubicles; and double the length of training time to help phoners

Stop Blaming Resistance

learn the billing system and billers improve their customer service skills. Other ideas were suggested by only a few people, but they reflected a specialized knowledge: bring in database managers to design a comprehensive Customer Service database; get a second intranet server to support faster communications and data transfers; add a module on bill collections to the training program. On this list, Sharon added the few ideas that she called “wild cards”, which were unlikely ever to be implemented. These included: let the billers train the phoners, the phoners train the billers, and give the unspent training dollars as a bonus to the staff; forget about cross-training and move everybody into the same area but keep their functions separate; go ahead with the cross-training, but don’t move the billers into the Call Center.

The third list was a product of Sharon’s communication with other executives in the company. She took the “worry list” and the “idea list” to the executive team, and they decided which ideas to implement and which to ignore. Sharon put these on the “executive action list”. They endorsed the ideas to update the pay scale, purchase a new server, and extend training time for all employees with an extra module on collections. They also clarified the physical layout plans by creating a map of the proposed locations of supervisors and staff in the new Customer Service area. Sharon took all three lists, along with the physical layout map, back to the Change Tour follow-up meetings to show everyone their ideas had made a difference in the planning process.

“During the follow-up meetings,” Sharon said, “people were glad to see the whole list of what everyone had said. It gave them confidence that all aspects of the change were being considered. It also let them see the complexity of the change, since some people had never thought about system servers and communication times.”

“The oddest thing was their reaction to the “wild cards”,” she said. “They all understood that the decision was firm to move into the same workspace and cross-train

Stop Blaming Resistance

everyone, and they gave up any objection to that. But most of them had never thought about having billers train phoners and vice versa, and when they saw that suggestion they jumped on it. It seemed like such a dumb idea that I didn't even take it up to the executives. But they were insistent that it had merit, so we discussed it and came up with a way to integrate it into the training plan. This meant our change plan changed again, but it was worth it to get something they felt was at least partly their own."

"Working with them to clarify and resolve their concerns," Sharon said, "gave me insight into smoothing over some technical and training issues, but what I learned about the people was even more valuable. I saw that each group was concerned about whether they would get along well, and whether their different areas of expertise would keep them socially separate even after they were all operating in the same building. I decided to call in some help from a consultant who specializes in creating office celebrations, and we had a pre-merger office barbeque. As part of the celebration, the consultant helped members of each group produce and deliver a comedy skit about all the problems that would happen after the merger – how the billers would try to dominate everyone and how the phoners would use their people skills to outfox them, things like that. It was hilarious, and helped everyone get better acquainted and relax a little about the changes ahead."

Sharon bypassed the negative aspect of "resistance" by inviting it, capturing it, and displaying it for all to see. She swears by the visual capture of the response to the change proposal because it helped people see the ways others were responding and produced some useful information about pitfalls and scheduling options. Not all comments will be critical or complaining, but even those that are negative may have a kernel of information that should be captured. It took skill and determination to translate employee input that sounded like complaints, objections, and criticisms into statements that could be of value, but she

Stop Blaming Resistance

understood that people do not always know how to communicate their concerns in ways that make them clear or actionable.

This approach is not without risk: managers who are expecting resistance can easily be overwhelmed by the tone or style of the communication, and unable to gain intelligence from employee input. Sharon worked with the information from both phases of the Change Tour meetings and the result was a modified plan for change that was successfully implemented. She also gained a strong working relationship with her employees, and good cooperation among the employees in their training program and in collaborating in their new location.

Resistance can help Complete the Past. George, the new manager of a vehicle service organization, planned to upgrade his maintenance team's technology by giving them GIS and computer communication systems. He had met with the fleet and service supervisors in one-on-one meetings, but today he was going to talk to them as a group about the installation schedule and the training program for supervisors, mechanics, and parts managers.

The discussion about the installation schedule went well, but when he handed out the training schedule, he did not get the discussion he expected. The supervisors surprised him, saying, "This isn't going to be fair for the back room guys who handle the parts.", "You're going around us again.", and "This won't work any better than what was tried last time." These comments shocked George, since the upgrade was something he knew, from previous conversations, that the supervisors wanted.

After listening to all the "yeah, buts", he finally said to the group, "I find it hard to believe all this is about a training that will help you use the new system. Most of you have

Stop Blaming Resistance

already told me you want GIS and computer communications. What is going on? Really, I don't care what it is, but I want to know what this is about.”

After a moment of hesitation, one supervisor mentioned an incident from a training program two years earlier. At that time, the manager who preceded George told the people who purchased and inventoried the department's truck parts that they had to attend trainings for a new corporate purchasing system. He promised they would receive both a promotion and pay raise if they could switch over to the new system within eight weeks. This was enough incentive that the four men involved buckled down and learned the new system, transferred their inventory data, and updated their inventory records within the eight-week period.

This prior manager was ultimately unable to obtain the promotions or the raises for his crew, and, embarrassed at the lack of financial support from his Vice President, he made other adjustments in an attempt to reward them. He permitted three of four supervisors to receive overtime opportunities that boosted their income. The fourth man had not been with the company long enough to be classified in a way that made him eligible for overtime, so he gave the fourth man a “special” title and promised a change when he reached his two-year anniversary. By the time the anniversary date came, the manager had left the company.

Although the men could never prove it, they believed the manager never intended to obtain the raises and promotions. Further, they had convinced themselves his decisions had racial and cultural overtones. Their resentment had hardened and George realized that, whatever the truth, the inventory personnel believed they had been betrayed. Although George had not been the cause of the problem, he knew he was going to live with its consequences until he found a way to resolve it.

Stop Blaming Resistance

Research tells us that in an attempt to rectify the injury created by broken trust or betrayal, people will lower their productivity, reduce their work quality, become uncooperative, or, in extreme cases, seek revenge or retaliation through sabotage, theft, or other forms of aggressive or violent behavior. In these instances, people believe their actions are justifiable ways to “get even”. The losses only compound over time, eroding respect and credibility and undermining subsequent attempts at change.

Research also shows that people who experience having been betrayed are more willing to reconcile and repair trust when they are given an authentic apology. Apologies can mitigate aggression from injured persons, and apologies that are more extensive are necessary to resolve violations that are more serious. Sincere apologies include recognition of the injury, a concern for the relationship, and a desire to restore trust. Where the apology fails to recognize the betrayal, injured people expect a recurrence of the betrayal and may demonstrate increased cynicism and disparaging behaviors toward change projects and change leaders. Insincerity does not work. A study of victim reaction to deceit finds that when the apology is perceived to be honest, the deceived party’s negative reactions are reduced.

George chose to take the apology approach, hoping to close the door on the past so he could move ahead with his current project. He offered his genuine apology, on behalf of the company, for their having been misled and for the lack of respect demonstrated by leaving the problem unresolved. He went further, offering his personal apology to each man and promising he would do what he could to “make it right”.

He did “make it right”. He met with the HR Director and the Operations VP, and followed through to see that the inventory personnel were properly classified and received the best increases available in the budget. Three weeks later, the HR Director came to meet

Stop Blaming Resistance

personally with the men and tell them when their new pay scale would begin. Their skepticism finally dissolving, one inventory manager said, “It’s great to get this squared away, but you know what made the biggest difference to me? Seeing that George was shocked and sorry to find out we had been treated like that in the first place. The way he said he was sorry, even though he hadn’t done anything, I knew we had a friend. And this follow-through proves it.”

By dealing with the broken promise on its own merits, George not only completed something his predecessor left incomplete, he enhanced his credibility and earned the respect of his men. It would have been very easy for him to dismiss their complaints as simply a form of resistance, but by listening to what was behind their comments, he was able to strengthen his relationship with his staff members. His experience is a reminder that the responses a manager receives to a change proposal may have little or nothing to do with the current plan.

George said later, “I think the previous manager did the best he could at the time. I probably would not have been able to do any better than he did, but he made a mistake in not following through to get their pay raise the following year. I wonder if I would have been honest enough to apologize for that incident if it had been me who caused it in the first place. I’d like to think so.”

Research shows that admitting mistakes actually increases a leader’s credibility, but many are reluctant to do so, fearing it will make them look weak or incompetent or undermine their authority and respect. Actually, when managers are willing to admit a miscalculation, they earn empathy and respect from others, increasing their credibility. One study found when CEOs acknowledged that periods of poor company performance were

Stop Blaming Resistance

due to their own mistakes, rather than to external factors, they had higher company stock prices than those whose CEO's made no such admissions.

George learned something about the way people listen to a plan for organizational change. He said, "They hear everything you say about what's going to happen, and they also hear everything that was ever said about anything related to that." Unacknowledged failures in past change efforts, questionable ethical incidents, or negative cultural tendencies in an organization may seem to be part of an invisible background for a newly planned change. They may be invisible, but they also shape the reaction of change recipients. Managers who listen to the response to change can identify issues from the past that need to be recognized or resolved in order to add momentum to the current change process.

Resistance can Help Clarify Objectives and Strategies. A Midwestern city government committed to implementing a more streamlined process to approve private development engineering plans. To promote development, the city wanted to establish a "one stop shop" where developers could get their plan approvals and building permits in one place, instead of having to work with different engineering groups in the Utility, Transportation, and Development departments located in different parts of town. In addition to convenience for developers, the city was committed to improving its standards for the plan review process, which would pave the way for wider use of new city planning technologies.

The One-Stop team, appointed by the Mayor's office to develop a feasibility and implementation plan, called a meeting with three city Directors, from Utilities, Transportation, and Development, to discuss the "one-stop" plan and the method by which each of them would give their signature authority to approve development plans without slowing down the process. As the Mayor's team outlined their proposal for a quick approval

Stop Blaming Resistance

of every development plan, it quickly became evident that the Directors' signature approval was no mere formality. Their signatures would authorize a developer to take actions that could compromise the infrastructure of city streets, streetlights, sewer lines, and much more. These Directors had spent their careers protecting this infrastructure from harm while planning and installing its expansions and improvements. No developer would receive an easy pass without satisfying the genuine concerns of the people accountable for city infrastructure.

The Directors took turns asking blunt questions, raising objections, and expressing their confusion about how the One-Stop team would integrate the large and complex body of knowledge of the city's water, sewer, electricity, and transportation engineers into a single protocol. Ultimately, they insisted that the One-Stop team go back to work with their engineers to identify all the specifics of their approval criteria, including those used to approve changes a developer makes on a previously approved plan.

"Until that process of defining and documenting decision protocols is complete," one Director said, "we are not going to turn over the final signoff authority to a new One-Stop group. We have no confidence that your group appreciates the engineering, safety, and environmental compliance needed to meet our standards." All three Directors made it clear they were unwilling to support the proposal until "all the kinks are worked out", and said that a new meeting would be scheduled only when the One-Stop group was "ready with a complete proposal."

The One-Stop team was unhappy with what they perceived as resistance. One team member said, "All they gave us was criticism, objections, and pointed questions. They just want to maintain control over approval and their engineers, so they resisted the One-Stop idea every step of the way." The team felt they had proposed a solid plan and that the

Stop Blaming Resistance

“approval details” could be worked out in their discussion with Directors, so they were disappointed to be sent back to work with four different groups of engineering specialists to add more detail to their plan.

When responses to a change proposal are immediately critical and vocal, the change agent must consider that there is a serious flaw in some aspects of the plan. Although such responses can be off-putting, they nevertheless provide change managers an opportunity to listen and learn what revisions they need to make to the proposal.

The One-Stop team was reluctant to consider that their proposal was confusing, ambiguous, or incomplete. They set up meetings with the four engineering specialties, and after the first meeting, realized they had underestimated the complexity of the change they were proposing. As one team member put it, “We had no idea about the engineering processes required to tap into a sewer line or install fire hydrants. Now I see we don’t just need to meet once with each engineering group. That is only a beginning. We will need to have all four startup meetings, then draft a standard One-Stop approval protocol, plus a plan for cross-training in the One-Stop location, then get all the engineers together to help us finalize it. This is huge. I wasn’t very happy with the Directors before, but now I see why they are the Directors.”

Many changes are sufficiently complex and dynamic that it is impossible to know every task and process needed in order to reach the goal. Some of the unknowns may prove to be knottier than anyone anticipated, and local knowledge will be needed to understand what the change proposal really means for various departments and for the process as a whole. People who are closer to the action will need to be included in formulating the proposal for change, and change agents must be prepared to listen and to modify the plan as needed.

Stop Blaming Resistance

If change agents appear to be defensive, inflexible, or unresponsive to corrective input, they will lose credibility in the eyes of the change recipients, who may in turn withhold their specialized knowledge and potentially sabotage the success of the change. Apparent resistance can be an important resource in improving the quality and clarity of the objectives and strategies at the heart of a change proposal, and can be used to improve the prospects for successful implementation.

CONCLUSION

The failure of organization change occurs for a variety of reasons, including overreaching, insufficient communication, and the failure to execute. The process of working with individuals and groups to change systems and practices has no simple recipe, but people's objections, worries, and fears are likely to contain valuable information that can be used to accelerate and smooth the process. Resistance is a naturally occurring phenomenon in organization change. When we are too quick to label those who raise objections as resistors and dismiss what they have to say as resistance, we overlook opportunities to get the process strengthened and back on track. We also set up a self-fulfilling prophecy where we end up blaming resistance for any difficulties and failure.

Every change is a part of a bigger picture in people's careers and in the organization's business processes. Today's change will be compared to the changes made last year and the changes anticipated for next year. Complacency, resignation, and cynicism are a predictable part of change communications in every organization. When people learn that something is going to change, or find themselves struggling with changes in their offices, technologies, or operations, their natural response will be easy to perceive, and write off, as resistance. If managers hope to eliminate all resistance as a strategy for accomplishing change, they are

Stop Blaming Resistance

missing an opportunity to learn new ideas on how to execute the change effectively, not to mention wishing for people to be superhuman.

Resistance is energy to be channeled for the benefit of higher objectives.

Recognizing that people want to work on something of value, we can remind them of the value of a change initiative and invite their observations and suggestions. Even working with “difficult people” can provide value when change managers treat communications with respect and are willing to reconsider some aspects of the change to accommodate sub-organizational needs while still fulfilling plan objectives.

Resistance can be understood as the legitimate response of engaged and committed people who want a voice in something that is important to them. It is a sign of engagement, an opening for a dialogue about the realities of the organization and the ways managers can implement their plans and strategies in coherence with those realities. Working with people in an organization to clarify their concerns is a strategy for improving the success of change initiatives. Change planning and implementation can be made smarter, faster, and cheaper by listening to the feedback embedded in “resistance”.

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Stop Blaming Resistance

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