

Article

Getting Smart About Employee Resistance to Change — Part One

(Task I.F.6)

Overcome one of the primary challenges of leading change. Learn what causes employee resistance, what resolves it, and how to work with it to maximize the results you achieve in your change efforts. Gain insight about how to deal with the deep-seated resistance catalyzed by peoples' core psychological issues, and how you can work with these substantial mental, emotional, and behavioral forces to make your change efforts more successful.

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Introduction

Change management as an industry was conceived in response to the need leaders' had to overcome their employees' resistance to the changes they wanted made in their organizations. This concept of "overcoming resistance" has not provided many truly effective solutions to employee resistance. Is this because people inherently resist change, and no matter what you do, that resistance will exist? Or is it because change management approaches have not yet evolved to provide solutions to the real causes of the problem?

From our perspective, the bottom line about resistance is straightforward:

1. Resistance is always present in complex change efforts.
2. Resistance is a good and natural response, not a bad thing.
3. Working with resistance competently will always lead to increased results.
4. You should never try to "overcome" resistance; instead, you should learn to nurture it, use it, and benefit from it.

In this and next month's feature article, we will attempt to de-mystify resistance—what it is, what causes it, what resolves it, and how to work with it to maximize the results you achieve in your change efforts. Learning how to work with employee resistance is one of the keys to optimizing the human capital in your organization, both during change and as a part of normal operations. A side benefit of what we are about to reveal regarding resistance is that these employee practices are the essential components of building a high-performing organization.

Resistance Comes from Different Places

In previous newsletters or in our books, you have heard us state that a comprehensive change strategy is made up of three critical areas:

1. Content (what is changing, i.e., structure, systems, technology).
2. Process (how the change will be planned, designed, and implemented).
3. People (those impacted by or participating in the change).

Employee resistance can be triggered by each of these three areas, either from negative reactions to the direction (content) of the change, how the change is being handled (process), or from intra-personal dynamics that occur naturally in all people. Which of these areas is causing the resistance is very important, because how you might resolve the resistance will depend on what is triggering it.

In this article, we will focus on resistance that occurs in employees as a response to what is happening in the content or process of your change effort. Next month, in Part Two of this article, we will address resistance that occurs in employees as a natural psychological process. We hope these distinctions make it easier for you to build change strategies to resolve employee resistance so you can achieve the full benefit of your change efforts.

What Is Resistance and What Causes It?

Webster's dictionary defines resistance this way:

1. The ability of an organism to ward off disease.
2. A force that retards, hinders, or opposes motion.

3. The active psychological opposition to the bringing of unconscious, usually repressed, material to consciousness.

While these are very different definitions, each leads us to valuable insights about the nature of resistance. In this article, we will focus on the first definition as it reveals much about resistance that is triggered by negative reactions to the direction and process of change.

Resistance: “The Ability of an Organism to Ward Off Disease”

When disease begins to enter an organism, its first AUTOMATIC response is to fight the disease. The organism doesn’t consciously choose to resist the disease; it does so automatically without any conscious thought. Resistance is a built-in function that just happens as a natural consequence of the disease being present.

Similarly, employees resist change when they perceive the direction of the change is wrong. In this type of resistance, they don’t accept the change because they feel it is bad either for them personally or for the business, that the change is a “disease.” This kind of resistance is healthy, and can be a good thing. Perhaps the change IS wrong. Perhaps the resisters know something the change leaders don’t know. Employees are often closer to the customer or the operations and very well could have information the change leaders can’t possibly possess...without talking to them.

Case In Point

We were working once with a manufacturing plant whose change effort was being stymied by very significant resistance in the warehousing group. They simply weren’t participating and were actively attempting to get other departments to resist as well. The plant manager was very angry. When we arrived, he had already conducted a couple of disastrous meetings where he attempted to “force” them to go along. The

plant manager’s upset was amplified by the fact that he truly believed that if the changes his senior management team was demanding did not occur, the plant was in jeopardy of being closed.

The plant manager asked us to create a strategy for overcoming the warehouse peoples’ resistance. Our initial suggestion was simple; Go talk to the warehousing group, not to force them to comply, but to ask them how to improve the direction of the change.

Initially, that meeting was a challenge to facilitate. There was much resentment and hostility on both sides. By the end, however, no facilitation was needed. Once both parties realized they had a mutual goal of keeping the plant open, and that each would listen to the other’s ideas, they collaborated freely.

In the end, the plant manager altered the direction of the change based on the warehousing group’s input. Immediately, the warehousing group became the change’s most staunch supporters. With their help, the change was wildly successful and moved the plant from being on the chopping block to being second in profitability for the parent company within nine months.

It was a simple yet profound solution: Go talk to the resisters to find out why they are resisting and what solutions they have for improving the change.

In similar fashion, employees often resist change because they don’t agree with the process by which the change is being designed and implemented. In these cases, they resist the change even though they might agree with its direction. Employees usually resist the process of change when they: (1) don’t feel included in it or don’t have their needs or interests represented, (2) don’t feel informed or adequately communicated to about it, (3) perceive the decision-making

process driving it as unfair, (4) feel overwhelmed by the number of change activities taking up time and resources necessary to do their “real” work, or (5) feel they can’t succeed in it because of inadequate expertise or training.

Leaders who lead change using a command and control style often trigger this type of resistance due to misunderstanding the impact their change process plans have on the people who must carry them out. These leaders often create change efforts that are fraught with inadequate communications, low participation, minimal local control, and insufficient training.

This type of resistance often occurs when senior leaders rely on external consulting firms to design their change solution, the content of what needs to change. Doing this isn’t inherently wrong; it’s just that these firms, which are very competent with the content of change, usually don’t understand the people and process dynamics of change. Therefore, many of their practices trigger resistance without them even understanding this.

A good example is the practice of having the external consultants and the senior executives design the change in isolation from the rest of the organization. In these situations, the design teams are staffed only with senior managers; major portions or levels of the organization are not represented. These teams usually don’t communicate much, if anything, to the organization until they finalize their change decisions. Consequently, the water cooler grapevine is in full swing, people’s fears are activated, and the change is resisted before it is even announced.

The content of your change must be planned while keeping the people impacts and the process elements in mind. The best way to ensure that your process of change will be accepted and positively supported by your employees is to include employees on your change project teams.

If you want more input than the size of your team will allow, then create an advisory team of employees that provides input to your change project teams regarding the design, implementation, and human impacts of your change. These teams can be virtual, which will enable you to get great sounding board advice on pending decisions within hours. The ROI you will get from these teams is tremendous. They will save you huge amounts of money and time by helping you design change strategies that will be smoothly implemented by your people.

Senior Executives Resist Change As Well

In the field of change management, resistance is often discussed as if it only pertains to those below senior management, but that is just not true. Resistance occurs in ALL employees, from the CEO to the line worker. In fact, the initial stages of transformation efforts often include weeks or months of meetings where senior executives work through their own resistance. These meetings are often heated discussions about what needs to change in the organization, why it needs to change, and how it will change. These debates often include significant political posturing as executives try to maximize their own organization’s individual gain from the change. Once all this gets resolved, senior management announces the change effort to the organization, as if they have always been aligned.

When employees don’t automatically accept the announced change, the senior managers immediately label their behavior as resistance and are dismayed that it exists. They have, of course, forgotten their own previous months of painful resistance and what it took to resolve it. That’s fine, but let’s be truthful here. All humans resist change, senior managers notwithstanding. It is natural. It should be expected. And it must be accounted for in how you plan, design, and implement your change efforts.

As a change leader or consultant, you must provide employees with the same type of opportunity the senior managers had to resolve their own resistance. As with the executives, the “other” employees should also have the opportunity to discuss and challenge the change issues and be asked for their input. Not all of what they want and feel will be accommodated, of course, but the act of asking, listening, and considering their input will greatly reduce their resistance. This can be handled in large group meetings, town halls, work teams, or one-on-ones, with the information generated funneled directly back to the change leaders in charge.

Summary

Both of these causes of resistance—when employees don’t accept the change solution, and when they don’t like the change process—should be seen as healthy and beneficial wake-up calls for improvement. Each is a product of intelligent people with good common sense trying to make things better. If you automatically perceive employee resistance as bad and something that should be “overcome,” you miss these opportunities to discover essential insights that would otherwise shift the direction of your change or make its process more effective and expedient. In fact, dealing with resistance in positive ways is one of the highest impact strategies for accelerating your change effort and lowering its ultimate cost.

As our friend and colleague, Dick Hallstein, says, “Employee resistance is energy waiting to be released.” It is a naturally occurring positive force, never something to be overcome, always something to be worked with for greater results. Unleash that energy in your organization. Involve your employees. Go ask them how to improve your change efforts. You will be pleasantly surprised by the gain in results their input will produce.

About the Authors

Dean Anderson and Linda Ackerman Anderson are the co-founders of Being First, Inc., a results-oriented change leadership development and transformational change consulting firm working with visionary leaders of the Fortune 1000, government, and large non-profit organizations. For twenty-five years, Being First has been assisting executives to maximize their ROI from change, transform their cultures to high performance, and build their organization's change capability. Being First provides a complete change solution, including change strategy development, change methodology and tools, training, coaching, consulting, and hands-on change project support. A Deloitte and Touche research study once named the Being First Change Methodology the most comprehensive in the world.

Mr. Anderson and Ms. Ackerman Anderson are co-authors of two cutting-edge books on change, *Beyond Change Management: Advanced Strategies for Today's Transformational Leaders* and *The Change Leader's Roadmap: How to Navigate Your Organization's Transformation*. They co-author *The Change Management* column for *Workforce Performance Solutions* magazine, as well as the e-newsletter, *Results from Change*, which is distributed to change leaders and consultants worldwide.

Mr. Anderson and Ms. Ackerman Anderson speak internationally about the people and process dynamics that are key to succeeding at transformational change. They can be reached at info@beingfirst.com or 970-385-5100.

About Being First, Inc.

BEING FIRST, INC. is a highly specialized change leadership development and transformational change consulting firm, serving Fortune 1000 companies, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and change consultants worldwide.

We partner with our clients to achieve breakthrough results. We provide a fully integrated solution of consulting, training, coaching, change methodology, and tools; everything our clients need to radically improve outcomes. We are experts in unleashing extraordinary human performance, transforming culture to enable that performance, and developing leaders to lead those transformations.

Outcomes

- **Maximize ROI** by achieving the tangible business results you are after from change; faster and with less cost to your business and people
- Build your organization's **change capability and skill** so you can consistently reap the benefits of successful change, now and in the future
- **Transform your people and culture** to truly unleash breakthrough performance
- Develop your managers and leaders into **competent change leaders** who know how to lead all aspects of change, including the people and cultural dynamics
- Develop your internal consultants into **expert change consultants**

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- **Web-based Change Methodology, Products, and Tools** for every task in your change effort. Test drive **The Change Leader's Roadmap™** at www.changeleadersroadmap.com
- **Change Strategy Development and Process Planning** for complex transformation
- **Change Leadership Development and Coaching** for senior executives, change sponsors, change process leaders, change project teams, change consultants, mid-managers, and frontline targets of change
- **Change Consulting** that ensures you get the best change solution implemented by an engaged group of stakeholders
- Change Consultant Development to build your in-house skills
- Executive Team Development that builds cohesion, alignment, and commitment
- **Assessments:** Change Project Audit, Change History Audit, Change Readiness and Capacity, Change Sponsorship, Change Leadership, and Change Team Performance
- Results from Change e-Newsletter at www.resultsfromchange.com