Harvard
Business
Review

Change Management

Decoding Resistance to Change

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From the Magazine (April 2009)

Summary. Reprint: R0904J When a change initiative falters, the knee-jerk response can be to blame those who won't get on board. Jeffrey Ford, of the Ohio State University, and Laurie Ford, of Critical Path Consultants, examine why that type of reaction is not only pointless but... **more**

When change initiatives run aground—as they so often do—change agents can be quick to point a finger at the people who never got on board. The assumption is that they resisted a perfectly logical move, so it fell apart.

However, blaming resisters not only is pointless but can actually lead to destructive managerial behaviors. When managers perceive resistance as a threat, they may become competitive, defensive, or uncommunicative. They are sometimes so concerned with being right—and not looking bad—that they lose sight of their original goals. In stubbornly pushing things through without understanding the resistance, they sacrifice goodwill, put valuable relationships in jeopardy, and squander the opportunity to engage skeptics in service of a better plan. They don't hear about missing pieces and faulty assumptions. And, in true us-versus-them fashion, they presume that only the other folks—the resisters—need to alter their behavior and that the change would succeed if not for the resisters' irrational and self-serving actions.

It's true that resistance can be irrational and self-serving. But like it or not, it is an important form of feedback. Dismissing it robs you of a powerful tool as you implement change. It takes a strong leader to step up and engage when a change effort meets with pushback. If you can gain perspective by paying attention to, understanding, and learning from behaviors you perceive as threatening, you will ultimately deliver better results.

Resistance Is a Resource

In our research and consulting work, we've had the opportunity to study change initiatives at scores of large and small companies, and we've found that to understand resistance to a program, you need to start by adjusting your own mind-set. Ask yourself two questions: "Why am I seeing this behavior as resistance?" and "If I viewed the resistance as feedback, what could I learn about how to refine the change effort?" Once you've honestly answered those questions, you can begin to see resistance as a resource—as energy to be channeled on behalf of the organization. (See the sidebar "Defining Resistance.") Even difficult people can provide valuable input when you treat their communications with respect and are willing to reconsider some aspects of the change you're initiating. Here are five ways you can use resistance to effect change more productively.

Defining Resistance

Managers have many terms to describe resistance: pushback, not buying in, criticism, foot-dragging, and so on. And they ...

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1. Boost awareness.

By the time you're ready to implement a change program, you've probably had ample opportunity to process what it will mean for you as an individual. It's easy to forget that the change hasn't been similarly internalized by those who will be most affected by it—in ways you can't imagine. Drop two levels down in the hierarchy, and the tasks people are doing are probably invisible to you. Their jobs will change in ways that you don't understand, and if you suppress dialogue, you'll miss opportunities to gain their buy-in. In the early stages, any talk—even a litany of complaints or a highly charged discussion—may be the one thing that keeps a conversation about change alive.

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2. Return to purpose.

Awareness is about *what*; purpose is about *why*. People who aren't involved in the planning need to understand not only what is about to change but also why their jobs are being upended.

We worked with Alison, an IT executive who was preparing for a change in her hospital's computer systems for registration and insurance reimbursement. With those two functions at the opposite ends of the business cycle, the new systems would touch almost every employee, including clinical and laboratory personnel, in some way. The initiative was a crucial one because delays in reimbursement are costly to hospitals, and the most common reason for rejecting claims is incomplete or inaccurate information. When a bill bounces back, it can take a long time to track down the error; some irregularities are never resolved.

Throughout the design process, Alison had communicated regularly with the rest of the executive team, preparing handouts for them to take back to their groups. Given that effort on her part, she'd assumed that the executives would explain to rank-and-file employees how the move would benefit not just the company's bottom line but also the patients the company served, by ensuring they received the right treatments and were not wrongly billed. As it turned out, the executives had been reluctant to deliver what they feared would be seen as bad news, and leaders from functions such as finance and clinical services didn't feel equipped to answer questions about the new technology. They'd hoped that Alison would take charge of the kickoff, so their people had heard only rumors—and no explanation of the rationale for the change. Consequently, her launch meetings were contentious. The insurance team, which feared that historical files would become inaccessible, was particularly annoyed.

Alison had to postpone the rollout and arrange a series of meetings to explain the changes, with IT team members at the ready to describe their implications. Though she was disappointed that the members of the management team hadn't communicated with their own people, she acknowledged a key lesson: The pushback from frontline employees made her appreciate the need to educate the entire hospital staff about the purpose of the systemic change.

3. Change the change.

Frustrating though it is, resistance can lead to better results. People who are outspoken about their objections to a change are often those who genuinely care about getting things right and who are close enough to the inner workings of an organization to recognize a plan's pitfalls.

Consider Harold, the COO of a large manufacturing organization we worked with. He had drawn up a plan to consolidate two groups: the product design engineers, who worked at the main office, and the capital-planning engineers, who worked in the plants. His objective was to improve collaboration, communication, and efficiency. But when Harold announced his plan, Eric, the manager of the capital-planning engineers, voiced strong objections at every turn. As the meeting progressed, Harold grew reluctant to allow Eric to speak; his vague and ambiguous complaints were incomprehensible to Harold and made people uneasy about the change.

Harold later invited Eric in for a private discussion and, with some probing, discovered what was really bugging him. The capital-planning engineers worked closely with a third group, plant maintenance, to make decisions about what equipment to buy, lease, repair, and so on. "You don't want to have me reporting to the product design group or even the engineering VP," Eric told Harold. "I belong with the plants because that's where my work is." Furthermore, the head of maintenance had informed Eric that he would start looking for a new job—taking a couple of his best mechanics with him—if he was not on the same team with the capital-planning engineers. He didn't want to have to beg for engineering support or miss chances to offer his input about capital purchase decisions.

Eric was surprised when Harold asked him for alternative ideas that would still meet the objectives of the consolidation plan. Eric proposed a biweekly, half-day "consolidation meeting" of all the engineering teams in the company. The gathering would have a specific agenda: to address machine status and maintenance issues, equipment needs related to partnerships and product lines, and capital investment plans. "My consolidation plan was out the window," Harold admitted. But the new plan met the company's goals more effectively than his initial proposal had.

4. Build participation and engagement.

Buy-in can be a simple matter of being heard, as the experience of Sharon, the leader of a 110-person phone center we worked with, shows. Sharon was preparing to integrate a group of 30 billing specialists with the existing workforce. Her plan called for telephone staff to learn how to send and adjust bills, and for billing staff to become skilled at other customer service tasks. She believed the company would benefit from having a larger group of people who were cross-trained in the two aspects of customer relationships.

Sharon anticipated some pushback when she introduced the change in a series of meetings with the staff, and she got it in spades. So she took careful note of everyone's concerns and ideas, ultimately creating a "worry list" and an "idea list" from among the most common and important items. The biggest worries concerned pay scales and the apportionment of physical space when the groups merged. The idea list included proposals that had been offered in every group (for instance, mix the staff together in similar cubicles); ideas suggested by only a few people with specialized knowledge (get a second intranet server to support faster communication); and a few wild cards, which Sharon thought were unlikely to go anywhere. Among the wild ones: let the billers train the phoners and the phoners train the billers, and give the staff the unspent training dollars as a bonus; 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.

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Sharon took the worry and idea lists to the rest of the executive team and, with their input, created a third "executive action list." She then brought the three lists into follow-up meetings with staff. Employees bypassed suggestions to reject cross-training and relocation; they knew those were basically nonnegotiable. But, to Sharon's surprise, they jumped at the prospect of training one another—a proposal she'd considered so ridiculous that she hadn't even taken it to the executive team. Employees were so enthusiastic about that idea that the group came up with a way to integrate it into the plan. Sharon said that, regardless of her own opinion, it was worth the effort to let them "get something they felt was at least partly their own." She willingly embraced the core concerns of her people—which were really about whether they'd get along and whether different groups would remain socially separate even after they were collocated—and she held events to forge stronger relationships among them. In the process, Sharon bonded with her employees and fostered good cooperation as they underwent training and then collaborated in their new location.

5. Complete the past.

As employees listen to new proposals, they remember previous experiences. Given the dismal rate of success in change efforts, it's not surprising that people expect history to repeat itself—and resist going through it all over again. If you don't know the history, an explanation for the resistance can remain elusive.

George, the head of a vehicle service organization we studied, planned to upgrade his maintenance team's technology by giving the group GPS and computer communications systems. He had met with the fleet and service supervisors one-on-one, and he knew they wanted these systems. But when he spoke to them as a group about the installation and training schedules, the supervisors surprised him by saying, "This isn't going to be fair for the backroom machine guys," "You're going around us again," and "This won't work any better than last time."

When George probed into their skepticism, one supervisor finally mentioned an incident from a training program two years earlier. George's predecessor had promised promotions and pay raises to the purchasing and inventory staffers if they could switch to a new system within eight weeks. The four men involved buckled down and learned the new system, transferred inventory data, and updated their records in time—but they never received their promotions or pay hikes. Embarrassed, the manager at the time found a poor substitute for three of them—some overtime opportunities—and promised the fourth a promotion when he reached his two-year anniversary. But that never came to pass because the manager left the company before the anniversary.

The men believed that the manager had never intended to obtain raises and promotions. They'd also convinced themselves that his decisions had racial and cultural overtones. Although George hadn't been the cause of the problem, he knew he would have to live with its consequences. His solution: a heartfelt public apology to the employees, 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."

George kept his promise. He met with the director of HR and the VP of operations to see that the purchasing and inventory personnel got their promised titles and the best pay increases the budget would allow. Three weeks later, the HR director met personally with the men to tell them when the pay hikes would take effect. As their skepticism finally began to dissolve, one inventory manager said, "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."

George's experience makes clear that responses to a change proposal may have little or nothing to do with the current plan. Unacknowledged failures in past change efforts, questionable ethical incidents, and negative cultural tendencies are often invisible backdrops to a newly planned change.• • •

Our work has turned up many instances in which people resisted a change for no apparent reason other than that change didn't suit them. However, in the end, it doesn't really matter why folks are dragging their feet. When we pin failure on resistance, we risk overlooking opportunities to strengthen operational outcomes—and to correct our own biases. We also lose credibility in the eyes of change recipients, who may in turn withhold their specialized knowledge and sabotage the success of the change initiative. Resistance, properly understood as feedback, can be an important resource in improving the quality and clarity of the objectives and strategies at the heart of a change proposal. And, properly used, it can enhance the prospects for successful implementation.

A version of this article appeared in the April 2009 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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