

Overcome Resistance to Change with Two Conversations

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Summary. Most change efforts fail due to internal resistance. To combat this problem, leaders must understand and engage their opposition. Are people balking on substantive grounds because they feel disrespected or rushed? Although each issue should be addressed... [more](#)

Across industries and sectors, the track record for organizational change is bleak. Research finds that anywhere from 50%–75% of change efforts fail. And for those that do succeed, many don't achieve the goals of the original vision. Why is change so hard?

Usually, figuring out the right answer is not the challenge, whether it's a new strategy, more-efficient processes or systems, or a new structure that better meets the needs of a growing company. The biggest hurdle to effective organizational change is people. A core part of your job as a leader is to help others overcome the inherent, very human bias toward maintaining the status quo.

In our work of leading change in higher education and teaching students and executives about the change management process, we've gained a deep understanding of why resistance happens and what leaders can do to overcome it.

Identifying the Sources of Resistance

You first need to identify who — that is, which individuals and groups — have the biggest potential to thwart positive change. Then you have to unstick them. Doing so begins with understanding their perspectives. In our experience, there are three primary reasons people resist:

Even if you've done your homework and have engaged a broad range of stakeholders in determining the new direction for your organization, team, or project, there are undoubtedly going to be people who disagree on substantive grounds. Maybe they don't agree with your analysis of the problem or they think they have unique experiences, expertise, or information that hasn't been sufficiently considered. With this type of resistance, your job is to listen and be open to changing your approach based on what you learn.

A second universal source of resistance is the human need for respect, which frequently heightens during periods of change. This is especially true of employees who have been with an organization for a long time or have held a good deal of influence at some point in the past (and believe they still do). If these people don't feel that they've had a chance to weigh in, they will assume that an important perspective has been missed, that the answer can't be right if they have not been consulted. Again, the solution is to listen respectfully and make sure they feel heard.

Another reason people might resist is simply because they are feeling rushed. They don't have enough time to digest the new direction or cope with the situation emotionally. We all operate at different speeds. Here, your goal should be to figure out whether any timelines can be adjusted to reduce some of this time-based stress.

Talking with the Resistors

As you begin talking to resistors, keep in mind four ground rules.

Forget efficiency. Motivating true change requires unhurried, face-to-face, one-on-one conversation. Email doesn't do it, nor do memos or webcasts. If a specific work group or person is very important to your organization's future, and they are resisting needed change, you have to take the time to talk with them in person, and to do it under as little time pressure as possible.

Focus on listening. No matter how brilliant your plan or persuasive your argument, you must make everyone feel understood. That starts and ends with listening. When you're in these conversations, make sure to take up no more than 20% of the airtime, and when you do speak, try to repeat back what you've heard as much as possible.

Be open to change yourself. A resistor who senses you are listening only so you can get what you want won't open up and definitely won't get onboard. You must have an open attitude — be ready to learn something new and, if necessary, modify your plans. Show that resistors' opinions and feelings matter to you and will shape your thinking and actions.

Have multiple conversations. We've found that effective dialogue with resistors typically requires a minimum of two conversations. In the first conversation, you listen and diagnose the roots of the resistance. In the second conversation, your goal is to make clear that you have reflected on what you heard; to outline what will be different, or not, in your approach to the change based on that conversation; and to explain why. Even if you're not changing your overall plan, we've found that anyone who truly listens to opposition will have their thinking changed in some way. So you can at least be genuine about that.

The time in between these two conversations is critical. We recommend at least two days, depending on the scale of the change. If you respond immediately, either during the initial talk or within a few hours, resisters won't believe, perhaps rightly, that you've fully considered their point of view. But don't wait more than seven days, because at that point the person feels dismissed and forgotten.

Effective change management is critical to the vitality and progress of every organization. Where most people trip up is in failing to manage resistance effectively. Doing so requires an ability to listen to your opposition, diagnose their antipathy, consider their thoughts and feelings, and explain how it has changed your thinking, if not your plan. This is a time-consuming but effective process. As Jim McNerney, the former CEO of Boeing, said in one of our classes, "Change happens one conference room and one office at a time."

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